



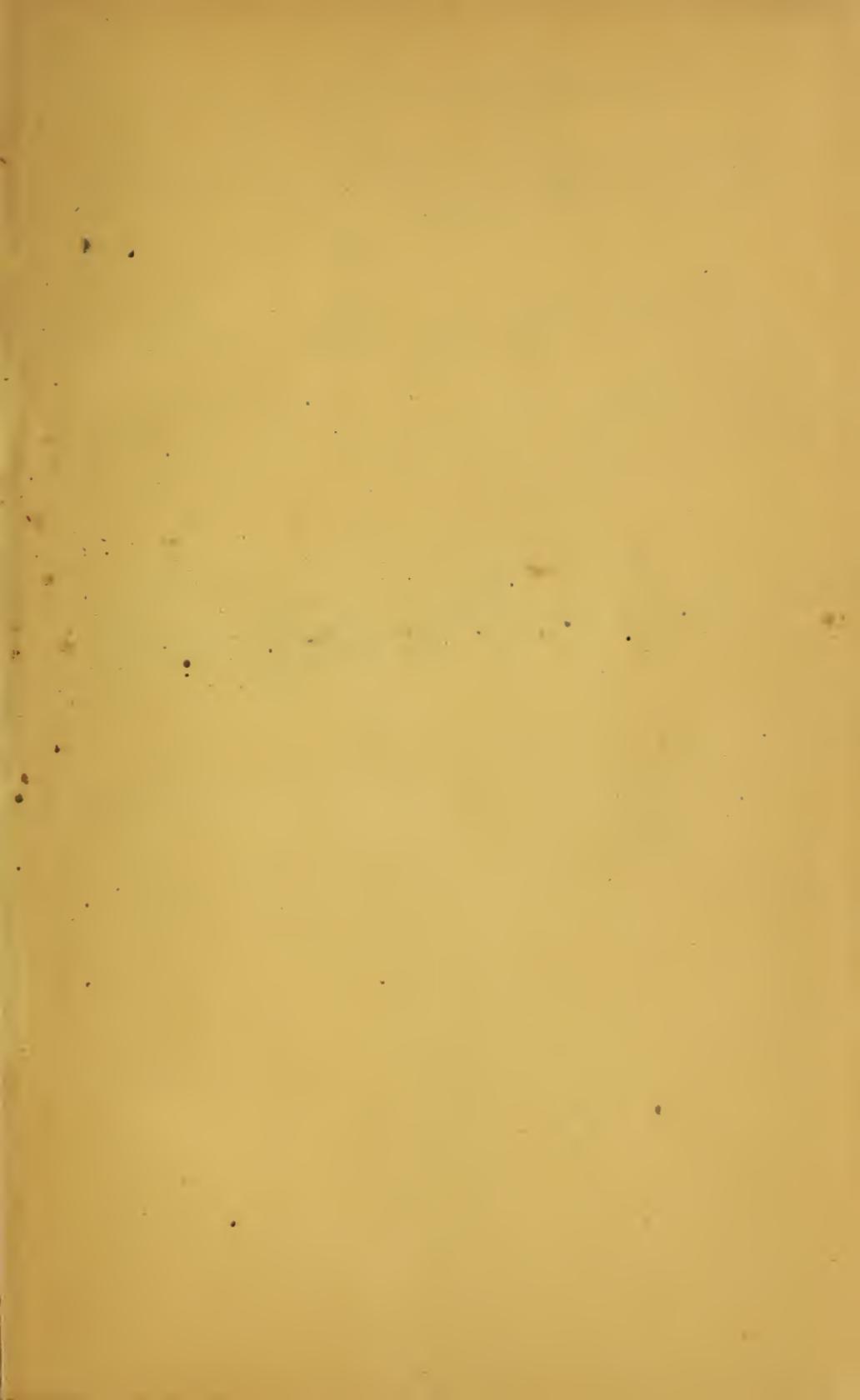
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THE

# TRANSLATED PROPHET.

1868

BY

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HEBREW LAWGIVER," "A WEEK WITH JESUS," &c.



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# THE TRANSLATED PROPHET.

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## CHAPTER I.

### *ELIJAH'S MISSION IN THE APOSTASY OF ISRAEL.*

IF any household among us had now in its possession an ancient and valuable book, that had belonged in the same family for over two hundred years, that had been especially esteemed as an heirloom, inseparable from the direct line of inheritance, and that had been read by each father, and personally handed down to each elder son with a sacred injunction to pass it down to his successors, how would such a book be prized! We would take pride in preserving uninjured the ancient binding, that could not be renewed by the taste of modern binders; we would read the lines with greater interest because our fathers had read them before us; we would decipher the antiquated type, and perhaps be puzzled by the strange abbreviations of the earlier printers; and if the ancestors, in their reading, had made brief notes upon the margin, these we would carefully ponder, as indicating the topics in which they took a special interest, and as giving us their views upon them. No guest could be

long beneath our roof till we had shown him this family treasure. No costly piece of modern furniture could adorn our dwelling as compared with the interest and pleasure gathering about this venerable heir-loom.

But we have a book : not the original, time-worn copy, yet the very teachings which our spiritual ancestry in the Church of God have possessed for many generations. It is not a solitary volume, to be held exclusively in your household or in mine. For many ages back has it been a dweller in many hands : with many-tongued voices it addresses, as though they were one, the separated sons of men ; it is equally at home when the philosopher or the savage asks its counsels ; it has cast down tyrants, it has strengthened the oppressed, awakened guilt, allayed anxiety, instructed the ignorant, guided the perplexed, consoled the sorrowing, supported martyrs, confounded the wise, exalted the foolish, taught the very children, and spoken by the lips of babes. Especially if we belong to the great household of faith, to which belong still the oracles of God, then these sacred pages have been the delight of our spiritual ancestry in all the earth, in all the ages. We hold the book they held ; we read the words they read. They imitated the holy examples here recorded ; they died in the hopes drawn hence ; and, like interesting notes on the margin, the interpretations of some of the wisest and best, in the standard commentaries of the Church, teach us how they under-

stood the sacred volume. Can we wisely refuse to cherish such a treasure? Shall we not join our fathers' studies, and hand down to later times the precious legacy—the incomparable BOOK?

Our fathers have studied, let us also consider, the character and deeds, the history and influence of the prophet Elijah, one of the most remarkable of God's ancient servants. It may not be easy for us to enter fully into the spirit of such a life, to comprehend the times in which he lived, to understand the circumstances in which he was placed, to take in all the difficulties with which he must contend, and so to judge wisely of his personal and official character. We give our careful thoughts to these things. We know nothing of his ancestry; even the place of his birth is doubtful; but we have no sympathy with the idea, conjectured by some of the Fathers, that he was not a Hebrew at all—at least not a Jew nor an Israelite—but of Ishmaelitic descent. The prophet needed none of the blood of the wild race to make him bold for God. Yet in our thoughts of this distinguished prophet we are not to think of him as possessing a character in which we can discern no flaw, and which we might vainly attempt to rival. With all his excellences, we have the best authority for declaring in terms the most express that he was a man of like passions with ourselves, James v. 17; and we may justly reflect that upon this very account we should more carefully study his history.

We accord to him the reputation of a holy man ; yet can we not approve of his entire spirit and character. We recognize him as a man of great zeal and boldness in the service of his God ; yet was he not without the fears and misgivings and infirmities which bring him down to the level of our own frail and erring humanity. He stands forth upon the sacred page as one of the sternest reformers that ever called a guilty people to repentance ; and yet beneath that rugged exterior there beat a heart of the finest and tenderest sympathy for human suffering, exemplifying a character, not seldom given in the Scriptures and found beneath their teachings, where an inflexible and high-toned sense of right is joined to the warmest and truest benevolence.

More perhaps than is true of any other character in sacred history, the life of this man of God contains many checkered scenes and exhibits many wide extremes of feeling. Here we have zeal as bold and fears as timid ; success as large and failure as decided ; faith as confident and yet unbelief as dejecting and despondent, as can be easily found in any wide experience of other men. If our earthly life is an ocean, and we are mariners upon it ; if the Psalmist's description of sailors applies to us ; we mount up to the heavens, we go down to the depths, and we have melting hearts and are at our wits' end ; let this prophet teach us to understand the loving-kindness of the Lord. And

when we have learned all the lessons of his mortal life, and have gone through the annals of his earthly career, what shall we think of the further records that separated him widely from the ordinary experience of men? When we have passed through his entire history, it shall be without any call to sympathize with him in suffering the last pangs of nature, and without the occasion of dropping tears upon his grave. For one thing of his remarkable history is the almost unexampled fact that he never did die; and even this seems almost exceeded by the further truth that he appeared again upon the earth, nine hundred years after the great reformation which he effected in the Jewish Church.

If thus far we had withheld the name of this wonderful personage, any intelligent reader of the Scriptures could decide that these things apply to but one man in the world's eventful history. The prophet Elijah, the great Reformer of Israel's days of apostasy, is one of the favoured two to whom God hitherto has granted the privilege of departing from the earth without the pangs of death; he is one also of another favoured two whose privilege it was to return to earth for a time, and to talk of heavenly things in mortal ears in company with the transfigured Son of Man.

The great value of biography is to give us true views of what life is; we are strong ourselves to do the work which our life sets before us when we sympathize with the struggles and successes of those

who have manfully addressed themselves to their duties ; and though great differences may exist between their times and our own, the principles upon which they lived are of sterling value for our guidance. Here we chiefly search for the great religious teachings that may reasonably be looked for in the lives of inspired prophets ; the sacred writings, which purport to give us the history of Israel's kings, here expand their instructions, so that the religious condition of the people occupies more attention than the civil affairs of the kingdom ; yet the mingling of history with religion only better adapts the whole to our profit. All we can expect in any such teachings is to find principles of permanent value, enclosed like the kernel of a nut in a shell of circumstances, that protects their value till we can secure them ; it is ours to separate between the transient that may be thrown away and the permanent which we may use. These things have still their needful connection. The shell and the kernel, taken together, make a nut ; nor does the kernel ever grow separately. A man and his times make a life ; nor can we ever appreciate a man unless we know his times. Our weak judgment may think that sometimes a man forms his age ; that one mind directs the current of human events for his generation ; and that, but for him, his entire nation might have known a different history. Yet indeed, the greatest men and those of largest influence upon the world have been indebted to circumstances

and occasions they could neither create nor control, and we must never consent to lay aside that largest view of human history which gives free scope to human agencies, yet places every man and all generations under a Supreme Ruler.

But neither is it desirable nor possible to separate the life of any man, especially the life of one who has accomplished either very great good or very great evil, from the history of his times. To present the lives of such men as Alexander the Great, Mohammed, Philip the Second of Spain, or Voltaire, on the one hand; or on the other the lives of Luther, William of Orange, Cromwell, or Washington, is to compose the history of their respective ages; and we are obliged to weigh somewhat their influence upon their own and succeeding generations. And sometimes it occurs that rival characters in the same age must be crowded into the same historic records, and placed in contrast with each other; the one a worker for evil, and the other, withstanding him, a worker for good. He who would give a just account of the Reformation in the sixteenth century might write a life of Luther. For he was a chief providential instrument in awakening the public mind of Europe, and of forwarding that beneficent revolution; he had much to do with all the great men who were his contemporaries; and his life involves the history of his times. Or such a writer might reach substantially the same result—as has indeed been done by a standard historian in

our own language—by composing the history of Charles the Fifth, Emperor of Germany, whose power and historical wisdom as a monarch, and whose fanaticism as a bigot, had great influence on those times; and whose history, therefore, as truly as that of Luther, is interwoven with the Reformation annals. The history may be written in connection with either life; these important personages stand so antagonistic to each other in character, in purposes and in success, that a true life of one must give just views also of the other. We cannot judge of such a man's character or success unless we estimate the difficulties he overcomes; and to tell his life is to tell who his foes were.

So it is with Elijah, as a Reformer, in Israel's degenerate days. With his life and history we must necessarily connect the life and character of his sternest foe. Bring before your mind a personage of royal blood; of a proud, stern and decided bearing; impatient of contradiction; bold, cruel and unprincipled; liberal-handed toward every friend; vigorous and relentless in pursuing every foe; seated upon the throne of Israel in direct transgression of Israel's ancient laws; opposing those laws and trampling upon them, by injustice toward man and by leading the nation to wider apostasy from God; filling the kingdom with outrage and desolation, yet never once flinching before the stern words of the prophet of the Lord, nor standing in awe of the sterner judgments of God's

own hand ; living an unmitigated curse to that generation ; dying for those long-continued crimes by ungrateful violence ; and then, without even the humblest burial, eaten by the dogs of Jezreel ; it only adds to our horror and disgust at such a history to say that this is the character of a woman. Thus ELIJAH and JEZEBEL stand face to face in these historic scenes ; to write the life and history of one makes us necessarily acquainted with the other ; their common age owed its wickedness and its desolations largely to the influence of Jezebel ; and the dawn of better days for Israel and the Church of God among the ten tribes is as largely owing to the reforming efforts of Elijah. A life-like history and biography must seem to stand before us, as some well-pictured scene from the hand of a great artist. But as the art of the skilful painter consists, not so much in the correct outlines of his figures and their due proportion in the picture as in the proper mingling of light and shade, which gives a just conception of the perspective, makes the dark equally necessary with the light, and causes each figure to stand forth in its due relief ; so must a wise historian—who is the noblest style of an artist—exhibit the dark and the light. Every beholder may learn as much from the one as from the other ; and the light itself appears brighter when put in contrast with the darkness from which it emerges.

It has been well said of the abrupt appearance of Elijah's name upon the sacred pages, that this

prophet seems like one dropped from heaven in the midst of an awful night-piece.\* It was his lot to live in the calamitous days of Ahab, king of Israel. Yet, indeed, in human experience great wickedness is not usually of rapid growth. Individuals depart gradually from the paths of rectitude, and nations seldom reach the summit of iniquity within the lifetime of a single generation. Yet the progress of corruption had been rapid in the kingdom of the ten tribes, though we must not charge all the evils of his times upon Ahab and his queen. At the time when Ahab began to reign, the separate kingdom of the ten tribes—ever spoken of as the kingdom of Israel, as the house of David reigned over Judah—had been in existence for about sixty years. A slight review of the annals of this kingdom may better prepare us for the intelligent understanding of Elijah's history. We may here see the danger involved in any people's departing from the service of God, and the truth of the prophet's declaration: "The nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish." Isa. lx. 12.

For some three centuries or more after the children of Abraham possessed the land of Canaan, they were under the authority of no one civil ruler, but judges held authority, usually over limited districts; and the union of the people was chiefly in these

\* So Matthew Henry: "He drops, so to speak, out of the clouds;" Krummacher and Bishop Hall: "He comes in with a tempest who went out with a whirlwind."

things: that they were of the same race, language and history; that one statute-book was recognized by all the tribes as the law of their God; that they were one people in reliance upon the same covenants; and, that they were united in the avowed worship of the same Jehovah. But when, at their request, God gave them a king, the entire twelve tribes were united in one sentiment of loyalty toward this anointed sovereign. At the death of Saul an unhappy division took place, which lasted seven years and perhaps laid the foundation for the permanent and disastrous division which occurred in less than a century afterward. Ten tribes adhered to the house of Saul, refusing even the divine sanction of David's claims, though their leaders well understood that these were justly founded, 2 Sam. iii. 9. But the death of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, gave the entire authority into the hands of David; and so all the tribes were one till after the death of Solomon. Yet the seventy-five years had not so united them but that discontent and ambition could make their former division the pretext and the basis of their later separation. The rule of Solomon was magnificent, but the heavy expenses of so splendid a reign laid a weight of taxation upon the people which they were not ready to endure; and in their madness they hurried to results which made all matters, and this among the rest, incomparably worse. The ill-advised course of Rehoboam drove off those whom he should have conciliated; the

murder of an enrolling officer declared the stern determination of the malcontents; yet an express command from God forbade Rehoboam to make war upon the separating tribes. From that time forward, for a century and a half, there were two separate and often warring kingdoms among the sons of Jacob.

Unhappily a famous but a very bad man was called by Israel to the throne of the new kingdom. Some years before this, a widow's son had attracted the attention of King Solomon for his valor in war and his energy and industry in peace. Yet he proved to be as unprincipled as he was energetic. We know too little of his dealings with Solomon to decide whether he gave the aged monarch any just cause for jealousy; but because of the prediction of a prophet, that Jeroboam the son of Nebat should reign over ten tribes, or because the young man attempted dangerous things through this encouragement, Solomon compelled him to flee for his life. Upon learning of the death of Solomon, Jeroboam returned from Egypt in time to take part in the popular discontents toward Rehoboam; and when the final breach occurred, became king of the new empire. Thus far no evil record is made of him. He was a man of energy and ability, and he held the reins of power firmly for over twenty years, until the time of his death. But the grand wickedness of his life, which made the name of Jeroboam the son of Nebat infamous as the man who made

Israel to sin, was to repeat in the new kingdom the very crimes for which God had rent the dominions of Solomon; and the prophet in the original call of Jeroboam, had forewarned him of this, 1 Kings xi. 31-33. He took a most important step, influenced by shortsighted reasons of state policy. His reasons may have seemed plausible to a mind not controlled by true religious principles, yet the results of this policy were exceedingly disastrous—indeed were fatal to the permanence of his own family and to the prosperity of the kingdom through all subsequent times. Political cunning and a certain unchanging consistency Jeroboam had; but it tells badly for his true wisdom that neither forewarnings, 1 Kings xi: 38; nor reproofs, ch. xiii; nor judgments affecting directly his own person, ch. xiii: 4, and in the most painful manner reaching his own hearthstone, xiv. 17, could avail to change his chosen course of wickedness.

