

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE GREAT REQUEST

We come now to behold Elijah arrived just at the consummation of his life of faith, and anticipating the perfect enjoyment of that glorious liberty which is the future inheritance of all the children of God.

“And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so” (II Kings 2:9, 10).

The sacred narrative has brought us to the boundary of Elijah’s earthly course. We have the last words and his last work; a work indeed less evident to the senses than his former acts; but not inferior, perhaps more astonishing than those. The several matters which at present require our attention are;

- I. The position after crossing the river
- II. Elijah’s proffer to Elisha;
- III. The request of the latter, with the answer he received to it.

I. Elijah, whom we here behold beyond Jordan, may, spiritually considered, be regarded as now placed beyond the limits of sublunary evils and sorrows

These things, like the waters of Jordan, now lie behind him. His eternal sabbath of rest is just at hand, and the remaining few moments of his earthly sojourn are now only a blessed waiting for the heavenly chariot.

What an enviable situation! And yet it is in substance the same with that into which the Gospel ought already to have brought us all! Whatever depths or difficulties we still anxiously behold lying before us, if we were only in the vigorous exercise of a true and lively faith; we might easily surmount them all, and spiritually leave them behind us. For faith substantiates what is hoped for, and evidences the things which are not seen.

What is it that makes us tremble?

- Is it even the waves of death itself? Let us embark only in the sweet promise of the Saviour, “**I will come again and receive you to myself,**” and we have already surmounted these.
- Is it the storm of temptation? Let us commit the keeping of body, soul and spirit to Him who has promised that he “**will not suffer us to be tempted above what are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it;**” and the severest and most violent temptations will thus become powerless to us.
- Does the remainder of our innate corruptions dismay us, so that we are ready to ask, How shall we become perfectly holy? Let us reflect that Christ is “**made of God unto as wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.**”
- Are we disposed to entertain anxious presentiments of temporal and spiritual troubles? Let us remember that each day is ordered by almighty and everlasting Love, and brings with it that measure of the bitter and the sweet, which, according to the judgment of infinite Wisdom, is most conducive to our true peace and welfare.

Ye see then, brethren, what glorious prospects are placed before us by Divine revelation, and how real they are to every sincere member of Christ. So that all such may securely look beyond the Jordan of death, beyond all the intermediate wilderness toils and temptations of their way, as if they were already there.

Yes, those whose hearts are set upon gaining, by divine strength, a complete victory over their innate corruptions, may rest assured of their final triumph, and say with the Psalmist, “**I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness**” (Psalm 17:15).

II. When the two men of God were gone over Jordan, “Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee”

This was something more than an affectionate parting word. He wished to communicate to him his last paternal blessing, and this no common one; “**Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee.**” These are great words!

But what kind of benefit did Elijah intend? Was it some valuable temporal good? Was it a large grant of worldly riches, honors, or gratifications? O no; he was thinking of good and perfect gifts that come down from above, from the Father of lights, Elisha is, therefore, invited to ask for blessings from the sanctuary; and here we discern a radiance of the glory of the New Testament in the Old. Bold as this expression is, “Ask what I shall do for thee,” it was perfectly appropriate to the condition of the inspired prophet at that time, for he was evidently favored with an extraordinary outpouring of prophetic grace.

The words, however, of this address to Elisha serve to remind us of the words of our Lord to his disciples: “**Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you: hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.**”

You know what is commonly understood by praying in the name of Jesus. People say, they pray in his name, when they so present their requests before God as not to hope for acceptance on ground of their own worthiness, but on that of the merits of Christ and from free grace. They say, that to pray in the name of Jesus is to pray in humble acknowledgment of our own entire unworthiness of any claim on divine help, and to hope for it from the tender mercy of God through the merits and blood of Jesus Christ.

Is this explanation the true and correct one? It is not exactly incorrect, but it is defective and imperfect. A person may really pray with the state of heart just described, and yet not pray fully in the name of Jesus. For if this expression signified nothing more than to pray, confiding in the merits of the Surety, why did Christ say to his disciples, **“Hitherto ye have asked nothing in my name?”**

If the Saviour would have had nothing more to be understood by praying in his name, than to pray as a contrite sinner, trusting in the merits of the Redeemer, then Abraham, Moses, Daniel, David, and others had certainly already prayed in the name of Jesus. But praying in the name of Jesus is here presented to us as something entirely new. The Saviour himself speaks of it as a thing which was not known previous to his appearing upon earth, and it must therefore be regarded as one of the chief privileges of the New Testament dispensation.

If, in the painful consciousness of my desert of condemnation, I approach the eternal Father in prayer, and set Christ before me as my Mediator and Surety, regarding God only as a consuming fire, and considering that without Christ’s mediation I should certainly be consumed before Him—have I not then learnt the full import of praying in the name of Jesus? No, not if I consider the Father as still strange and distant with respect to me, and that I am protected only by Christ from his wrath; for then I am in the bondage of fear before the God of all grace.