It was Jeroboam's evil pre-eminence to begin among the sons of Abraham the legal establishment of an idolatrous worship.\* From the days of the

\* It is with great surprise that I find Dr. Stanley, from whom a wide diversity of views and sympathies separates me, making the affirmation that "the kingdom of Israel was the National Kingdom, and the Church of Israel was the National Church" after the division. A larger and more populous territory belonged to the ten tribes. But the temple at Jerusalem was the lawful place of Jehovah's worship; the priests of Judah were in a lawful descent, as those set up by Jeroboam were not; above all, the promise of the Messiah belonged to

Exodus, the covenant people had been prone to the worship of images, of which the golden calf at Sinai was the first example. During the period of the Judges we find traces of the same bad tendency. But during the reigns of Saul and David and Solomon there had been a better regard to the fundamental law of the Hebrew commonwealth, which made their God their King. Especially after Jerusalem became the capital of the kingdom, and Solomon had built there his magnificent temple, there was a union of the people around that sacred spot for these sacred services. There were placed all the cherished memorials of their past national history; there the God of Jacob gave special tokens of his presence between the cherubim; there three times a year the tribes went up, "the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel," Ps. cxxii: 4; and God's covenant people found holy communion with each other as they bowed before his altars, and longed for the forgiveness of iniquity through the symbols of atonement. Evidently the building of that tem-

David's house, and the Kingdom of Judah survived to witness its fulfilment, after the other kingdom was utterly destroyed. All these are proof that the National Church had its central place of worship in Solomon's temple. Israel had prophets and prophetic books, because God did not give them up; yet many prophets and many reproofs show rather Israel's greater guiltiness than that Judah had lost the National Church. Was restoration made when the ten tribes were carried away? Or was the "National Church" then for ever dissolved.—*Stanley's Jewish Church*, sect. xxix.

ple, the regular, solemn assemblies of the whole people there, and their union in religious duties under the same priesthood and before the same God, would have a strong tendency to hold together the twelve tribes of Jacob as one people. There is no stronger bond of union than the union of religious sentiments and feelings. A union of piety must ever have great influence to prevent—perhaps also to heal—the separations caused by blinded passions and prejudices.

Jeroboam, in the ambitious prospects that filled his mind, wished for no such healing influence over Israel's divisions. He looked at the whole matter as one to be governed by state policy, and the fear was exceedingly natural, that if the kingdom of the ten tribes remained still united to Judah by such strong religious associations and affections, there would be the gradual allaying of political asperities, and perhaps, at some future time, the reuniting of the people in political relations. But the merging of the kingdom of Israel in the dominion of the house of David was of course as contrary as possible to the mind of the new sovereign. If he had been a godly man, and worthy to rule over God's covenant people, he might have escaped this snare. Reasoning justly from God's usual dealings with his faithful servants; remembering that for idolatry had Solomon been rejected; recalling the special assurance given to himself by the prophet Ahijah, 1 Kings, xi. 38, Jeroboam should

have sought in the path of duty to God, his own well-being, the prosperity of his kingdom, and the permanence of his family upon the throne. But wickedness is never wise, and apostasy from God can never bring true prosperity. King Jeroboam adopted means that were indeed calculated to separate his people as widely as possible from Judah, and to prevent all likelihood of a future reunion; but, like many schemes of wickedness, he secured the minor end with the defeat of the main purpose. He did effectually separate his kingdom from that of Judah, so that they were never again united. But his success was the ruin of his own family, and the introduction of a long train of evils that brought desolation and destruction upon the kingdom; if indeed we may not lay largely at his door, the evils that resulted in the decay and dissolution of both the kingdoms.

To secure the loyalty of his subjects toward himself and his house, Jeroboam sapped the very foundations of religion. He overlooked or despised the important truth that the fundamental law of man's allegiance to his God underlies and supports all meaner laws, and that we cannot depend upon the influence of sterling principle in any man as a citizen who consents to be an apostate from his God. Jeroboam should have known that by destroying the loyalty of his people toward Jehovah he made it impossible that they should show much attachment to a miserable race of profane

kings. Yet this was his policy. Israel had been idolatrous before. We shall take further occasion to notice that even Jeroboam did not attempt to annul the existing laws, that were derived from Moses, but rather superimposed others. But, for the first time now, idol-worship and priests for these services were established by law, and drew their support from the public treasury. Borrowing, as did the fathers at Sinai, the services and gods of Egypt, he set up two golden calves one at Dan, and the other at Bethel; made these the objects of national worship, and experiencing some faithful opposition from the priests and Levites, whose place it was to keep the people obedient to the laws of the Lord, he banished them from office—perhaps also from the kingdom, 2 Chron. xiii. 9. In their stead he elevated the basest men to the priesthood, the tools of his own despotism, thus subverting the laws of Moses, though perhaps not without the pretence of keeping these ordinances and of serving Jehovah, even through these images.

Thus his reign was in reality the apostasy of the ten tribes. Faithful men remained among them, but the kingdom declined; and this the more because through these very evils it was wretchedly governed. From the death of Jeroboam to the accession of Ahab was a period of but forty years. During this entire forty years one quiet and pious king of the house of David reigned over the sister kingdom of Judah; but, reckoning both Jeroboam

and Ahab, that one king of Judah lived to see eight kings of Israel. That miserable kingdom, established by disunion and rebellion, and nourished in apostasy from God, was torn to pieces by internal troubles; massacres and conspiracies succeeded each other; the only virtuous son of Jeroboam died beneath his father's roof during his father's lifetime; another son succeeded his father, but in two years was killed in a rebellion. Thus the succession which Jeroboam paid so dearly to secure departed for ever from his family. But the troubles of the kingdom went on. Two years later the drunken murderer was himself killed; one usurper strove with another; and when, thirty years after the death of Israel's first king, the crown was settled upon Omri, the father of Ahab, it was by a military despotism—the power that usually settles the disorders of a weak and wicked government.

We shall further see that the iniquities of Israel grew still more flagrant before the coming of the stern Reformer whose character and history we desire to study. Ahab, we are told, “sold himself to work evil.” He did not begin these miserable scenes. But he was wicked enough to carry them on with a high hand; to refuse the warnings by which he, at least, was sometimes appalled; and to maintain his rebellious and impenitent mind till his dying day.

It is lamentable to recognize that all times and

ages testify to the wickedness of man. Sometimes we are startled as we open the pages of history upon some period of abounding iniquity; deeds are recorded that seem beyond a parallel, and scenes pass before us that are too shocking for apology. Let us judge righteous judgment. By such men as ourselves were these things done; and if we differ from them, it is for no reasons that give us occasion for self-gratulation. And let us not suppose that only national evils grow strong with years and indulgence. In every individual there is the same vitality, the same deceitfulness, the same gathering strength in evil. Every germ of indulged sin makes the salutary changes of life more unlikely; we live in defiance or neglect of God to our own increasing peril; and many who go not far enough in evil to incur the reproof of men for notorious infamy, may yet go far enough to lose their own souls.

## CHAPTER II.

### *THE PERSECUTIONS OF JEZEBEL'S DAYS.*

AHAB came to the throne of an unhappy kingdom in declining times. But it was the great misfortune of his people that, bad as they were, their ruling prince was in advance of them. It should give us an impressive lesson of the superior responsibility of official authority to notice that far more censure is cast upon the kings of Israel because they led their people to evil than for all the depravity of their personal characters. We cannot entirely separate between a man's character and his influence, since influence flows from character and accords with it. And because of the influence belonging especially to official station should rulers be held responsible for their leading of the people. The expression used respecting the iniquity of Ahab is very strong: "There was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord."—1 Kings xxi. 25. A voluntary slave, sold to evil, though the king of Israel! Yet this man ruled the land for nearly a quarter of a century, and filled it with wretchedness and desolation.

The unhappiness of his reign and the increasing disorders of the kingdom were greatly increased by the king's marriage. Marriage in Eastern lands has not the influence to mould the husband's character that more frequently attaches to it among us. There, marriages are less the result of affection, but are arranged without consulting the parties, especially the woman; polygamy is allowed, and divorces are easily secured; all which things tend to give the wife far less influence than in our society. Here the entire character and life of an individual are sometimes changed through the influence exerted, favourably or unfavourably, by the person chosen to be a life-long companion.

Sometimes such influence is seen in Oriental life, and especially where the wife is the stronger character. Two things may have given especial influence to Jezebel. First, state policy may have brought this marriage about, and have given influence in Israel to Zidonian counsels; and, second, Jezebel gives proof of a mind superior in its natural endowments to that of her husband. The city of Zidon, or Sidon, was a powerful commercial city on the Mediterranean coast; and doubtless it was partly with the hope of strengthening his kingdom by the alliance that Ahab sought a Zidonian princess in marriage. We read enough afterward of Jezebel to estimate her character. We may say of her, in the language of a Jewish king (1 Kings xii. 10),

that her little finger was thicker than her husband's loins: a proud, imperious, implacable woman, and the record is that she stirred up Ahab to work iniquity. From the day of their marriage it soon appeared that not Israelitish, but Zidonian principles—not Ahab, but Jezebel ruled the kingdom of Israel.

There is a consistency about Jezebel's character that should not escape our notice. She was a Zidonian princess, and she acts the thorough Phœnician in all her life. She was willing to go to any length and to incur any expense to establish and maintain the forms of Phœnician idolatry. She came to the throne of Israel a thorough heathen, and persistently remained so: she was ever unsubdued by the fierce judgments of the God of Israel; and when Ahab submitted to the stern Reformer, and a change seemed about to occur to overthrow her schemes, she hurled back upon the prophet a defiance so keen, and fierce, and immediate, that Elijah himself quailed and fled before a woman's angry menace. Up to the time of Ahab's accession, there was, perhaps, no attempt to introduce a pure idolatry into the kingdom. The golden calves of Jeroboam were doubtless transgressions of the second commandment of the Decalogue rather than of the first; that is to say, they professed to represent, not false gods, but the God of Israel himself. So Jeroboam told the people, "Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." 1 Kings xii. 28. But this is just the language used

by Aaron when he made the calf at Sinai. That worship was deceitful. It was professedly the worship of Jehovah; and Aaron said, "To-morrow is a feast to the Lord." Ex. xxxii. 5. So these images of Jeroboam were professedly symbols of Jehovah's worship. This was as truly opposed to the law of the ten commandments; yet it was rather the corruption of religion than apostasy from it. This explains the singular mingling of the true and false which we see in so many prophets of this age. The lying prophet of Bethel (1 Kings xiii.) speaks a direct falsehood, which proved fatal to a brother prophet, yet he receives a true word from God after this. A corrupted religion may justly be distinguished from a false religion; and while special dangers belong to corrupted forms of true religion, because the truth we should hold often gives currency to the errors we should reject, we may judge charitably of those who are entangled in errors where yet substantial truth exists. Israel in the days of Jeroboam was in serious error; yet the laws of God were perverted rather than subverted. Still, the tendency of such errors is to advance. To worship God by images leads rapidly on to the worship of the images themselves; and after religion had been corrupted for half a century, and the better teachings of the purer faith were unknown to the mass of the people, the way was prepared for introducing a pure idolatry.

Jezebel made it the object of her ambition to in-

roduce the worship of Baal in Israel, and to cause his polluting and infamous rites to fill the land. But she was not content that her forms of worship should be tolerated. They must be established; the wealth and authority of the kingdom must be enlisted to sustain them; every opposing lip must be silenced, even though it might imply the hush of death upon every prophet; and the servants of the living God must be compelled to render their worship henceforth to the Zidonian god. It is much to the credit of the nation, degenerate as it had already become, that a vigorous opposition withstood these endeavours to subvert the fundamental principles of Israelitish law. We think it likely that Jeroboam could not have done what Jezebel now effected. Fifty years earlier it required a cautious and seductive policy, the end of which, it may be, Jeroboam himself did not see, to lead the people from their allegiance to their God; and either the better part of the people were blind to the dangers thus introduced, or they did not give them a firm and persevering resistance, certainly not a successful one. Thus, usually, error begins with slow and persuasive steps: it is justified, not by its inherent excellency, but for reasons of apparent policy, and enough at least are deceived to prevent a bold and successful opposition.

Let us not suppose, however, that the policy of the kingdom, even in the early days of Jeroboam, met with none to oppose it or to show its wicked-

ness toward God, and its dangers toward the Israelitish people: the truth rather seems to be that the true priests and Levites of the days of Jeroboam set the first example of a voluntary sacrifice for principle's sake, such as God's true ministers in later times have, upon several occasions, been compelled to imitate. We all know what a profound impression of the excellency of religion and of the power of Christian principle was made upon the world by the exodus of the Free Church of Scotland. After long and earnest efforts to prevent the encroachments of the civil authorities upon the spiritual duties of the Church, nearly five hundred ministers voluntarily gave up their congregations, church buildings, salaries and comfortable homes, and threw themselves upon the sympathies of the people. They went forth to begin the world anew in the service of Christ. They had congregations to form, churches to build; their incomes to secure by means heretofore untried by them; and foreign missionaries to support in addition to their home burdens; and all these things were to be done at once. And they were nobly done, with many instances of self-denial, but also with large advantages to ministers and people. The results of over twenty years' experience have indicated the propriety and wisdom of that noble stand.

Yet it is due to the truth to say that as an instance of heroic self-devotion to the principles of the gospel, it was far less illustrious than may be.

found in the conduct of the English Non-conformist divines two centuries before. When the Scottish ministers left the Established Church, they threw themselves upon the sympathies of a people ready to receive them; their persecutions were scarcely anything else than petty annoyances, that served to help their cause rather than to hinder it, and they were soon as prosperous as before. But on Black Bartholomew's Day, 1660, two thousand godly ministers in England, rather than conform to the tyrannical orders of Parliament, were cast forth from their charges without the privilege of helping themselves by the free exercise of their ministry. Many hundreds of them had neither house nor bread: if they dared to preach, they were imprisoned for their crime, and the people dare not aid them, even privately, lest they should be suspected of disloyal conduct. By the law of Protestant England no Puritan preacher was allowed to come within five miles of his former congregation; spies and informers were constantly upon his track, and any attempt to exercise his ministry was the signal for his arrest and imprisonment. The annals of England must ever be stained with that instance of most refined cruelty which English law inflicted but two hundred years ago upon men like Bates, Owen, Baxter, Howe, Calamy, Flavel and Philip Henry, whose names are now the ornaments of English literature, whose superiors cannot be named, as eminent in advanc-

ing the cause of civil liberty, and, better still, of promoting the piety of the Church of God.

We have not a full record of the sufferings which were cheerfully borne for principle's sake by the priests of the Jewish Church in the days of Jeroboam. When the kingdom of Israel was set up in rebellion from the house of David, a strong tide of partisan feeling sustained the new king, Jeroboam. But when he attempted to interfere in matters of religion, when he required the people to serve the golden calves at Dan and at Bethel, his people resisted his efforts. This resistance, perhaps, was not formidable; it may have been far less than it should have been. Doubtless many were ready to go wherever the influence of the king would lead them; others were seduced by the plausible pretences of Jeroboam, and did not believe that this was the beginning of national apostasy. Yet many understood the guilt and danger, and nobly took ground against the king's proposals. The priests and Levites would not serve these gods, even though called by the name of the Lord. So they were cast out of their offices; the support allowed them under the Mosaic laws was withdrawn, and given to priests who would be more subservient to Jeroboam; and these faithful men were compelled to find refuge in the neighbouring kingdom. And of the best people of the land, so many fell away and passed over to Judah as greatly to strengthen the power of Rehoboam. 2 Chron. xi. 13-17; xiii. 9.

It is difficult for us to describe, from the brief account we have of the matter, whether the pious priests and people of that age acted wisely or foolishly in leaving their own land. If they could have remained and resisted the encroachments of idolatry, perhaps they might have saved the kingdom from coming disasters; the persecutions of the days of Jezebel might have been prevented, and the later efforts of Elijah might have been sustained. It is not right for God's people easily to desert the post which Providence has assigned them. If they can stand in their lot, let them there abide; especially if freedom of speech and action is allowed to them, and if they can hope, even through self-denial and much endurance, to maintain the cause of God and truth. But we may have here an example of the folly of princes, so often exemplified in the later ages of European history. When we know that Spain banished thousands of an industrious and thriving population simply because they were Jews; that France sent into exile half a million of the Huguenots, almost completely destroying the manufacturing interests of the kingdom, and, through her bigotry, giving her great rival, England, an advantage whose importance has constantly increased for over two centuries; that Ferdinand II. of Austria conducted an exterminating war against the Protestants of Bohemia and Moravia, devastated the land, expelled the inhabitants by thousands and reduced the population

from three millions to less than one, inflicting injuries from which Bohemia has never since recovered; and that from several countries of Europe, even from Protestant England, men of the highest moral worth were compelled to emigrate—exiles for conscience' sake—to the wilds of the Western Continent, we may esteem bigotry in any age as one of the worst passions of the human mind, the most blind to every wise interest, the most reckless of consequence, the fiercest in its cruel sway. The first monarch of the new kingdom, though actuated less by genuine bigotry than by his own stern resolve to separate the ten tribes from Judah, would put down all opposition to his will at all hazards. So the pious Israelites of Jeroboam's day were compelled to leave the kingdom or conform to the established worship of the golden calves. The example of their piety is valuable to us, though indeed the new kingdom could poorly afford to lose her best population, and soon sadly missed the presence of such subjects.

But now, in the days of Ahab, we see the importance of the previous changes. Whether we judge that the pious portion of the people of Israel did not make sufficient resistance to the schemes of the idolatrous king, or whether all their resistance was in vain, and they were forced to leave the kingdom, we see the lamentable result when Jezebel attempted still more important innovations. Worse than all that Jeroboam had done, her effort was to

introduce the worship of Baal. This heathen divinity was extensively worshipped by the Eastern nations. He is supposed to be the sun, as Astarte, called also in the Scriptures, Ashtoreth and the Groves, is the moon. We can scarcely wonder, if men are idolaters at all, that they should pay their honors to creatures so magnificent as these heavenly bodies. The name of Baal signifies Lord, and is often used in compound names of inferior gods, as Baalpeor, Baalzebub, etc. His worship was often of a most cruel character, consisting in human sacrifices and with degrading and polluting rites. We cannot be surprised that Jezebel's efforts to establish the worship of such a god in Israel gave great alarm to the better part of the people. Here was a bold and open attempt to subvert the religion of the nation and to overthrow the authority of their ancient laws. Men that might be kept quiet by the plausible pretences of Jeroboam had no difficulty in comprehending the evident designs of this Zidonian queen.

But that portion of the people of Israel who were disposed to resist the wickedness of Jezebel had now grown too weak to make successful or even formidable opposition. Half a century of prevailing corruption had depraved the public conscience, and the previous exile of so large a number of the leaders and of the most pious part of the people had given a decided preponderance to the idolatrous party. So an open resistance at such

a time could have only the result of securing the more complete destruction of all who withstood the decrees of the cruel and imperious queen. We do not know what form the resistance took. But one important sentence incidentally occurs at a later time to reveal things, which, alas! have been too commonly known in the history of God's believing people. We are informed that Jezebel slew the prophets of the Lord, and that only those escaped whom faithful friends secreted from her fury. 1 Kings xviii. 4, 13. This record opens to us a fruitful source of thought. The prophets of God in a time of advancing errors stood faithfully up to resist the encroachments of evil. It made no difference to them that monarchs were the aggressors, nor did they shrink from the post of duty, though their blood must put the seal upon their faithfulness. Doubtless oftentimes an unfaithful ministry has brought error and mischief in upon a land; yet in all ages the faithful ministers of God have been the sternest foes of tyrants, and have sealed with their lives the precious doctrines of his truth.

Yet it is lamentable to think that in the land promised to the patriarchs these scenes of persecution and massacre occur. Not beneath the taskmasters of Egypt, nor by the distant rivers of a sad captivity, but upon the very plains of Canaan, by the well of Jacob and in the pasture-grounds of Abraham, the covenant people were trodden down by a domestic tyranny and forbidden by their own

king to worship their own God. Yet is this a chapter of grief not unusual in the pages of the Church's history; but we often read of those that were "destitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom the world was not worthy; they wandered in deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth." Heb. xi. 37, 38. Nor need we wonder that Canaan was a land of persecution, and that the sacred soil was dyed with martyr blood. Human nature, in its deep depravity, is ever prone to decline from the purity of divine teachings. There is a constant tendency to apostatize from the true faith, against which every age of believers must be upon its guard. The bitterest and most cruel enemies against whom the Church of God has ever contended have spring up within her own bosom; the blood of true martyrs has been sprinkled upon God's own altars; and the great Martyr of the world's history, and for the world's salvation, declared solemnly that a prophet — especially the greatest Prophet — could scarcely perish save in the holy city, Luke xiii. 33; and his death upon the cross was procured by men who were the anointed priests in God's own house. And the persecutions of later times, the most cruel the world has ever known, have shown chiefly the enormous cruelties of an apostate Church.

When a pagan queen is partner of the throne of Israel we have just the elements of a persecutor. Let the spirit of paganism dwell in Israel, and we

have an age of prophet-martyrs, even upon sacred soil. The detailed history of those sad years is not given to us. We are told that one single man, whose office in the court of Ahab made him acquainted with the schemes of Jezebel, hid one hundred of the Lord's prophets, at least for a season, from her rage. But these may have formed but a small proportion of the numbers of those slain by the queen's orders or compelled to leave the kingdom to save their lives. The Church of God has her martyrs unknown, as well as her martyrs known and honored. The Christian poet very beautifully as well as truly speaks the praises of those that

"lived unknown,  
Till persecution dragged them into fame,  
And chased them up to heaven."

But of these noblest patriots and noblest freemen how many have never been "dragged into fame!" Many perished in Israel by the hands of Ahab's queen, whose names we can never know, and of whom this record remains alone for earth: "Jezebel slew the prophets of the Lord." Many have died in the secret dungeons of the horrible Inquisition, or laid down to their unknown graves in the dens and caves of the earth, or dragged out their solitary exile in distant lands, of whose names the Church knows nothing. Many have nerved their brethren, and even converted their persecutors, by the spectacle of their heroic sufferings. Freedom

to worship God is a blessing that has cost many earnest struggles and the large shedding of precious blood. And it is worth all it has ever cost — worth to us and to our children all it may ever cost them and us to maintain and defend this legacy of ages past. And indeed this is the excellency of the cause of God and truth: that even in this life it well repays those who suffer most to promote it. The words of our blessed Lord express a principle of most precious truth; and this was of equal value long before his lips gave it this delightful utterance: “Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Happier is the sufferer than the injurer; happier the persecuted than the persecutor; happier the unknown Hebrew prophet, even if he was circled by the kindling flames, a living sacrifice to Baal, than the queenly Jezebel, within whom burned the more enduring and more consuming flames of unholy passions. The worst of God’s service in any age is better than the best of Satan’s. The day will come, after the jewels of every earthly diadem have lost their lustre, when every martyr-crown shall shine with refulgent splendour; and when, in contrast with the dishonoured memory of their persecutors, the name of every suffering believer shall be held in glorious remembrance.

It is very likely that these persecutions in Israel in the days of Ahab were attended with special severity. Two reasons may suggest this: 1st,

The services paid by the Phœnician tribes to Baal were of great cruelty. Indeed it may be that the fearful method of destroying human life by fire — used chiefly in the martyrdoms of the people of God — had its origin in the awful rites of those Canaanitish gods. The Scriptures often speak of the offering of their children by fire to these divinities; and human sacrifices thus made, even in the time of Jezebel, may have set the horrible example, so long afterward copied, of carrying on these persecutions by flames. What if these gods of Canaan and their fearful modes of torture were the true source of the terrible scenes which the paganized Church of Rome has so often repeated in her warfare against the saints of the Most High?

But, 2d, the cruelty of Jezebel was doubtless quickened by its contact with the teachings of the true religion. She was a pagan, but she became acquainted with the teachings of the Hebrew prophets. It is worthy of notice that the light of true piety degrades where it fails to elevate, and men are never so bitter as when they know the truth and yet fight against the truth. The natural fierceness of Jezebel's bigotry may have been incensed by the firmness with which the prophet-martyrs withstood her will and the patience with which they died. As the light of heaven pains a diseased eye, so divine truth provokes the bad passions of wicked men. The different false re-

ligions of the world are seldom arrayed against each other : wicked men in the world are tolerant of each other's vices ; but that which is most unlike the world incurs most the world's deadly hatred. Troublous times, guilty times, were upon Israel when the Lord's prophets were so slaughtered that even Elijah did not know of a single prophet left except himself.

These thoughts upon the condition of Israel in the days of Jezebel may remind us that both in national and in individual experience there may be a dangerous growth of evil, for which a deep responsibility rests somewhere. We cannot decide how faithful were the good people of Israel in those trying times ; but we should fear, ourselves, that guilt which makes us careless of approaching dangers, or allows us to throw off our responsibility because the peril seems small. The insidious beginnings and the insensible advances of sin have proved the ruin of many immortal interests. An evil character is insensibly formed, evil associates gradually gather around us, our feet imperceptibly wander from the paths of rectitude ; ere we are aware we have placed ourselves in peril, and every year of life increases our liability to go yet further on in ways that are disapproved alike by our own consciences and by the law of God. Against the deceitfulness of sin no people, no person, can too carefully guard. One compliance brings others in its train. The man who takes one wrong step, or indulges

one bosom sin, or lives upon one wrong principle, cannot possibly foresee the results.

We should be the more guarded in these matters, because in this fallen world evil is so much more easily wrought than good. See the tremendous influence of Jezebel. If we say she owed much of this to her place as queen, this must be admitted; yet, indeed, the effect is far more apparent where the energies are enlisted for evil. The same intellect, industry and time can do vastly more to destroy than to build up. It is an easy thing to awaken evil and corrupt thoughts in a youthful mind, but not easy to reform one already depraved. These lessons are taught us all along in human history, and impressed by a thousand examples under our own notice; and yet how difficult it is to make men afraid of evil principles, or to convince them that they stand in danger, when they voluntarily expose themselves to the corrupt influences around them!

### CHAPTER III.

#### *THE DESOLATION OF ISRAEL.*

WE have attempted to form some idea of the moral state of the kingdom of Israel under the rule of Jezebel and Ahab. And now a new character suddenly makes his appearance. When the prophets had been slaughtered, and the true people of God scattered or silenced, and the nation was devoted to the false gods of Jerusalem, or the more terrible rites of Baal, God raised up this eminent prophet. His very name, Elijah—my God is Jehovah—contains a public protest against the prevailing idolatry. In the New Testament, it takes the Greek form, Elias. He is also called the Tishbite. Some suppose this is from the name of the town where he may have been born. Yet the town, Thisbe, to which his birth is usually referred, was in the tribe of Naphtali and northwest of Lake Tiberias; while Elijah is said to be of the inhabitants of Gilead. Gilead is on the other side of the lake, and to the southeast. Perhaps the name is rather descriptive of his office. Translate it, and it is the converter or reformer; and what more appro-

priate title belongs to this prophet than to call him Elijah, the Reformer!

Whether he had been a silent witness of Israel's desolations, up to the moment when his voice breaks so abruptly upon the ears of Ahab, we have no means of deciding. Perhaps he was an unwilling exile from Israel, and returned now at the Lord's bidding. But what sad scenes spread before him as he looked over the land! The pure worship of Israel's God was interdicted; profane altars smoked on every hill-side, and the shade of every green tree was devoted to idolatry. The very spot where the patriarch Jacob slept, when he saw the angels of God ascending and descending, had now, for more than half a century, been defiled with the idolatries of Jacob's sons; and though still called Bethel, the house of God, deserved better the name, significantly applied to it by one of the later prophets, Bethaven, the house of vanity. Hosea iv. 15. The triumph of Jezebel seemed complete. What had now become of the hundred prophets, sheltered by the care of Obadiah, we cannot tell; now, at least, every prophetic voice was so silenced, every service paid to the living God was so secret, that Elijah thought he was left alone. Then the prophet stood forward. His personal appearance is afterward described to us, yet rather as to his dress than to anything else: a hairy man, girded with a belt of leather. The prophets of Israel wore coarse garments, cheaply made from the rougher hair of the

camel, and any man wearing such a dress laid claim to the office of a prophet. Zech. xiii. 4. So, when Israel had been long without a prophet, John the Baptist—who had many characteristics like Elijah— attracted great attention in the wilderness when he came preaching, “clothed in a raiment of camel’s hair and a leathern girdle about his loins.” Matt. iii. 4. Dressed in this prophetic garb, Elijah appeared at the court of Ahab, and fearfully announced a heavy judgment upon the land. Perhaps the very terms of the woe were designed to awaken the penitence of the people; no limit is fixed for the time of the judgment, for they might shorten the days by turning to the Lord. And so we may say that the prophet secures his own life from the wrath of Ahab by the very form of the threatening. The needed rain for the land depends upon his word; and the angry king would not dare to slay the prophet, at least until he had secured the recall of the fearful malediction.

Elijah stood before Ahab, and in the most solemn manner, and in the fearful name of the God of Israel, declared that there should be no rain or dew upon the land but at his word. He gives no proof of his commission, except that which is involved in the fulfilment of his words. This, in such a case, is a sufficient proof of the prophet’s authority.

Perhaps we should think of this judgment in the light of those sins of the people of Israel upon

which it was called down. In the divine administration of earthly affairs, we often see the punishments of sin so appropriate to the sins that call them forth that men have no difficulty in discerning why the displeasure of God is upon them. The Scriptures often express this rule in explicit language: "His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself." "As she hath done, so shall it be done to her." "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." The Egyptians destroyed the male children of the Israelites, and in judgment lose their own first born. David's sin is followed by like sins in his own household. The Jews rejected their Messiah, and were rejected by him. So in this great calamity of Israel. The people reap the fruits of their own devices.

It is not the unanimous opinion of the learned that Baal is the sun. Mr. Mede thinks that the Bel of the Babylonians was a deified king of Babel, and that the Baal of the Zidonians was a deified Phœnician king. Yet Calmet, Bishop Patrick and others, think that Baal is the sun. Though the plural name of Baalam is applied to other gods, or perhaps to multiplied images of the same god, yet it explains all the Scriptural references to Baal's worship to suppose that he is the sun. The Jewish people did worship the sun. Josiah put down the priests "that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the planets and to all the host of heaven."

2 Kings xxiii. 5. So also he took away the chariots given to the sun, and burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

Thus to understand this Baal worship explains the appropriateness of the judgment now pronounced by Elijah, and of the challenge given three years later at Carmel. We may suppose him now to say, "Since you will worship the sun, let the sun be your ruler. Let his bright and unclouded rays beam upon you; let no storm-clouds obscure his beauty to your admiring eyes; let no vapours rise to darken his splendour. The burning sun is Israel's god; let him teach Israel the folly of exalting the creature into the place of that Creator who alone can make all his creatures subserve his providential purposes." And thus God still deals with the sons of men. Their follies and sins become the means of their chastisement. A stricken people may often see the exact offence they have given to the great Ruler over the nations; for their troubles arise from their sins. Even God's noblest creatures may not be put in his place, and he can make our very blessings the instruments of his chastising righteousness.

It seems a serious thing to consider that this judgment upon Israel was in answer to Elijah's prayers. He looked abroad over the land; he saw the covenant people of Jehovah given to the debasing worship of the heathen. The orgies of Astarte polluted the night, and human sacrifices

to Baal threw up their lurid smoke to cloud and defile the day. We are not told what warnings Elijah may have given, what expostulations he may have used, what rejections — possibly persecutions — he may have met before he reached this almost incorrigible point in Israel's guilt. The long forbearance of God usually goes before the severity of his judgments; and we have no reason to think that Elijah was wanting in feelings of ardent attachment to his people and to his land. But at length his holy indignation is roused at their wilful and wide departure from their God, and he is jealous for the divine name and authority. "He prayed earnestly that it might not rain." Let us not think it strange that a wise and good man should call such a calamity upon his people. He had doubtless the same end in view that in such a case might be placed before the divine mind. There is, we must ever remember, an infinite difference between the highest servant and that Almighty God to whom belongeth vengeance; but if a faithful servant may approve and vindicate the Lord's sternest dealings with sinful men, he may desire such providential workings as shall reprove for sin and teach the people righteousness.

Of Israel's guilt we have proof enough; and herein is evidence that too great severity was not exercised toward them: 1st, That God heard Elijah's prayer; and, 2d, That the people remained still rebellious and impenitent. Indeed,

not Elijah, but Elijah's God, sent these judgments on the guilty land. The servant in his house cannot rise above a servant. God hears not the mad cry of revenge, the impatient complaints of petulance or the miserable frettings of an unholy anger. We may look upon the prophet in this remarkable prayer as rising above the low and common view of things; as preferring the vindication of the divine honour, and as desiring this divine severity as the means of awakening the penitence of a sinning people. How fearful was the apostasy that demanded such a remedy!