I ought to approach the Father with a firm belief that I am welcome to come to him in Jesus Christ; and that if I truly loathe myself for all my transgressions, and thus make confession to him, then my sins and iniquities are remembered no more. Here then may very suitably be applied to me the spirit and import of those words which he spake to his disciples: **“And I say not that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father loveth you, because ye have loved me, and hath believed that I came out from God.”**

Let me then learn to cast all my care upon Him, fully assured that in Christ I am not merely saved, through him, from wrath, but am also numbered among **“the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.”** Surely, to pray in the knowledge and belief of all this, is something more than to pray to an offended God with a cold reliance, from necessity, on the merits of Jesus. We all know, that to do anything in the name of another person is in some sense to *represent* that person; so that if you prefer a request in my name, and you are refused, this would amount to a disparagement of me. For it is not in reality so much you that ask, as I. If the request be granted, it is from the respect of belonging to and paid to me, that any such request is granted to you. This precisely is the case with respect to asking in Christ’s name. Every answer to our prayers is primarily an answer to the intercession of Christ for us, and in him it is that we are accepted, answered, and blessed.

Now, he that is enabled, by faith of the operation of God, to bring his requests before God with a filial boldness; not doubting that if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us—such a one prays in the name of Jesus.

Now, the disciples not yet prayed exactly thus. Their insight into the mediatorship of Christ had never yet reached so far as to enable them to draw nigh to God in **“full assurance of faith.”**

Indeed the condition of most of the Old Testament saints, in relation to God, though the same in substance, appears to have come far short of this in degree. They knew that, for the Messiah’s sake, they should not be condemned; yea, they knew much more than this, and in so far they rejoiced in their redemption. But not many of them appear to have anticipated that fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ, which was brought fully to light by the Gospel. They had not come to **“mount Sion, the heavenly Jerusalem,”** but had come rather to **“the mountain that might be touched, and that burned with fire.”** Even of the most eminent of them it is written, that though they died in faith, **“having obtained a good report through faith,”** as yet **“they received not the promise”** (Hebrews 11:39).

Nor ought we here to overlook the largeness of the promise which our blessed Saviour makes to his true disciples.

- **“Ask, and ye shall receive; that your joy may be full.”**
- And again, **“Whatsoever Ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.”**
- **“Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”**

And to such a promise as this he solemnly prefixes the asseveration, **“Verily, verily,”** or **“Amen, amen.”** What can we desire more? Nothing in the world is so great, nothing so small, that we might not every moment be receiving from the Father, if we only asked it in the name of Jesus. Say, what would ye desire to have granted you? Is it to be freed from domestic troubles; as, for instance, that your sick child should recover? Would you gladly see your whole household drawn to God?

Ask for any such thing in Jesus’ name, and be assured that he will grant it you. But does not experience seem to contradict this? We answer, it does not really do so. The deceit lies within ourselves, through not really asking in Jesus’ name. For let us again call to mind what this asking in his name implies.

You might wish very ardently, it is true, for some peculiar interposition of God; and you might express this wish in prayer, and, as you think, in Jesus’ name. But in this it is possible that you may be mistaken. A petition is offered in his name when it is offered in that faith which is of the operation of God, and when that which we ask is according to his will.

Luther prayed for the lives of his friends, Melanchthon and Myconius, who were sick unto death, and already given over; and, lo, he received the petitions which he desired of God: and whatever we pray for, be it only gold or silver, even this may be granted us when asked for according to his will.

Thus the pious Professor Franke prayed for means to erect his orphan-houses; and immediately the silver and the gold flowed in upon him, and he who on commencing was scarcely able to command a few pence, had soon enough to found that abode of orphan charity and education, whose praise has been in all the churches. Here the Lord granted what his servant desired.

It is to this end that John addresses us, in his First Epistle 3:21-23, **“Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.”**

What shall we say to these things? Alas! How little account do we make of such exceedingly great and precious promises! How lamentably is this shown by the low state of spiritual advancement in which most are contented to live! Were it otherwise, things would wear a very different appearance among us. The heavens would not so often be as brass over our heads, nor the earth beneath us as iron. The church would soon flourish like the lily; there would be more shaking among the dry bones, and a gracious rain would oftener refresh God’s inheritance.

Our low condition therefore at present, in spiritual things, is really our shame and our condemnation. It is still but too true of many among ourselves, **“Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name.”**

But much as these mighty words reprove us, they also serve to encourage us; for they unfold a glorious prospect of better days to the church of Christ, whenever they shall generally unite in asking for a new and Pentecostal season, a general outpouring of the Spirit of grace and of supplications upon the Israel of God. This good work, we acknowledge, has begun to be engaged in by many a company of devout persons in various places. But as yet, comparatively speaking, such union of prayer in the name of Jesus is but partial. As soon as it shall be full, and general, and fervent among all real Christians, then will the fullness of the desired blessing be poured out.