This prayer of Elijah was founded upon the express teachings of those ancient Scriptures which belonged to the people of Israel. As long ago as the days of their lawgiver, this judgment had been denounced as their punishment for idolatry. After promising rain among the blessings flowing from their obedience, Moses thus warns his people: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside and serve other gods, and worship them; and then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit." Deut. xi. 16, 17. So this judgment was just that before threatened, as well as that which was appropriate to Israel's worship of the sun.

But hard indeed were the hearts of that guilty people, when these fearful judgments failed to

awaken penitence. The sentence of Elijah was so pronounced, in the name of the God of Israel, that every month of the drought's increasing severity might more and more convince them that the hand of Jehovah was upon them; yet the door was left open for their speedy relief, when they sought it of the Lord. And we need not judge that no good effect was secured among any of the people by this terrible drought. Unknown indeed to Elijah, but not unknown to the prophet's God, there was a faithful band who had not bowed their knees to the prevailing worship, but had maintained their allegiance to God through all this period of national degeneracy. And these, we may hope, mourned over the sins of the land, humbled themselves under the severity of the divine judgments, and were confirmed in their ancient faith. But the ruling authorities and the greater part of the people continued yet in their sins. They may even have attributed the evils that happened to the ordinary operation of natural laws, according to a sceptical philosophy, which, however it may change its phases, is ever regarded as new by each succeeding generation; though indeed it is as old as the spirit of infidelity, or, to give another name to the same thing, of depravity in man. So great is the delusion of error that, despite the plain words of Elijah, they may have attributed these evils to the anger of Baal; they may have been more zealous to extir-

pate the worshippers of Jehovah ; they may have multiplied their vows and offerings for Baal's favour.

The judgments of God often fail to secure the risings of salutary contrition. At the end of three years and a half the judgment still rested upon the land. There may, indeed, have been some preparations for Elijah's reappearance, and many secret prayers from seven thousand faithful hearts ; yet, so far as we can see, the movement of deliverance began in the divine mercy — which deals not with us according to our sins, nor rewards us according to our iniquities — and in the earnest prayer of the prophet himself. In every age the law works wrath, and though judgments are sent to awaken the conscience, divine mercy draws and wins the heart. The fable teaches truth. The bleak north wind may beat upon the traveller, only to make him wrap his cloak more closely around him ; but the warm sun makes him throw it off and seek shelter in refreshing shades. Divine judgments have their important purposes to serve, as God sends them upon those who have yet opportunities for repentance ; but his mercy alone is effectual to soften and win and renew and purify the sinful heart.

The judgment denounced by Elijah upon guilty Israel proclaims not simply his personal piety, as zealous for the Divine honour, but his official rank as a true prophet. Such words would be folly, and even wickedness, uttered by his own authority ; but

he speaks them in the name of the Lord. "There shall not be dew nor rain these years but according to my word." Even if this expresses the truth but generally, if occasional showers did come, not enough to relieve the drought of the land, the calamity is one too great for the widest range of our imagination to conceive. So accustomed are we to the exuberant bounty of our God that we think too little of this; and too little reflect how much our constant comfort depends upon common blessings. The element of water—how needful to us, how adapted to innumerable purposes, how abundantly supplied, how admirably distributed! How copiously, yet how gently, it descends in genial showers, applied without human labour just where its reviving and sustaining influences are needed; laid lightly at the roots of the thirsty plants, refreshing the trees on the mountain side, the grass in the valley, the grain in the cultivated field. How it penetrates the veins of the earth, lays up its reservoirs in her secret places, springs up for the necessities of man and beast, even in the wilderness, and gushes forth in unfailing supplies in almost every farm-yard. How it flows in the channels of our noble rivers, and as a continual source of supply for the clouds of heaven, rolls its ocean billows over two-thirds of the globe. Especially is ours a land blessed by the God of heaven with springs and fountains and streams of water. Less subject to droughts, we are less capable of comprehending

their severity, as sometimes experienced in other lands. Perhaps none of us ever saw six months of drought without rain. A few weeks of dry weather make us long for the showers of heaven. But a few months' drought, in a land of springs, and wells, and streams, gives but a feeble idea of the distress in Israel in Elijah's days. There, a spring of water is a gem of priceless value; a well is a meagre pool of almost brackish water, poorly comparing with our living fountains; and the Jordan would be a mere rivulet beside our grand rivers.

In such a land the prophet pronounced a calamity that extended to years. Every succeeding year, even every month and week, would increase the desolation. The cities would be the first to feel the curse. The hot sun would beat down upon their narrow streets, the clouds of scorching dust would penetrate their inmost chambers, the wells and cisterns would gradually fail, the rivulets would dwindle in their needful supplies, extravagant prices would bring sufferings upon the poor, and the houses of the wealthy, and even the palace of the king, must suffer in the prevailing, universal destitution. Outside of the walled towns, the influence could be easily seen. Scarcely any sight is more distressing than that of a cultivated country suffering under the severity of a drought. The delightful carpet of green upon the meadows gives place to dry and withered and unsightly sods; the dusty fields lie unstirred by the plough of the hus-

bandman, for it is vain to cast the seed into such a soil ; and the forest trees, perhaps the last to show their need of rain, are bare and dry as in the depths of winter. The streams and fountains fail, some enduring a longer, others a shorter time ; and all nature, animate and inanimate, in all the realm, is compelled to feel the power of an avenging God.

We are not made acquainted with the sad details of these years of calamity in Israel. We know not the resources of the nation, or the measures adopted to meet this severe dispensation. Doubtless many of the people became voluntary exiles to lands of greater plenty, there to remain till the famine had subsided. These famines seem to have been oftentimes over comparatively narrow districts of country, and the people often sought refuge in neighbouring lands. Thus Abraham and Jacob both left Canaan for Egypt by reason of famine ; thus Naomi and her husband went to Moab because of a famine that lasted ten years ; thus, perhaps, Israel was drained at this time of much of its population. In any case, the resources of the kingdom must have been exhausted, though if the drought did not extend to Hermon and Lebanon, the fountains of the Jordan would not be dried up, and the people might resort thither for relief.\* Yet the narrative implies that the Jordan also must finally have been exhausted. Perhaps, now, Ahab depended much upon his father-in-law, for though the drought ex-

\* The Land and the Book, ii. 228.

tended to Zarephath, yet Zidon, as a famous seaport of the Mediterranean, would be able to furnish supplies from a distance.

It seems to argue that this drought was confined to a narrow district that so little is said of the kingdom of Judah at this precise period. The king of Judah at this time was Jehoshaphat, a good man and a true servant of the Lord, and we are not told of any decline in his kingdom during the period of this calamity upon the kingdom of the ten tribes. Rather we are told that he did not serve Baalim; that the Lord established the kingdom in his hands; that all Judah brought him presents; that he had riches and honours in abundance; that his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord; that he took great pains to have the true religion taught to the people throughout all his dominions; that he waxed exceedingly great, and that there was remarkable religious and temporal prosperity in his times. See 2 Chron. xvii. Sometimes two nations give this remarkable contrast as they stand side by side, and even the prosperity of one may largely grow out of the sins and troubles of the other. A few years difference in the chronology may make all these statements still consistent with the partial suffering of Judah at the same time with Israel; but we have no direct proof that other neighbourhoods suffered in the distress of Israel, except the district of Zarephath.

Yet if Judah suffered with Israel in this judg-

ment of God, we have here but one of the mysteries of Providence not seldom seen among men. The innocent are closely connected with the guilty, so that they often suffer with them, and men feel sorrows whose cause and guilt they do not share. The innocent often suffer with the guilty; the guilty are often spared for the sake of the righteous or through their prayers. These are mysteries in the government of a righteous God that force upon us the conviction that in another life he will vindicate and rectify the inequalities here so often seen in his dealings with man. This is a world where God's people must walk by faith; many things remain unexplained. By means of these the hearts of the wicked are often fully set within them to do evil, yet surely may we know that it shall be well with the righteous—it shall not be well with the wicked.

If, during this time of adversity in Israel, Judah was still prosperous, we may wonder why the prophet did not seek refuge there, as doubtless many others did. It would appear that he never fled there to escape the power of Jezebel. This may have been to prevent a needless embroiling of the two kingdoms in strife; for we read that the angry Ahab sought everywhere for him, and even sought — perhaps demanded — an oath of the neighbouring kings that they had not sheltered one who was a proscribed outlaw. But in the brevity of the scriptural narratives we are often

perplexed at matters which could be easily explained by the mention of one or two simple facts. These writers keep in view their own great aim, to present to us the religious life of God's ancient people, rather than to trace their political history. Thus they omit things which we would gladly know. They often perplex us with difficulties which might possibly be explained if we had but the smallest additional fact; and the history of this prophet is more completely given than the life of many a warlike king. If we seek here simply to gratify our curiosity; if we demand a full explanation of every matter of which we have some instruction; if we look for teachings of merely natural or historical interest, we will often be disappointed. But if we would learn the higher lessons which remind us of the divine rule among the sons of men, we need not fail to secure these — lessons of permanent value to every age and to every reader of these sacred pages.

See in these records how easily the divine hand can punish the sins of men, since we are so constantly and so entirely dependent upon the divine bounty. So numerous and familiar are the divine blessings to us that we are prone to receive them unthankfully, and even to forget the hand from which they come. Yet should he withdraw one of many of our comforts, we perish. He does not need to send a flood of water to drown a sinning world: it would effect the same desolation if he

should simply withhold the "showers that water the earth." All the skill and resources of man would be vainly tasked to supply this single deficiency if his providence should send no clouds to cover the earth. Yet against a God upon whom they are so dependent, from whom they receive so constant mercies, and who could so easily lay his wrath upon them, men ever rebel. Here are two things to attract our wonder: that men should sin so long and so perversely against such a God; and that God should forbear so long and so kindly with hardened sinners — should still grant them the bounties of his providence, and should even soften their hearts by unsearchable grace. We need not hesitate indeed to decide which is the greatest marvel. No greater wonder does God's own universe contain than the wonder of his grace to sinning man.

And even these records of judgment may encourage us to draw near to God in humble penitence for our sins. God's forbearance betokens his willingness to show mercy, and is adapted to lead men to repentance. In this case he hearkened to the prophet's prayer for judgment. He is not less ready to hear the cry that asks his mercy. The very form of the prophetic woe, which seemed to leave open the door of approach to him, that the days of vengeance might be shortened upon the land, may call us, in the days of his forbearance, to seek a sin-forgiving God.

But these all are earthly judgments. Let them teach us how fearful must be their estate upon whom shall fall the eternal wrath of the God they have despised. "Our God is a consuming fire." There are many things to restrain and modify and shorten the earthly judgments of God as inflicted upon even hardened sinners. Even Ahab and Jezebel, miserable as was their own fate at the last, did not meet with the full displeasure of Israel's God. They ruled over a people whom God would not utterly reject; they had many pious subjects who must suffer in their sufferings; and for the sake of the pious, and by reason of the prayers of the pious, God withheld many sufferings he might otherwise have sent. Many earthly advantages belong to sinful men from God's present methods of dealing with the earth and from their connection with the righteous. The tares and the wheat are in the same field; their roots are intertwined. If one is plucked up, the other suffers; both must grow together until the harvest. God's people are in the world; God's prophets pray for the world; God deals in mingled judgment and mercy. But one day the wicked will pass the boundary of the divine forbearance. The severest earthly judgments give us but a faint idea of the day of divine vengeance. No seven thousand will mingle with the throng upon the left-hand side of that awful judgment-seat. No Elijah will pray for mercy then. If Christ wept

over Jerusalem, well may we weep over dying souls;—now, not then. Then it will be too late. Unhappy he who finds it too late, even by one single moment!

## CHAPTER IV.

### *THE PROPHET BY THE BROOK CHERITH.*

EVERY judgment from the hand of God upon man, in all time past, has doubtless been like the judgments of the present, in this: that the guilty are too prone to interpret the divine dealings by their own prejudices. While the faithful few in Israel stood firm in their love and allegiance, many profane mockers set the prophet's threat at defiance, and refused to believe that the heavens would be shut up at Elijah's word. Yet as time wore on, and matters became worse and worse in the desolated land, the scoff of profanity must have assumed a sickly seriousness on the most ungodly lip; and the words of the prophet and the justice of Elijah's God were vindicated in judgments whose power even opposers must confess. But the perverseness of iniquity, especially in the reigning family, is seen in this—that all the steps taken would tend rather to increase than remove the calamities of the land. Efforts seem to have been zealously made to find Elijah as the known proclaimer of this curse; the odium was laid upon him

which really belonged to the wickedness of the people, and doubtless the consciences of the guilty were less disturbed because they aroused a zealous indignation against him. So hard is it ever to reprove iniquity so that favour shall be awakened toward a faithful reprove, or repentance toward God when he judges for sin!

While Ahab sought for Elijah, he was concealed by the divine command, and perhaps within a day's journey of the king's palace. We suppose that his stay there was during the entire first year of the drought; and the secret of his hiding-place was unknown even to a single pious Israelite. Yet at this time the faithful Obadiah dwelt in the very palace of Ahab; and there were seven thousand persons in the kingdom who steadfastly refused to fall in with the prevailing idolatry. Still these all made no public profession of their attachment to Jehovah, and Elijah knew not whom he might trust for secrecy and safety. By divine direction, therefore, he sought a hiding-place by the brook Cherith. It is not easy now to identify the prophet's place of concealment. Dr. Robinson supposes that it was the place now called the Wady Kelt,\* a ravine entering the west side of the Jordan, not over forty miles from Samaria. The valley of the Jordan has, within our own times, been explored by an expedition sent out by the United States Government, and an interesting volume published upon

\* Bib. Res. ii. 288, and note.

the subject.\* Scarcely any river in the world descends more rapidly, for the same distance of course, than the Jordan in its rocky bed. This remarkable river "does not depend upon its tributaries for its steady supply of water, but is almost wholly formed and fed by certain great fountains," † which are supplied from the far north by the melting snows of Mount Hermon. So, when there are no rains, and the tributaries of the Jordan have dwindled to rills, the river itself is often full, and even to overflowing. For the prophet to dwell directly upon the Jordan would be to incur great risk of discovery, for the population upon the river would naturally resort to the river as other waters failed. But the insignificant stream by which Elijah sat was perhaps naturally secluded, and was so small, compared with the larger stream, that its nearness to the Jordan, and the boldness that kept him in the neighbourhood of the king, would make his hiding-place more unsuspected and secure.

The Lord's command to Elijah, to hide himself from the persecuting rage of Ahab and Jezebel may teach us that it is no part of true piety to court opposition or martyrdom. Piety is most complete in any man when there is in his character a harmonious union of all the virtues. True religion imparts zeal and boldness to stand at the post of duty in trying and perilous times; it teaches us and

\* Lynch's Dead Sea and the Jordan.

† The Land and the Book, ii. 454.

enables us to endure the tribulations we cannot righteously avoid; yet it not only allows us, but it bids us, decline a needless conflict. When we can retire from a vain contest without the surrender of precious principles, we should often do so. Thus our Lord taught the disciples whom he sent forth, "When they persecute you in one city, flee ye to another." It was from wrong impressions of their obligations, both to themselves and to the truth, that some of the martyrs of the early Christian Church voluntarily braved martyrdom, though this was against the judgment of good men, and though sometimes these persons found less support in their trials than God gave to those who better exhibited the true spirit of the Gospel. Our duty is often the delicate decision between conflicting claims. Even in a soldier bravery is but one of the many qualities upon which true success depends. The commander of an army, intrusted with important powers under heavy responsibilities, should not put these interests in peril except when wisdom and prudence and intelligence decide that skill and valour can prevail. Let him fight when he stands upon any fair terms with the foe, and has a great object to gain; but where there are no hopes of success, the efforts which might otherwise be esteemed wise and gallant would truly be the wicked, wanton and cruel waste of life. A well-ordered retreat may show more true courage, more masterly skill than a battle, as the name of Xenophon is scarcely less

illustrious for saving ten thousand men than that of Leonidas, who sacrificed three hundred men that Greece might be saved. Thus, in all our life, duties are to be decided by principle, and not by impulses; and they are happiest who take their way, as Elijah now did, by the word of the Lord, however they may know the divine will.

Elijah stayed by the brook during the first year. The drought lasted over three years, Luke iv. 25; James v. 17. But it ended in the third year of his stay with the widow of Zarephath, 1 Kings xviii. 1. Thus three years and a half were spent in comparative inactivity—one year in absolute seclusion from human society. In our busy, bustling age, in the restlessness of human activity in any age, we are in danger of too highly estimating the active efforts of life, and of overlooking the holy principles that lie at the secret springs of all valuable exertion. In sending Elijah to these solitudes, God deals not with him, nor with his own cause, according to the thoughts or the wisdom of men. Israel was apostate from Jehovah's service, and Elijah was the boldest and most eminent prophet of his age. Consult human wisdom concerning the means best adapted to bring about a reformation, and Elijah would have been sent forth, as his later vision suggests, like an earthquake or a storm, rather than especially to shut him up in the solitudes of Cherith. We would have sent the great Reformer forth with a whirl-

wind of stirring eloquence, to preach repentance in all the tribes, protected by the very excitement which his awakening words had raised, and using an irresistible popular enthusiasm to overawe the haughty court and the cruel Jezebel. We would have him throw down the calves of Jeroboam as Moses destroyed the calf at Sinai, and stay the flow of human blood upon Baal's altars, and avenge the persecutions of his brethren. And Elijah's zeal may have panted for such a commission.

But the divine methods are quite otherwise. The giant oak is not built to last for centuries with ponderous scaffolding and noisy hammers, but by the quiet deposit of an acorn out of man's sight beneath the ground. It is very remarkable, in the history of the Church of God, that some of his most able and energetic ministers have been providentially set aside from the exercise of their ministry, idle and apparently useless; and this too at critical periods, when their preaching seemed most acceptable to God's people and most needful for the advancement of his cause. Doubtless thus God deals in providence with those who are not his prophets; and we wonder that so many, capable of great usefulness, are not brought forward into usefulness, but fill some quiet and unnoticed niche, though they might have been the leaders of national enterprises.

“Full many a gem, of purest ray serene,  
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

Specially speaking now of those whom God calls to preach his truth among men, we have often wondered to see able and beloved ministers laid aside by feebleness of body or by the inexorable stroke of an early death, while yet they were so well fitted for their work, while there was so much work to do, and while so few seemed fitted and ready to do it.

And sometimes in his strange dealings with his Church he treats his ministers as he did Elijah at Cherith. The prophet had life and health, vigour in the body and furniture of mind, willingness to labour for the Lord, and everything, apparently, but the opportunity to preach. Yet indeed God's later providence has often wonderfully vindicated his wisdom in thus enforcing silence upon his faithful servants. Let us notice a few examples that have become familiar. When the English Act of Uniformity so cruelly shut up the pulpits of two thousand ministers, and forbade them, under severe penalties, to come within five miles of their former churches, great distress was brought upon them; but great good grew out of it for succeeding times, from the new labours to which they were forced to turn. Prevented from preaching, they made use of their pens. Their writings have since been republished and widely sent forth; and, for generations to come, the sterling theology of the seven-

teenth century will be as deep wells of living water, whence the thirsty may draw refreshing supplies. Richard Baxter was one of the divines thus silenced, and we may reckon his "Saints' Everlasting Rest" among the volumes thus providentially furnished to the people of God. We cannot indeed ascribe it to persecution, for it was written at least thirteen years before the Act of Uniformity was issued. But the author was in feeble health, away from home, with no book in his hand but the Bible, and, to use his own language, by Providence "happily forced to the work of meditation."

And there is another book of fame as wide and usefulness as marked as any ever written without the direct inspiration of the Almighty; and it is a cherished remembrance of God's people that this owes its origin to that mystery of Providence which so long and so painfully silenced a healthy, zealous and spiritual preacher. How did Satan miss the mark when he urged the enemies of that humble English tinker to shut him up for twelve long years in a prison! But for this act of persecution the world might never have possessed such a book as the "Pilgrim's Progress." Lord Campbell, an eminent chief justice of England, speaks thus of that immortal work: "Had Bunyan been discharged and allowed to enjoy his liberty, he no doubt would have returned to his tradè, filling up his intervals of leisure with field-preaching; his

name would not have survived his own generation, and he would have done little for the religious improvement of mankind. The prison doors were shut upon him for twelve years. Being cut off from the external world, he communed with his own soul" (and with God); "he composed that noble allegory which has done more to awaken piety and to enforce the precepts of Christian morality than all the sermons that have been published by all the prelates of the Anglican Church." So Macaulay writes of him: "It may be doubted whether any English Dissenter had suffered more severely under the penal laws than John Bunyan."\* It cannot at all be doubted by a pious mind that the providence of a gracious God has given his humble servant a large reward of his patience.

In the sacred writings we have two remarkable instances where God laid aside the most able preacher of his age when the great harvest-fields around seemed to demand the most laborious toils. Just as the Christian apostles seemed entering upon a career of triumphs; when Saul of Tarsus had not only been stopped as a persecutor, but converted to the faith and sent forth to preach it; when he was more laborious and more successful than his brethren; when he had already wrought so much good, had acquired so large an influence by upright means, and had the care of so many

\* Hist. England, ch. vii., vol. ii. 177.

churches resting upon him, and when he was so ready and so able to work, and there were so many open and inviting fields in the heathen world calling for the zeal and eloquence and prayerfulness of just such a preacher,—man would almost say that Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, could not be spared from the service of the rising Church. It is God's own work; God had raised up this instrument to do the work; God would continue him in it. But God's ways are not our ways. The active career of this able and successful preacher was suddenly stopped. He was arrested by hostile hands at Jerusalem; he was detained more than two years a prisoner at Cæsarea; he was sent, in an inclement season of the year, upon a long and dangerous voyage, was subjected to shipwreck in midwinter, and after years of comparative idleness was still kept in confinement at Rome. Yet we hear the cheerful voice of this apostle exclaiming that these things—so contrary to human expectation—had “fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Phil. i. 12. Paul had access to men whom he could never have reached; he had secured a favourable hearing for his messages, such as perhaps he might have sought in vain but for the violence of his persecutors. The wrath of man was made to praise the Lord. And in the case before us, Elijah—a man so well fitted to call the nation to repentance—is restrained from a mission of zeal and activity, and when Israel needs his teachings

sits down a fugitive and an exile, hiding idly in the solitudes of Cherith.

While we may not know all the reasons of these divine counsels, we may yet learn some important lessons from these orderings of his hand. Especially we may know this, that God, in conducting human affairs and in blessing his Church, will not give the glory to any man. Sometimes, as we have already noticed, he would show us how he can overrule the most untoward events for larger good; at other times he teaches that the life and labours of no living servant are essential to his cause; that Elijah and Paul are but messengers whom God condescends to employ, and that he can afford to set them aside even when their labours seem urgently needed. And besides that thus he maintains his sovereignty, he secures another important end in his moral government. He could carry on his work of grace without prophet or preacher, but he uses human instrumentality; and this he does in such a way as to bless both the preacher and the hearer. The kingdom of God, in all the dispensations of the Church, is in the soul of man; and God sets his servants at profitable rather than at pleasant work. Give Paul his choice and he would a hundred-fold prefer to wear out his energies in laborious preaching in the streets of Rome, rather than to let them rust out in the inglorious sloth of a Roman prison. And Elijah would doubtless have preferred the energetic discharge of a prophet's

duties, as he afterward so boldly vindicated Jehovah's law upon Carmel, rather than to sit down day after day in apparent uselessness by the disappearing waters of the brook Cherith. The slowly-passing hours were doubtless dreary, but not unprofitable.

When a man is thus laid aside by God's providence—sometimes by sickness, sometimes by other agencies—he should esteem it a call to look into his own heart, and he should learn much of the inward workings both of grace and of depravity. In the busy duties of active life we are prone to neglect our hearts. But God sets great store by the life of religion in the souls of his people. And he seldom works large good by any man without first working good in that man. We may not limit his grace nor declare that he never blesses an unworthy instrumentality. On the contrary, he causes the wrath of man to praise him, and can awaken the souls of men by the most unlikely means. But we speak of God's ordinary methods of working. Usually, when he would work extensive good by any man, he carries on his work in the heart of that man, making him acquainted with himself and leading him to communion with God. A deeper work in the heart of a minister—perhaps a season of discouraged services, that seems as useless as Elijah's sitting idle by the drying waters of Cherith—often precedes his larger usefulness among his people. Religion must be before God

as well as before man; in the heart in order to the life; it consists in humility as truly as in zeal; in faith to suffer and to wait, as well as faith to expect and to do; in patience to endure, as well as courage to brave.

Every Christian who attempts to substitute an active zeal for an humble dependence upon God will surely fail to reach the happiest results. For the minister the closet and the pulpit must not be separated, but he is strong for God's service in God's strength. For the private Christian, intelligence and devotion must be in full harmony. Elijah was a silent prophet, not necessarily an idle one. His prayers were not only upon Carmel, but also in these ravines of the Jordan. Seasons of discouragement, times of affliction, voluntary periods of withdrawing from the world, should be spent in communing with God. Elijah's active career came after his long silence. So Moses spent forty years in a desert exile, and began his eminent usefulness as the leader of God's people at an age when most men would be ready only for the grave.

Yet the voluntary solitude which indicates a man's morbid distaste for duty is very different from the retirement which fits us for society. God has formed us for social life and laid many social obligations upon us. No man, therefore, can withdraw from society to become a monk or a hermit without violating the nature divinely given to him. He both refuses to receive from others and to exer-

cise toward them the mutual sympathies and duties that are inseparable from a rightly-ordered life. But because we are not to live apart from society, it does not follow that we are ever to live in public. We should have our seasons of retirement. Every Christian should have his daily seasons of private meditation and devotion. Every Sabbath should have its private services, which, as truly as public worship, should spread their influence over all the week. And special necessities, both public and private, according to the exigencies of pious experience, should lead us to retirement, meditation and prayer—oftentimes with fasting and humiliation. Various temptations make it difficult to keep such religious seasons of spiritual duty. We need special watchfulness in entering upon them. But they are greatly profitable if we avoid self-righteousness and in true humility seek seriously after God.

Perhaps because Elijah's engagements were personal and experimental rather than public, we have no record of the time spent in these solitudes. Doubtless his faith had its fluctuations, and he may have spent many a sad hour as he saw the stream gradually failing before him. But even perplexities have their value, and we need not wonder if in this good man's life there was the same mingling of hope and fear—of support and discouragement, which, like the crossing threads of the loom, are woven by divine providence into the web of our

Christian experience. There was important support for Elijah in the truth that God had commanded him to hide in this spot; for to know that we are in the place ordered for us by his providence is always a good ground of consolation. Doubtless there was further support for his faith in the coming and going of those strange messengers whom God had commissioned to bring the prophet's supplies of daily food. We need not wonder that Elijah was fed in these solitudes. The rule of God's house is, "If any man will not work, neither shall he eat;" but there are different ways of serving him. Milton's sonnet is almost sublime:

"God doth not need

Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state  
 Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
 THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT!"

We may serve as acceptably in small matters as in great; in sickness or health; in doing much or in doing nothing. If we are standing where he has placed us, doing what he has given us to do, waiting till he bids us move, we are serving God as truly and are as truly acceptable in his sight as are his most active and laborious servants. Elijah was as truly in God's service by the brook and watching the failing waters as he was upon Carmel watching the gathering clouds. It was not now that the Lord asked, What doest thou here, Elijah?

We need not wonder at the miraculous method of his supply, for indeed God's providential wonders are often as great as these. That birds of prey should bring the prophet food may be justified on several accounts. These birds, being unfit for human food, would remain unmolested when other birds might be destroyed by the famishing people; being accustomed to seek for prey, their instincts could be more easily turned to this service; their regular flight in a time of distress, when such birds might find more food, would attract less special attention; and birds so strong might fly in a wider range, and even snatch their food from the altars of other lands. That Elijah should eat such food from such carriers would teach that the ceremonial laws might be set aside by just necessity; as in a less pressing case our Lord argues that God "will have mercy and not sacrifice."

As the brook gradually dried, perhaps Elijah feared for his supply. God might have opened a spring at his feet. But God gives him a new trial of faith. He must leave this refuge for another. He must go, not to friends in Israel, nor to the kingdom of Judah, but to a heathen city. He must pass through Ahab's dominions, almost directly by Samaria and Jezreel. He must seek the territories governed by the father of Jezebel. And there his refuge was to be in the poverty-stricken abode of a widow woman. This was no mean trial of faith. To turn his back on Judah and Je-

rusalem and the protecting shadow of God's own temple, and to go twice the distance in a more perilous direction, was not what man would wish. But the path of the divine commandment is safe, and the prophet pursued it. He arose at the Lord's bidding, not, perhaps, without his apprehensions, passed safely through the domains of his persecutors, and entering the kingdom of Zidon, approached the town of Zarephath.

Extraordinary as is this narrative respecting the prophet, the lessons it teaches are for ordinary life. The prophet lived by faith by the brook. His fellow-believers in later times experience relief just as certainly from the hand of the same wonder-working God. We sometimes wonder that the righteous are allowed to sink into perplexities so deep. Yet the entire dealings of God with us are designed to educate us as truly as to exhibit his grace and wisdom. Past experience, in ourselves or in God's people, should vindicate the leadings of his hand, and assure us that "the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation." 2 Peter ii. 9. Times of trouble may come upon us; our way may seem hedged up; we know not why we are left apparently useless and deserted; we know not how we are to provide for our maintenance, or how we can accomplish any good. Yet many circumstances, many reflections, may sustain us if we are but in the pathway of duty. If he has placed us in this lot, he knows fully all its trials. He is accustomed

to lead his people in dark ways of his choosing rather than in light ways of their own; yet is he often slow to reveal his purposes, until he has brought us to the true recognition of his hand. As to the time and method and means of our deliverance from evil, he often works as we cannot anticipate; yet his people have ever confessed that he has dealt with them better than their fears.

Our constant tendency is to trust God too little. We often, indeed, trust presumptuously; that is, giving no due heed to his teachings of our duty or of his methods of working; and this is not trusting him at all. And he rebukes both our presumption and our distrust. He gives lessons of our own experience; he allows us to read lessons in the history of the Church; he affords us clear promises in his word to assure our confidence. The God of Elijah lives, and yet feeds and guides his people. So far as principles are concerned, he deals with us as he did with him; and we may, with little danger of misconception, use the same terms to express his dealings. We see our streams gradually dry up; we fear they may fail; we are dejected and dispirited. Yet he is faithful to his promises. In their Lord's service the Lord's people may look for safety.

The Lord's service is to do or to suffer the Lord's will, however he may make that will known to us. Does he call us to sit down in solitude and mourn over the desolations of Zion? The set time for favour draws near, when her children take

pleasure in her stones and favour her scattered dust. Yet, let us not think he has forgotten his cause because we feel helpless to further it. They who stand still through indolence or indifference are indeed guilty, but in times when we can only wait and pray let us do this also cheerfully. Ready for God's service, we will never have just views of it till we know that it can go on without us. He carried it on before we were born, and he will advance it after we are dead. There is a kind of complaining in times of declension that does no possible good, and we may sigh all our lives and keep going backward. Let us cultivate humility and patience and resignation and faith, as well as zeal and activity. Religion is the love and service of God; it is independent of particular circumstances; it may be doing or suffering. Perhaps in dark times, when we can see his way imperfectly, our trust in him may give him the most honour.

## CHAPTER.

### *THE FAITH OF THE WIDOW OF ZAREPH*

**I**N no one matter have we a more striking contrast between the Church of God in Elijah's times and in our own than in regard to the influence exerted upon foreign nations. The Jewish Church was not a missionary and aggressive Church; the Christian Church is essentially so. The one was in prosperity in proportion as the people kept themselves apart from the rest of the world; the other, perhaps, in proportion as her members, in true obedience to our Lord's command, go forth to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation in all the earth. And yet the vital principles of piety are the same for the former and for the present dispensations; and the Jewish people, though separated from the rest of the world, could not but have an important influence, especially upon the neighbouring tribes. The design of their separation was not to prevent their exerting an influence upon the nations; this would have been contrary to the essential spirit of true religion. Rather it was to prevent the people of Israel from being influenced by the other nations. For this reason the abomi-

nations of the Canaanites were so severely punished by the sword of Joshua ; the people were forbidden to have intercourse with other nations, and laws were enacted that seem to us wonderfully strict and severe. That they were not too careful is proved by the fact that even these precautions proved ineffectual. In spite of all this care, that people did make alliances with the Gentiles, did adopt idolatrous practices, and seemed in danger of losing the principles of which, as a separated people, they were the special guardians.

But though the people of Israel were thus influenced by other nations, they must also have exerted some influence upon the outside world, and this far beyond their direct contact with the tribes just about them. We are not to think of the earth then as it is now, for intercourse was slow and restricted in every direction, and the nations knew comparatively little of each other. Yet this people of God held in their hands his oracles ; these teachings were incomparably superior to all else the world contained ; and even in the worst times of Israel, the struggles of a faithful remnant would declare these great thoughts, so as to keep the testimony of God before the minds of men. And when religion flourished among the Israelites themselves, there may have been many salutary influences sent abroad. Providentially the Hebrew tribes were surrounded by all the great nations of the ancient world ; their land bordered upon Asia, Africa and

Europe, and thus the Jews stood like a light-house for the world. Especially in the palmy days of David and Solomon they exerted a large influence. The twelve tribes were united under one monarchy; they had abundant prosperity; Jerusalem became the centre of a well-established worship; many proselytes seem to have joined themselves to Judaism, and even distant nations heard of the glory in Israel. Matt. xii. 42.