The same kind of observation applies to individual blessings desired by us. Is it the conversion of a child, or a beloved relative? We too often lament over the condition of such, without ever fervently praying in the name of Jesus on their behalf. It is well worthwhile here, also, to be reminded of the duty of commending to God, in the name of Jesus, all our private cares.

Unbelief on the one hand, and spiritual pride on the other, are alike negligent of this. “What is the use of it?” says the former; “God can hardly be supposed to concern himself about my private matters.” And it is the notion of the latter, “That because God does concern himself about them, therefore I need not do it; neither need I make such things a subject of prayer to him.”

But be it remembered, that he has ordered prayer in the name of Jesus as the means of obtaining and receiving our blessings. This is evident from Scripture, and from the experience of all ages of the church. If we are truly alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, we shall feel that we can never enough value the inestimable privilege of being thus permitted to ask and to received.

If we do not value such a privilege as this, it must be because we are still unrenewed and dead in spirit, or because we have backslidden or sunk into a lamentable state of sloth and lukewarmness.

It may here also be further observed, that such boldness and access, given us in prayer through the faith of Jesus Christ, throws light and evidence on that great truth, **“that when we were enemies, we were reconciled unto God by the death of his Son; and that, being reconciled, we are made the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.”** For God, in thus answering our prayers, dealth with us as with sons; hence the Saviour calls him **“his Father, and our Father;”** and he says, **“As the Father hath loved me, even so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.”**

So much for one of the most glorious and significant expressions that ever proceeded from our Saviour’s lips. We now return to our narrative.

III. The bold invitation to Elisha to ask what he would from the departing prophet, indicates a state of heart towards God, which was substantially the same with that we have now attempted to describe

Elijah already rises high in making such an offer; and Elisha seems to rise still higher in his expectation from it.

“I pray thee,” says he, **“let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me;”** that is, **“I desire to be twice as much endued with the Holy Spirit, and enriched with his gifts, as thou hast been.”**

Let us not mistake the worthy Elisha in his request; however lofty it may sound, it proceeds from a humble and holy spirit. I do not believe that Elisha was here referring, as many expositors suppose, to the birthright of the first born son, who inherited twice as much as his brothers and sisters, and that he only meant, “If others inherit a portion of thy spiritual gifts, let this portion be doubled to me, to whom thou hast been more especially a father.”

Surely, he rather had his eye upon the loss which Israel would sustain by his departure. This appeared to him immense; he thought that the earth contained no man at all comparable with Elijah. The idea that he, the inconsiderable husbandman of Abel Meholah, could fill up such a breach, or carry on the work of Elijah to its complete accomplishment, was overwhelming to him.

Therefore, if Elijah must depart, his successor would humbly implore sufficient help for his conscious inability. It seems then a feeling of purest humility and self-diffidence which dictated this request. Perhaps, also, he foresaw, by divine revelation, that his own future labors in Israel would be essentially different from those of his great predecessor, and would bear a more evangelical character.

After the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire, the still small voice of the Lord’s grace and lovingkindness was to succeed, and be conveyed through Elisha to Israel; for such a vocation he needed very peculiar endowments.

As he was to stand forth in the character of a messenger of the divine benignity, it was necessary that this peculiarity of his vocation should reflect itself in his whole conduct, and beam as it were in his countenance. Perhaps he felt this also, and therefore said, **“Let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me!”**

But, however this may have been, he desired this blessing only in order the more effectually to glorify the Lord’s name. The more any servant of God is humble within himself, and lives by faith upon divine grace alone, the higher will his wishes for the glory of God naturally rise.

IV. To Elisha’s request Elijah answered, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so”

As if he had said, “It is no common favor that you ask; neither is it a favor that can be conferred on you the will of man; it is a rare vouchsafement, and such as few prophets ever have been, or ever will be distinguished with.”

The condition upon which Elijah, by Divine inspiration, made the grant to depend, is also remarkable. **“If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.”** If “thou see me at my departure, or in the act of departing;” as much as to say, “Do not expect the gift from me, but from Him, who is taking me away; moreover take notice of the sign which he appoints thee for ascertaining his will in this matter: for by this sign thou shalt understand that the gift is purely of God’s bestowal.”

Let us conclude, with noticing the superlative bounty of the New Testament dispensation. You know how frequently, in the first age of the church, the Holy Ghost fell on all them that heard the word; and how the common members of the New Testament church were often gifted with power to perform the most stupendous miracles. And thus, as the apostle Peter tells us, has commenced the fulfillment of **“that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh; and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: and I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath”** (Acts 2:16-19).

How highly then should we value our privileges, as members of Christ, and partakers of the new dispensation, the heavenly calling! For behold how the glory of the Gospel surpasses everything that has preceded it! What are we that we should be thus favored! And **“what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness!”** (II Peter 3:11).

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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