The times of Ahab seem unfavourable times for exerting any influence in favour of the Jewish religion upon the nations around them. How could idolaters be won to Jehovah's service when the covenant people themselves had forsaken him, had cast down his altars, had slaughtered his prophets, and had turned to the abominations of Baal? And yet, indeed, there is a sense in which the principles of religion testify clearly when the practice of professedly religious people is worst; men see the contrast between what these people are and what they should be; and the very ability to discern and condemn their apostasy implies the knowledge and the approval of the principles they have dishonoured. The testimony of religion will condemn its rejectors as surely when its professors reproach it as when they adorn it. And at this period it was clearly understood by the nations that the Israelites had departed from their God, and that the judgment on the land was a fearful proof of his indignation and power. The proclamation made by Elijah was

made only more fully known by Ahab's efforts to arrest the prophet; and he published both the threatening and its fearful fulfilment in the neighbouring kingdoms. And those things would be well known in Zidon, because by the marriage of Ahab those two kingdoms were upon friendly terms. So, indeed, while Jezebel was hardened against the divine judgments, some of her own people may have better understood the true principles involved in the Lord's controversy. Especially the humble woman to whom now the narrative introduces us may have learned to know and fear and worship the wonder-working God of Jacob.

Obedient to the command of the Lord, Elijah had left his place of solitary concealment; had traversed the full length of Ahab's dominions; had thus seen, as he passed along, the traces both of wickedness and judgment; and had arrived, it may be faint and weary, with thirst and hunger and travel, at the heathen village whither the Lord had sent him. A woman was by the gate gathering sticks;\* and there seems evidently

\* As a curious specimen of the methods of allegorical interpretation used by many of the ancient Fathers, I give the following from Augustine, who was by no means the most fanciful in such matters. He is discoursing upon Elijah; forewarns his hearers that he designs to give the "spirit that quickeneth," rather than the "letter that killeth," and makes a long parallel between this prophet and our Lord. When he reaches this passage, he says:

"Therefore when Elijah came, the widow had gone forth to

to be a kind of mutual recognition. The prophet beholds the woman in whose house he is to be a guest; and though we have no reason to think that she was previously aware of his coming, she recognizes him as an Israelite, and, by his hairy garment, as a prophet of the Lord. She must have known somewhat the circumstances of the kingdom, especially as her own people were now suffering with Israel. She had heard of the persecution carried on by Jezebel, and of the search made for Elijah. Possibly she at once suspected that this haggard, weather-beaten man, who had not known the shelter of a roof for a twelve-month, was the prophet upon whose life a price was set, and against whom the Zidonian princess had breathed such vows of vengeance. Was not Elijah afraid to address a stranger, who might betray him to the Zidonians? Yet doubtless all he had eaten since he began his journey was a scanty supply of food; necessity may have urged him even to venture exposure; and God's declara-

gather *two sticks*. Observe, my brethren, that it does not say three, nor four, nor one stick only; but she wished to gather two. So she collected two sticks, because in the type of Elijah she received Christ. She wished to gather two sticks, because she desired to recognize the mystery of the cross; for the cross of our Lord the Saviour was composed of two beams. So this widow gathered two sticks, because the Church was hereafter to believe in him who was suspended upon two beams." (He repeats the idea in Homily xviii.)—*Works* x. 321, *Edition of 1616*.

tion that a widow woman should sustain him encouraged his application.

But especially worthy of our attention here is the faith of this heathen woman, through which a blessing comes upon herself and her household. In this particular incident the narrative derives great additional interest from a reference made to it by our Lord Jesus Christ. We are told that upon the morning of a certain Sabbath he read the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth. Yet did he not expect that the people of that town, where he had passed the chief part of his life, would receive his instructions or regard him as a prophet. He quoted against them a proverbial saying, that a "prophet is not without honour, save in his own country;" and then reminded them, by two important examples from the Old Testament, that God could find other objects of his grace, if they were so guilty as to refuse the blessings brought near to them. His teachings gave great offence. This may have been, not only that he implies the general principle that man may not prescribe any law to God for dispensing his favours,\* but also that he intimates the divine rejection of Israel for their unbelief, and proves that such intimations had before been given by the prophets. Elisha wrought a cure, not on the lepers who met his eye from day to day in Israel, but upon a Syrian general. Elijah

\* Calvin in N. T. i. 120.

passed the door of many a widow in his own land, but his errand was to Zidon, and he took up his abode with a heathen widow. Doubtless here we have the divine sovereignty, but a sovereignty in righteousness that is displeased with the unbelief of a highly-favoured people.

When Elijah met this woman, to whom divine guidance had led his steps, she was almost at the last extremity; and in deep dejection was gathering sticks enough to prepare from her last morsel the last meal for herself and her son. As nothing is said to imply that she was an idolater, except her residence in Zidon, it is possible she was an humble though poorly-taught worshipper of the true God, upon the borders of whose land she lived. Certainly she received the prophet with a respect, a readiness and a strength of faith that calls our attention. Knowing him by his dress as a prophet of Israel, she received him with the utmost cordiality. He asked for water. With true Eastern hospitality, she forgets her own feebleness and hastens to bring it. But he stops her again: "Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand." This is asking a great deal, in her circumstances. She and her son need for themselves what they have in the house, for it is the last. The son, it is likely, was young. She does not speak of him as one capable of caring for his own wants, but he is dependent upon her. His youth and feebleness appeal all the more tenderly

to the mother's heart. Now this travel-worn stranger steps in and asks for the last morsel. Shall she see her child die the sooner for giving it to this man?

He promises indeed that her little store shall not fail till the days of famine are gone. But what assurance has she that he speaks words of truth? He is a stranger to her, and these are wonderful words. If he has the power to provide food thus, why is he under any necessity of asking a widow's last meal? Indeed if these strange words are true, there is an easy way to test them. Why does he not say, "You and your son eat first. I am willing to take what you leave, for there shall be enough for us all." Difficulties such as these may easily have occurred to the mind of that suffering woman. We can scarcely suppose they did not; and it seems marvellous faith that, in spite of them, she hearkened to his words. Educated in heathenism, belonging to Zidon rather than Israel, taking views of all these matters different from those Elijah might have, her compliance is proof of no ordinary thoughts. It is likely that many widows in Israel would have rejected his word. It was in this same region of country that our Lord, long afterward, gave to another Gentile woman his hearty commendation of her great faith.

Let us not lay aside the important reflection that the widow of Zarephath, not without the influences

of divine grace, reposed this faith in the prophet's word. True faith has its origin, in all cases, in the Holy Spirit's workings. God declared to his prophet that he had commanded this widow woman to sustain him. Yet it is likely that she knew of no other divine command than that which came through the opportunity providentially afforded and the words of the prophet calling her to exercise this hospitality. The secret influences of the Spirit, inclining her to obedience, are inscrutable. Not otherwise than through a cheerful and willing submission did she yield to his request. Thus divine grace works in the calling and conversion of every renewed and believing soul. God employs instrumentalities which we recognize more or less easily as appointed by him for this end; but his is the gracious efficacy, whether we can or cannot trace the steps by which the soul is led to him. No conversion is by chance. Not casually does any man meet the messengers of mercy and hear from them the precious truth that saves the soul. Not by chance have men an open sanctuary, nor by chance are their steps led there; and the finger of God directs his servants to the timely teachings which grace makes effectual to salvation. We should neither overlook the human instrumentality nor the divine efficiency. This woman is not called without the prophet; but to other ears the same words might have come in vain. Planting and watering are needful, but the increase is from

above. God influences the hearts of men through the truth, but only the Spirit of God, working in and by the truth, leads to the exercise of saving faith. Let us ever seek to place our minds in contact with the truth; let us rejoice to receive and rest upon it; but let us ever pray for and yield to the gracious influences of the Holy Ghost, whose power we so much need.

Humanly speaking, many barriers to faith stood before this Gentile woman; and God dealt with her as he usually does with the subjects of grace. Grace comes in conflict with human infirmity and human depravity, and gains its victories, not by arbitrarily silencing the arguments of sense and sin, but by opening the eyes to better arguments. The service of God is so excellent that faith can afford to count the cost fairly and fully. And sometimes faith acts decidedly and promptly, even in difficult cases. This woman hardly seems like a heathen: she shows no sympathy with Jezebel, her native princess; recognizing Elijah as a servant of Jehovah, she betrays no prejudice against him; and there is no cavilling at the apparent conflict between his request for food for himself and his promise of food to her. It would not seem strange to us if she had spoken of these things: "If this man can make my barrel of meal outlast the famine, what need has he to beg a widow's last crust? How can this man be the favoured servant of Jehovah, and yet be reduced to this

pitiable distress?" If she had any thoughts like these, yet the rapid and clear conceptions of an interested and awakened mind thrust them all aside, that she might reach the just conclusion of an intelligent faith. Her alternative was certain death or life through the prophet's words. If she prepared this last meal for herself and her son, it could keep them alive but a little longer; if this man's words were true, there might be food and life for them all. Her only hope was in this strange but desirable assurance. She may have had her misgivings, but she did not allow them to hinder her. She believed Elijah's word. She prepared the meal and placed it before him; and she found the beginnings of her reward when he and her family ate of the unfailing supply for many days.

It was indeed a notable miracle that at the word of Elijah the meal-of the widow's barrel, though already nearly gone, sufficed for their support through the remaining years of the famine. The oil was olive oil, used, not for light, but in cooking, to supply the place of lard or butter as used by us. Yet in this miracle we need not be surprised at the power which wrought thus, since we must at once confess that the power of God every day of the world's history does greater wonders than this. He feeds thousands of households in all the earth, century after century: is it a great thing that he should thus sustain this household?

Nor need we wonder at the method of multiplying the meal and the oil, since indeed the ordinary increase of human food is the increase of each after its kind. The waving harvests of the field are but the multiplication of the seed sown by the farmer's hand: this is by a process which we call *natural*. Yet this is but a term we apply to a familiar process; while the power that secures such results is certainly not inferior to that which works the most wonderful miracle.

An Eastern fable is narrated to this effect: When Solomon was young he desired his preceptor, Nathan the prophet, to show him a miracle demonstrating beyond question the existence, power and goodness of God. At first the sage declined the trial; but being urged by the young prince, finally consented to his request. He placed before him a vessel filled with common earth. He then took a minute and curious ball and put it just beneath the surface of the earth, and bade the young man look. Presently a tiny and delicate spear sprung up from the soil, almost immediately it forked into blades, then became a small tree with its branches and leaves; and hardly had these appeared when beautiful flowers bloomed for a moment, and then fell, decaying to make way for the fruit that swelled and ripened rapidly before the admiring eyes of the young disciple. But when this wonder, occurring within the space of a few moments, called forth from Solomon expressions of surprise, con-

viction and delight, his wise preceptor replied: "My son, you have seen this miracle a thousand times and in a thousand varying ways before. Every year bears infinite testimony to God's being and power and goodness, in the springing seed, the growing plant, the opening flower, the maturing fruit. If the changes are slower, they are not less real; and in the orderings of Providence all around us a candid mind has proof of God's goodness a thousand-fold more satisfactory than any casual miracle can afford."

Indeed, if we are merely seeking for proof of God's existence and wisdom, the wonders of his providence are greater than any miracle ever recorded. We would be surprised to see a seed swell up in a few moments into the ripened plant or the stately tree; yet it is better proof of God's goodness that these changes, really taking place, are slow and not rapid. For here is new proof of his goodness and wisdom. What a calamity it would prove, how listless men would become, how desolate the earth would be, if the fruits for an entire year should bud and blossom and bear their harvest all in a single day! Such a thing every day would give a wastefulness of Providence far beyond the earth's supply. If it occurred but one day in each season, what dreariness of the landscape, what idleness for man through all the year! The earth is more beautiful, man is happier, God is more kind, that his providential wonders are deliberately wrought. The object of the scriptural mira-

cles is not to attest the being and power of God. We have ampler proof of this in Providence than in any of the miracles recorded in the Bible. Miracles are designed to attest the mission of a prophet; for this they suffice.

But the significancy of the wonder wrought at Elijah's word in this widow woman's household may remind us of dealings which God yet exhibits to the sons of men. Laying aside the extraordinary and substituting the providential agencies, we may say that God often repeats the wonder wrought for this widow by Elijah's hands. As we said before, the means are extraordinary, the lessons are ordinary. The widow's family is not alone among those that are destitute of the means of livelihood, save as God's kind providence affords their supplies. How many families in all the earth are compelled to take their daily food from a scanty store, that seems at the point of failing all their lives! They are often deeply dejected that now they are using the last meal, and yet, as the widow's barrel was never empty, they have never gone without their supply. Thousands rise in the morning not knowing what shall be the provision for the day; they are often in straits from which they can see no path of deliverance; they are ready to think that God has forgotten. Yet God leaves not himself without witness, ever granting his kind supplies to the evil and the unthankful. The wonders of Divine Providence, when he opens his hand and supplies the wants of every living

thing, should be regarded as constant proofs of his wisdom and kindness. God's believing people have often lived upon a promise of the same tenour as that which Elijah gave to this widow: "Bread shall be given thee, water shall be sure." Indeed, some of God's holiest and happiest people have lived by the day; nor does he give us any warrant to ask for more than our daily food.

The widow of Zarephath believed Elijah's word. That she did so reproves the sinful men who hear the gospel of Christ and yet believe not to the soul's life. Their faith may more reasonably be looked for than hers. She had an object to gain—the food of her household—far inferior to that which we should set before our eyes, the soul's salvation. And every serious thought makes our indifference and unbelief inexcusable as compared with this woman's faith. She trusted a stranger, with no opportunity of investigating his claims upon her faith; we read God's familiar teachings, and our faith may have every thoughtful and intelligent support. She trusted to a man's word; we read God's own revelation. She trusted at once; and the counsels and promises of the gospel have often been urged in vain upon us. Her faith seems entirely contrary to the training of a heathen education, while all we have been taught should rather support our reliance on the gospel. Quite as important as any other matter of comparison between us, let us notice that this woman exercised imme-

diate faith in a promise that had never a parallel in the history of man. Who ever heard of a handful of meal never failing, though constantly used? If this strange event had been a common occurrence, if even it had several times before occurred to her knowledge, her faith in the prophet's word would have been far less remarkable. Yet she believed, though this thing was so strange and new. Here her faith stands quite apart, and seems greatly more difficult than that of a sinful soul, who is called to trust for salvation upon the Son of God. Indeed, it IS A GREAT THING to have our sins forgiven, to roll our burden upon Christ, to look forward to the rest and joys of heaven. But, blessed by the mercy of our God, great as this thing is, it is NOT unusual, and the believing sinner is not called to go in a strange and untrodden path. Many have trusted in him ; many of our own happiest acquaintances are numbered among those that are justified by faith ; none have ever trusted in him and been confounded. Was this woman right in her believing? And have we not many advantages over her which must join to condemn the perverseness of our unbelief?

She reminds us, moreover, that the blessings men secure are not always in proportion to the privileges afforded to them. This is a lesson which the Great Teacher often impressed upon his hearers. And so, in all the ministry of Christ, only upon two occasions did he commend the faith of those who waited on him, and both of those were Gentiles. Many

widows were in Israel in Elijah's days, yet the prophet blessed this heathen believer. And at the last many shall come from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, while the children of the kingdom shall be cast out. Not to hear the gospel but to obey it, not to possess privileges but to improve them, brings a blessing to the soul. Let us not be high-minded, but fear. We have enjoyed manifold advantages in the ordinances of Divine Providence. So much the worse for us if we abuse them. There are valid reasons for expecting our faith and obedience—valid reasons for condemning us if we are indifferent and unbelieving. The men of Sodom, the queen of Sheba, the widow of Zarephath, the dwellers in Capernaum will rise up in the judgment against many in Christian lands. Indeed, thousands rescued from paganism in our own age will condemn many in Christian countries, for they have repented and found salvation with opportunities immeasurably less than ours.

And this woman teaches us that humble piety in any heart is of great esteem in the sight of God.

## CHAPTER VI.

### *ELIJAH RAISING TO LIFE THE WIDOW'S SON.*

FOR two years and a half, as we suppose, Elijah remained with the widow of Zarephath. His accommodations were, perhaps, humble, but they sufficed for his moderate wants, and they formed a gift from the widow acceptable in the sight of God. How carefully does the Bible assure us that "if there be first a willing heart it is accepted, according to that a man has, and not according to that he has not." This woman, in her gift to Elijah of her own last morsel, reminds us of the later commendation of our Lord toward a certain poor widow who was liberal above all the worshippers; for others cast into the treasury much from their abundance, and though she cast in but two mites, it was "all her living." So may she call to our attention that general promise that whosoever gives a cup of cold water only to a disciple in Christ's name, shall not lose his reward.

We have no account of the engagements of Elijah during his stay at Zarephath. We may believe that he taught in this lowly household the holy principles of his faith; and she seems well

prepared to receive the truth from his lips. The narrative leads us to judge that Elijah was entirely secluded during his stay there; the miraculous supply of food precluded all necessity for intercourse with the community around; and when he reappeared in Israel, no one seemed to know whence he came.

One event of his sojourn is given us, but with no clue to the year of its occurrence. The child of his hostess took sick and died. He seems to have been an only son; and here is full room for the prophet's pious sympathy. Here again the history of Elijah reminds us of the history of Christ. Our Lord met with a case of bereavement, and it appealed to his tenderest feelings that the dead man was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." In their sympathy with the stricken parent, the disciple and the Master act upon the same principles. The widow beneath whose roof the prophet was, was in deep affliction. She imputes her affliction to the prophet's presence, and recognizes it as bringing her sin to remembrance. We need not suppose that she thus confesses some especial and flagrant sin as the cause of this bereavement; or that, if she does, her thoughts furnish us with any proper criterion of judgment in similar cases. But she may remind us that seasons of sorrow are divinely designed to turn our thoughts inward, to lead us to reflect upon our unworthiness, and to lay more heavily upon us that burden which

we ought to feel, but which we are so prone to forget at other times. It may be that she thought the death of her child a special punishment of her sin, through the prayers of the prophet. She knew that his prayers had brought famine upon Israel; and now her self-accusing thoughts led to the fear that he had brought this sorrow upon a sinful woman. Perhaps this made Elijah solicitous to vindicate himself, even from a reproach that had no just foundation.

It may be that the child's death was sudden, and the prophet had no opportunity of praying for his recovery from sickness; or, as our Lord waited until Lazarus was dead before he came to the house of affliction, the delay of deliverance was for a greater display of the divine glory. The prophet resolved to pray for the child's restoration to life; though, so far as we know, such an event had never before occurred in all the history of the Church. Not even among the great things done by Moses do we read of "wonders shown to the dead." But Elijah was solicitous that the widow should not even seem to receive injury through dealing hospitably with him. His reputation as a prophet and the divine honour seem involved, and he made this great request of God. He took the child from his mother and carried him to his own apartment. Here, perhaps, he usually spent his time alone, for purposes both of secrecy and devotion. He laid the body upon his bed and earnestly besought the

Lord his God that the child's life might be restored to him. He makes use of this simple plea, that evil was brought upon a house where a prophet had been hospitably received. The divine honour seemed implicated; and wherever this plea can be truly made we have the strongest foundation for prevalent prayer. Thus Elijah teaches us how to pray to the same God who hears us as he heard the prophet. Besides his pleadings the prophet uses means of restoration, as if the apparent death was but a case of suspended animation. So afterward did Elisha in a similar case. Yet both are spoken of, in the Scriptures, as having raised the dead to life; and this use of means may only mark more distinctly the dependence of these prophets, and show us a wide line of distinction between them and a greater prophet than either. These are servants in the house of God; but One was to come, the Son of God and the Lord of the prophets. When our Lord Jesus Christ did like wonders there was no such array of means. He took the sleeping damsel by the hand and bade her arise. He stood by the young man's bier and bade the sleeper awake with the sure voice of authority. He called Lazarus from the grave where he had lain four days, and the dead heard and obeyed. Great as was Elijah's wonder, we must give the pre-eminence, here and always, to a greater than Elijah.

The Lord heard the prophet's prayer. The child

revived and Elijah restored him to his mother. If she recognized him as a prophet before, much more now: if she trusted his word before, much more might she confide in one who wrought a wonder so great as this! Yet here again her faith reproves and condemns men better taught than she. She believed; yet the Jewish rulers not only rejected Christ Jesus after a greater wonder, but plotted also how they might put both him and Lazarus to death. John xii. 10.

But this *incident* in the prophet's life is less important to us than the *principles* involved in it. We have here one of those miraculous events that belong to the history of this prophet. It seems appropriate for us to speak particularly of miracles when we pass over the history of Moses, of Elijah, or of Christ, in whose times especially, as we shall notice, these wonders were wrought. We may thus be led to the repeated consideration of the subject, as we consider the beginning, the middle, or the end of the sacred history; as we think of Moses the first writer of the Bible, Christ the chief subject of the entire Scriptures, or Elijah who stands between them and is peculiarly related to both.

We may *first* turn our thoughts to inquire into the nature of the scriptural miracles. Yet we need not discuss the exact definitions that have been proposed by various writers upon the subject. It may suffice us to claim that a miracle, according to the Scriptures, is an extraordinary occurrence

attested to man's senses, for which we can only account by admitting that God has wrought. A thing is not miraculous merely because strange or wonderful. The events of God's providence constantly wrought around us are greater evidences of divine power than any of the miracles recorded in the Scriptures; yet are they not miraculous. A miracle need not rank among the great things God can do; it is sufficient if it is something which man cannot do, and which therefore we must attribute to the working of God for important ends. To give sight miraculously to one man in a city is not a greater thing than to give sight to a thousand there in his natural workings; as a thousand men may have been born in Jericho with good eyes, and this was not miraculous; but when Christ gave sight to Bartimeus, though he could then see no better than his neighbours could naturally, the occurrence was a miracle.

It is a chief objection, not against the testimony that establishes the scriptural miracles, but against the possibility of any miracle occurring, that God is the author of the laws of nature, that these are wisely established, that they tend in the highest degree to promote the good of the universe, and that we cannot expect that God would work otherwise than through his own laws. We are willing to give its full proper force to the objection; nay, we are as desirous as any objector can be to maintain the wisdom and the usual uniformity of the

order of things in the natural world, as established by the Great Ruler over all. Instead of overthrowing the proof of scriptural miracles by establishing the ordinary uniformity of working in God's laws in natural affairs, we aver that no possible proof could establish a miracle, and that no valuable end could be gained in its occurrence, unless these laws did ordinarily work with uniformity. In the main the scoffer's declaration is true, "All things continue as they were from the foundation of the world." God has not only so constituted the universe that every effect must have an adequate cause, but he has so constituted the human mind that men readily believe this.

Not only is this a most important principle in the divine rule over the universe, but this would be a world of unspeakable wretchedness and disaster if it were otherwise. It is uniform experience that bread nourishes a healthy body, that water quenches fire, and that powder explodes at the touch of a spark. But suppose that there was no uniform law to govern these things, or that there was irregularity so great that we were always uncertain what results would flow from our actions. If, sometimes, water touching powder would cause an explosion, or a similar result occur from a spark touching water; if, sometimes, food would poison; if these irregularities were so great and so frequent that we never could be certain that any particular cause would secure a desired effect, the consequences

would be dreadful. There would be no encouragement for industry, no room for human happiness. Nature's laws ordinarily act with entire uniformity. The advocates of miracles believe this as fully as anybody; and this faith is essential to their cause. If any event could casually occur, or occur without an adequate cause to produce it, then the event itself could prove nothing.

Before we can argue from a design we must believe there is a design. And the greater the effect produced in any case, the higher is our estimate of its cause. An ordinary event proves an ordinary cause—an extraordinary event an extraordinary cause; make a thing out to be an accident and it proves nothing. Multiply accidents, irregularities, events without definite purpose or adequate causes, in the natural world, and the less possibility is there of proving a miracle; the less value in its occurrence. A miracle necessarily implies, *first*, that God's workings are ordinarily by uniform laws, which men can observe, and by which they expect things to occur; and, *secondly*, that sufficient reason must be assigned for any departures from this natural uniformity. Thus we keep invariably unbroken the essential rule that every effect must have its appropriate and adequate cause. If reasons of more than ordinary power, if advantages of more than ordinary excellence, may justify extraordinary effects through the power of the Great Author of all laws, then no force of argument can

render unreasonable the working of a miracle. Certainly there is no room to question the power of God to work a miracle. Let us only find the just occasion for such a display of divine energy, and the working of a miracle is an effect to be as reasonably expected as anything else that is ever done by the power of God.\*

We may next inquire, What is the just occasion for a miracle? A miracle itself is an event occur-

\* "And what then," asked Smith, "do you make a miracle to be?"

"I regard it," said uncle, "to be merely such an interference wi' the established coorse o' things, as infallibly shows us the presence and the action o' a supernatural poower. What o'clock is it wi' you, sir, if you please?"

"It is half-past twelve, exactly, Greenwich time," replied Smith.

"Well, sir," said uncle, pulling a huge old time-piece from his pocket, "it's ane o'clock wi' me; I generally keep my watch a bittie forrit. [A little forward.] But I may hae a special reason the noo for setting my watch by the railways; and so, see ye, I'm turnin' the hauns o't round. Noo wad ye say that I have violated the laws o' a watch? True; I hae dune what watchdom wi' a' its laws couldna hae dune for itself, but I hae done violence to nae o' its laws. My action is only the interference o' a superior intelligence for a suitable end, but I hae suspended nae law, violated nae law. Weel, then, instead o' the watch say the universe; instead o' moving the hands, say God acting worthily o' himsel', and ye had a' that I contend for in a miracle; that is, the unquestionable presence of an Almighty hand working the divine will. And if he sees fit to work miracles, wha can hinder him, what can hinder him? He has dune it aftener than ance or twice already; and wha daur say that he'll nae get leave to do't again?"

ring in God's natural government, but the cause of it is in his moral government. It surely needs no argument to prove that the moral is superior to the natural; and that it may demand the natural to be subservient to it. There can be no question of greater importance for us to decide than this. Does God indeed speak to man by the teachings of inspired prophets? A man comes to his fellow-men claiming their reverence and obedience to his words as the teachings of God himself. Is it unreasonable to demand of him that he should give some proof of his authority commensurate with the dignity of his claims? Would it not be improper to demand the faith of the world in such claims, unless extraordinary proofs—proofs above the working of human energy—were also exhibited to establish the divine approbation upon these extraordinary demands? We may justly expect, if God sends a prophet, that he will give him good proof of his commission—proof properly suited to authenticate that commission. This does not imply that every teacher of truth should also be a worker of miracles. If God should give such power to every teacher of truth, not only would miracles change from extraordinary to ordinary credentials, and thus fail of the very purpose for which they are given, but the present system of God's moral government must be wholly changed. But when God does a thing so rare in its occurrence, and so important in its bearings upon human

interests, as to send a messenger to man with extraordinary demands upon our faith, that messenger may fitly be entrusted with powers to work as none could work without the divine approval. We can imagine nothing of greater importance than the authentication of a commission from God. The natural order of things in providence may well be made subservient to the gospel, which has purposes higher far than nature. A miracle is a reasonable proof of divine favour to an extraordinary teacher.

In revealing his will to man, we may reasonably expect that God would teach us plainly some things of which we were not wholly ignorant before; some things that commend themselves to the human understanding by the self-evident light of their own excellence; but also some things which we must receive as true by our reliance upon divine testimony. Many things are taught in the Bible that are known to those who have not the Bible; if any man or people should hear the law of the ten commandments, not knowing whence it came, they might approve and receive it, through an intuitive recognition of its inherent excellence. But take the gospel as a system of salvation to fallen man, and its chief peculiarities are a simple revelation of which man knows only what God reveals; and he is assured of the truth of these teachings just so far as he has just reason to believe that GOD SPEAKS. Not only are the doctrines of the Trinity and of the future resurrection teachings

of pure revelation, known to be true only because the word of God so declares, but all that we are taught of the divine character and atoning work of the great Redeemer are matters known to us, not by reason, but by faith. But these are teachings whose immense importance we cannot overrate; and the system of teachings to which they belong should, as a system, rest upon foundations that cannot be moved. We are not usually expected to believe except upon proof; and no exercise of faith is so important as that which looks to God for the pardon of sin and to Christ for an eternal salvation. We need proof which only God can give that God speaks in these teachers. Instead of miracles being unreasonable, the demand for their working is reasonable. The importance of these teachings, and the urgent necessity for confirming their truth by irrefragable proofs, sufficiently justifies the working of miracles. And this is especially so, because there is no just reason against the occurrence of miracles; nor can any man point out a single bad consequence that flows from man's belief in the miracles of the Scriptures. Miracles do not injure the moral character of those who believe in them, nor lower their ideas of the divine character, nor shake their confidence in the invariable connection of cause and effect. Men may abuse any teachings to superstitious purposes; but intelligent believers in the sacred volume have certainly as much reverence for God and his laws,

as much confidence in the usual uniformity of nature, as much disposition to demand a reasonable ground for all they believe, as have any other men in the world.

These thoughts may aid us in solving another inquiry: When may we reasonably look for miracles? Not at the hands of every teacher of truth; not even frequently in the history of the Church; and not through all the ages of her history until the end of the world. The miracles spoken of in the Scripture do not belong to all the periods of the scriptural history. They are not wastefully wrought, at unnecessary times, or upon frivolous occasions. Many eminent men of the Church were not workers of miracles; as Abraham, Joseph, David, Jeremiah, Daniel, and John the Baptist wrought no miracles. Miracles are extraordinary proofs to establish the authority of extraordinary prophets. Laying out of view the wonders wrought directly by God himself—as the deluge, the destruction of Sodom, and the wonders recorded in the book of Daniel—and those wrought by especial divine direction, the miracles of the Bible belong only to three short periods of history, and gather especially around the three most remarkable characters of the Church. Moses first, next Elijah, greatest of all, Christ Jesus, are the three wonder-workers of the Church of God. Each of these indeed transmits the power, for a time, to his successors, for important reasons. Thus these powers

are shown to be official rather than personal; and each of these left an unfinished work, to be prosecuted by his successors. It is impossible to designate three persons at whose hands we may more reasonably look for such evidences of a divine commission than the chief three who stand forth in the Scriptures as workers of miracles. Moses gives to mankind the first written revelations of God's will; Jesus Christ is the Lord of all the prophets, and closes, in himself and his apostles, the great volume of truth; and Elijah and his successor Elisha stand between them, in a time of great apostasy, to vindicate anew the great claims of Jehovah against the encroaching idolatry. Not confining the working of miracles strictly to these three epochs, the general truth may be thus expressed: The highest occasion usually calls for the miracle; the man who does these wonders imparts his authority to the great system of truth with which he is identified; and Christ Jesus, as the chief of all divine messengers, gives his direct approval to all those teachings which before his day were already known as the Sacred Scriptures. After his days, and the continued proof of divine working in his apostles, the entire Bible was given to the world as an authoritative document, bearing the seal of its divine authority. The great reason for miracles no longer exists. God's ministers now are not revealers of his will; they are merely interpreters of teachings already authenticated. The

just occasion for miracles is a part of the just vindication of their occurrence.

But we should not fail to notice that there is a marked and striking difference *in kind* between the scriptural miracles and the pretended wonders of which so much has been said by erroneous teachers. We do not speak chiefly of the evidence adduced to prove that miracles are truly wrought. The scriptural miracles were openly wrought before friends and foes, in matters where the witnesses could not be deceived, and their record was made public during the life-time of the beholders. Spurious miracles have none of the just proofs of excellence. If wrought at all, wrought in doubtful and insignificant things, and before interested persons, or resting upon records made in later times and distant places, they should magnify the proof of the true miracle, rather than detract from it. But see how the true and the false differ in kind. Certain books are extant on the early life of Jesus, written, as Dr. Lardner thinks,\* by the Gnostics, or written or altered in the second century by Leucius or Lucian, a Manichee. These books relate many trifling and unmeaning wonders wrought by the boy Jesus—making clay figures and changing them into live birds, miraculously correcting the mistakes made by Joseph as a carpenter, and avenging himself upon his playmates. So the books published in our times and in our own land under

\* Lardner's *Credib.* viii. 530.

high authority, narrating the miracles attributed to the saints in the Romish Church, follow in the same channel. Decapitated heads open their mouths to make confession; statues extend their arms, or weep, or wink, or nod; and the sacred wafer bleeds when pierced, or, carried off by bees, changes into a boy and makes the whole hive adore it! There is nothing in such things apposite or significant or useful as proofs of divine working. We may judge of these as men judge of counterfeit bank-notes. Perhaps we cannot always trace them back and show whence they come, or even take time to examine a Detector. Upon the principle that every imitator is a bungler, we know that a counterfeit rarely equals the execution of a genuine bill. We judge by the very appearance. Some imitations may be close—of others we can at once decide. The most of the miracles of the Church of Rome are just what the Bible predicts they should be, viz.: LYING WONDERS. They are unnatural, inappropriate, and without that remarkable significance that belongs to the miracles of the sacred writings. Apart from the question of historical proofs, the two classes are widely separated. There is a high moral presumption in favour of the miracles of the three great epochs of scriptural history.

We do not believe the great teachings of the Church of God without possessing proofs, that in their own nature and in the abundant evidences to

support them are entirely worthy of our reliance. It is now an unreasonable demand if any one asks for miraculous proof that God speaks in the Scriptures, both because no man now comes to declare new things to us, and because God has already given the seal of his approval to these ancient revelations. No people ever demands other than historical proof of the great *events*, especially of the great *documents*, of national history. English courts never call in question the authenticity of Magna Charta; American statesmen admit the place of the Declaration of Independence; the Church of God is united in acknowledging the authority of every book of the canonical Scriptures; and no caviller at the miracles of the word of God has ever presumed to attack the evidences upon historical deductions. We may say of this revelation from God that the evidences of its authenticity are so numerous, so associated with other matters of unquestioned truth, and so interwoven with the history of man, that we must receive them or unsettle our confidence in all historical testimony. Indeed, as some of the Fathers long since said, the Christian Church, established in a scoffing and opposing world, without the aid of miracles, or *pretending* merely to exercise such powers, is more wonderful than any miracle.

Miracles are to be ranked among the evidences of revealed religion. To continue or to repeat them now would be to confess that those evidences

are insufficient. This confession we refuse to make, and the doctrine taught by our Lord Jesus Christ is very clear, that the same state of mind which now leads any man to desire miracles in order to his conversion would make miracles themselves useless to that end. Luke xvi. 31. Though miracles were wrought by Christ, many who witnessed them remained still unconverted, and these could not deny that the miracles actually occurred. Men may know the truth, yet refuse their obedience to its legitimate inferences. We see all around us, in our own days, that the men who cavil at the evidences of religion are not the men who carefully adopt and practice the teachings of the moral law, whose excellence they cannot question. They show such indifference to truths of recognized importance that we can easily discern that they do not lack evidences, but rather hearts disposed to embrace the teachings of divine truth. The men who give their careful and interested thoughts to the study of the sacred writings themselves, and of the proofs of their authority, are little disposed to complain that the evidences are meagre or insufficient. Indeed, God has not only given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, but all needful proof that he thus speaks to man.

The practical issue of the Saviour's teaching is that the guilt of man's unbelief lies upon himself. It is not the place of external evidences to renew the sinful heart; and they who echo the complaint

of the lost soul, "If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent," utterly misconceive the design of these wonders and the depraved tendencies of the hearts of men. Thousands now have the same intellectual conviction of the truth of these divine teachings which at most any miracle would produce, and yet are they unrepenting. Thousands have been converted to God, and prepared for everlasting life by just such teachings and evidences as we now possess. Our true wisdom is to regard these teachings as indeed a more sure word of prophecy.

And before we take leave of the wonder wrought for the widow's son at Zarephath, touching its precious significancy, we would add thus much more: that they must read perversely the character of our God, and know imperfectly the true spirit of the sacred volume, who learn not that here are consolations intended for all times. We do not mean that the exact similitude of the wonder may still be looked for, or that modern men of prayer may call back the breath to the nostrils of a lifeless child. But in all our households we are subject to the sudden changes of this humble abode. It had not been strange if the widow of Zarephath had become elated at her uncommon prosperity. She had suddenly been lifted from poverty and despair to comparative wealth and to joy unalloyed. She had exchanged her last crust for enough for herself and her child; she had a prophet for her guest, and

the evident blessing of God was upon her household. But the goodness of our God stoops to visit the humble habitation of the widowed and the poor as truly now as then; yet so that a dark and unexpected sorrow may stand just next to his marvellous display of mercy. The life of her son is spared from the famine, but death comes in another form.

Even this heavy calamity is not overwhelming. Rather, God's care for the widow is better shown through her son's death. And thus it still is. Through the prayers of some humble man of God wonders have still been wrought in the homes of the believing. Prodigal sons, dead to every true and kindly feeling, the grief of parental hearts, have been quickened to true life and duty. What happier words ever broke from parental lips than these: "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And from beds of languishing beloved ones have been restored, or they have departed with hope in their death; or they have filled our hearts with sad but salutary memories, sanctifying the thoughts and purposes of many years. Thus, in the experience of our earthly sorrows, we have often found that divine grace wrought unexpected and surpassing good through them. Blessings as true, and as truly from the hand of God, and as lasting in their stay, have come to us as those that are recorded of this widow. Lay aside the extraordinary manner in which her

blessings were granted, and we need not envy her. Our cup has been as full and of as rich blessings. This sketch of domestic history may interest us; for it is just this, a picture of human life, especially of spiritual experience.

Not seldom parental sin has been brought to remembrance by a sudden stroke upon a beloved child; genuine conviction has come through these pangs of sorrow; and the loss of her darling's life has been the gain of the mother's soul. A better resurrection this, a nobler miracle of grace, than in the living boy at Zarephath.

## CHAPTER VII.

### *THE PIOUS STEWARD OF AHAB'S PALACE.*

IN the third year of Elijah's stay in the widow's humble abode the word of the Lord bade him go and meet Ahab and announce the coming of rain. We do not know that there were such tokens now of repentance, on the part of sinning Israel, as to bring them this relief from their offended God. Divine judgments do indeed call a rebellious nation to turn from their sins, yet it may often be that only a portion of the people may truly humble themselves under judgments. So great is the prevalence of prayer that but ten righteous men would have sufficed to save the doomed "cities of the plain;" the cry of Israel in Egypt was prayerfully uttered in the ears of their covenant God by perhaps only a small portion of the tribes; and now it may chiefly have been the cry of seven thousand faithful men in Israel which prevailed to save the land before its utter desolation. The divine mercy toward sinning man seems ever ready to manifest its workings.

"His strokes are fewer than our crimes,  
And lighter than our guilt."

Toward the contrite certainly—perhaps often even toward others—his judgments speak this language: “I will not contend for ever, neither will I always be wroth; for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.” Isa. lvii. 16. What a sad state of things now in Israel! The perverse rulers hold on their guilty course; the rocks seem no harder than those royal hearts. Evidently it is not for the sake of Ahab and Jezebel that the rod of judgment is to be withheld. It may be that the prayers of one good man, to whom we are now to be introduced, had much to do with the respite thus given to the guilty land.

We are told afterward that seven thousand men were in Israel who had not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Here doubtless is one of them, and he lives in almost the last place where we would expect to find a spark of piety. Strange as it was, when the prophet carried us to Zarephath and taught us lessons of profitable faith in a Gentile widow, it seems quite as marvellous to find an eminent and honoured servant of Jehovah dwelling in the very palace of Ahab, holding an office of trust in that idolatrous court, and held in high esteem by the wicked king himself. But, indeed, this is one of the striking characteristics of the scriptural writers, that they ever forbid us to make true piety subservient to a man's circumstances. They exhibit many examples of true and even eminent piety in unlikely persons and under most

unfavourable opportunities, for they would show us that the true kingdom of God is in the soul of man. Surround an ungodly man with every opportunity to know his duty and every assistance to do it, yet with an unchanged heart he remains rebellious against God. But many such a man may so conform to the circumstances around him as to refrain from much evil, and even to assume the external garb of religion. He may do this without the direct consciousness that his motives are earthly and inferior. In the parable of the Sower our Lord describes those who "for a while believe, but in time of tribulation or persecution fall away." True piety is tested by changing times. Let us take occasion from the mention of Obadiah to consider the character here assigned to him. He is described as one that feared the Lord greatly. His was an eminent piety, all the more grateful for the unworthiness of his age in Israel. As a green spot in a desert, where a refreshing spring invites the thirsty traveller to repose and refreshment, the mention of a good man where so many are apostate from God invites us to consider the traits of his godly character.

Obadiah feared the Lord at a time when his people had widely departed from the covenant of their fathers. Perhaps his whole life-time—certainly the greater part of it—was spent in constant contact with the pollutions of idol-worship. The piety which can abide the test of such trials as he

possibly encountered must have true worth. A vigorous plant will grow, of course, when it has a favourable soil and warmth and rains, but its vigour is better tried in times less favourable. It is to the praise of this man that he remained faithful when it cost something to be true to his duties. We need not understand that he had no fears, no misgivings, no temptations to decline from the right way. He may have had his hours of dejection; he may have been addressed by sore and troubled thoughts; he may have felt sometimes almost forsaken of his God. These are not rare feelings in the experience of good men. Believers are not rendered apathetic or stoical by the renewing of the heart to piety. The changes through which God's providence allows us to pass must be met by us in such a way as to show what manner of spirit we are of. Doubtless, Obadiah, living in these troublous times of Israel, often cast his thoughts wishfully toward the marble towers of God's temple in distant Jerusalem, and desired the prosperity which belonged there. Doubtless, he often felt disheartened for the prospects of true piety among the ten tribes; and especially in these late disastrous times, when divine judgments desolated the land. But he felt not like forsaking the service of his God. Threatenings may have been used toward him—the seducing temptations of power and wealth may have attempted to win him from duty. Envious eyes in the palace of Ahab

may have watched carefully for some pretext that might furnish occasion, true or false, to awaken the jealousy of Jezebel. Yet we have no reason to judge that he swerved from his integrity in these difficult times.

That those were times of especial danger, and that he occupied an exposed position, should make us more admire his consistent integrity. To be the steward of Ahab's house at a season when such an office would be doubly valuable, because the famine had made provisions scarce and expensive, made it increasingly dangerous for one who did not sympathize with the prevailing thoughts of that wicked court. It is difficult to believe that any one could hold such a place and make no undue compliances; but he himself appeals to Elijah of his innocence, and asks what was his sin that he should be delivered into the hand of Ahab. So obvious were the difficulties of maintaining such an office, and still of keeping a conscience void of offence, that we might rather esteem it Obadiah's duty to retire from so exposed a position. And yet truly, upon no matters should we form a more careful judgment and in full view of all the circumstances, than when we would decide the duty, for ourselves or others, of changing our engagements, and of surrendering a position which Providence may have assigned. Perhaps there is no book which teaches us so plainly, as we are taught in the Bible, that God orders our lot in life, and

that righteous men may lawfully abide in almost any place, and discharge faithfully the duties that belong there, long after their position has been made uncomfortable.

Obadiah usefully held a dangerous and uncomfortable place. He dare not give it up, because his people needed him ; he could hold it, for Providence is any man's best guard at the post of duty. The steps—and the standing—of a good man are ordered by the Lord : he upholdeth him with his hand. Obadiah was needed, perhaps, to supply Elijah's place, now that the prophet is hidden alike from friend and foe ; and the steward of Ahab's house may have done much, in judicious measures, to hold together the seven thousand who refused Jezebel's entreaties and threatenings. Only one example is furnished us of Obadiah's deeds. In this time of persecution he had hidden a hundred men of Jehovah's prophets by fifties in caves, and supplied them with food. If this was recently, and during the famine, it was an act of great liberality. To feed one hundred men when provisions were scarce is no mean charity, though indeed we have no mention of the length of time through which he supplied them. But if not in times of scarcity, it was still an act of great daring. For the fierce Jezebel sought the lives of these men, and she would not have spared the steward of the palace had she known that he had ventured to resist her will. The risk was greater, because he must

have used the agency of others to dispense a beneficence so large as this. He could not personally have done this service; and indeed he addresses Elijah upon the subject as though the matter was well known, at least to the prophets and to this their leader. Had any of the servants of Obadiah betrayed the confidence reposed in them, his faithfulness to God's suffering servants would have given occasion to the queen to number him also among the victims of her bigotry.

While this good man owed his safety in the house of Ahab to the protection of God's providence, this does not imply that we can trace the matter no further. Rather, God's providence uses appropriate means to secure its wise ends; and what more fitting support for such a man in such a place than the very virtues which forced the respect and the confidence of even Ahab? The king of Israel may have needed just such a man for such an office; and if he knew fully of Obadiah's faithfulness to his God, he could thereby judge that his stewardship toward his king would not be dishonest. Let it be a valuable support to all our pious principles that they command the respect even of an opposing world. Religious men may be much reproached and ridiculed and persecuted, yet a consistent and holy character never is despised, and, so long as men have consciences, never can be. The men of this wicked world may have no taste themselves for pious principles or

religious duties; they may despise and laugh at a hypocrite; they may revile true piety for faults which they know never spring from it; but they can usually decide with a true judgment when a man deserves a good character; and such a character they always respect. And very certainly no other characteristic is at all to be compared with integrity as the foundation of true influence.

Several remarkable examples are afforded us in the Scriptures where a wise and unswerving uprightness has been the basis of lasting prosperity; where servants exhibiting this trait have become so valuable to masters, whose usual views were far different from their own, that they have been allowed the free exercise of their religious duties where less worthy men might have suffered persecution. Joseph in Egypt, though a friendless and youthful stranger, maintained his purity and piety amidst an idolatrous people, though gradually advanced to the highest offices in the realm. Daniel in Babylon was eminent in honours and usefulness through a succession of idolatrous kings. So Obadiah in Samaria was too faithful in his place to allow that Ahab should dismiss him and engage a more complaisant, but a less trustworthy, idolater in his room.

In his interview with the prophet, Obadiah shows the strength of his faith in his ready belief of Elijah's word. At first, indeed, he is startled that Elijah spoke of appearing before Ahab. He knew

the king's cruelty—how much especially he was incensed against this prophet, and how carefully he had sought for him in his own kingdom and in neighbouring realms. And now he is afraid that as Elijah has been so long concealed from the king, so he might again be caught away while he was bearing the tidings to Ahab. In this case the king would hold him responsible, and thus his life would be put in jeopardy. Nor should we judge that Obadiah speaks timidly or selfishly in these words. He had already staked his life when a proper occasion had authorized him to risk it; but his welfare was too important to suffering Israel to allow him to put his safety in needless peril. Or indeed he may have shrunk now for Elijah's sake also, knowing that Ahab lacked not the will to do him injury.

But upon the solemn assurance of Elijah that he did truly design to stand before Ahab, Obadiah makes no further objection. Perhaps he recalled a scene that not so long before had happened to a predecessor of Ahab, who had ventured to put forth his hand against a prophet, and was glad to ask his help to restore the withered arm which he could not draw back to him. 1 Kings xiii. He well knew, from his own experience, that they are safe who go upon the Lord's errands; and he was well aware also that Elijah held an extraordinary commission, against which earthly potentates might rage in vain. In prompt obedience, therefore, to the prophet's bidding, Obadiah sought Ahab and

informed him that he had found Elijah. Doubtless he was a witness also of the important interview that followed. He heard the king using words which he may possibly have often used to himself in self-vindication and to throw the blame of Israel's calamities upon the prophet, as if indeed he was the true troubler of Israel. Yet how boldly does the prophet answer back! and how easily does he compel the conscience of Ahab to testify that his charges are true! The true troubler is not he who brings *grief*, but he who brings GUILT upon any land or upon any soul. This truth is so obvious that Ahab is silenced, as the voice of God will one day silence many a vain cavil from the lips of ungodly men. Men throw the blame where it does not belong; but the true prophet tells the transgressor, "Thou art the troubler."

Perhaps when Elijah proposed that the prophets of falsehood should meet him in public controversy upon Mount Carmel and try where the right lay, Obadiah was of great assistance in gathering the people; through his agency a large representation may have been secured, including not a few of those who had remained faithful to Jehovah; and these may have been of essential service when the decision was against the prophets of Baal, and when Elijah executed upon them the stern sentence of death, according to the Mosaic statutes that were still binding in Israel.

It attracts our interest toward him to be told

that Obadiah feared the Lord from his youth. We do not know his age in the day when he went forth with Ahab to find water for their dying herds. If now he was a man far advanced in years, he may have passed his childhood in those better times of his people, when King Solomon ruled all the tribes, and when the offerings of a united land were laid upon the altars of Jerusalem. Yet it is more likely that only his parents could remember these happier times; and it may be that gathering iniquities about them made them more careful to train their family in the principles of the ancient faith. They who make apologies from the prevailing evils of their age, and thus neglect their own pressing and important duties, will find any times bad enough to furnish them with an excuse for their unfaithfulness; while parents who have any just appreciation of their responsibilities will be only the more careful and diligent in their labours, because special dangers gather about their children and special hindrances make their duties more difficult. Can we name any more important duty of social life than that which rests upon parents for the training of their children? Can we imagine any wiser scheme than that which God has devised to commit these great interests to a well-regulated family? Alas, we know scarcely any duty of man that falls under more common and lamentable neglect.

It is a privilege unspeakable when a human

being is taught from his earliest years the doctrines and duties of piety. Not in vain do the Scriptures give us repeated assurances and exhortations on this matter. A child left to himself brings his mother to shame—a child trained in the way in which he should go will not depart from it when he is older. If there is—as there is—a natural aversion of the heart to the teachings of piety, so much the more earnest, especially so much the more prayerful, should be the efforts early made in favour of pious thoughts and habits. If sometimes the mistake is made of looking for too much from a child, yet it is a more common and a more disastrous mistake to look for too little. Let a child be still a child, in religion as elsewhere; just as apt, as impulsive, as mature, as consistent, in one direction as another. Every child is a bundle of inconsistencies; one moment full of grief, and the next forgetting it in the glee of a new enjoyment; one moment uttering some profound remark, whose wisdom and penetration seem far beyond his years; and at the next saying some trifle that nobody cares to remember; delighted now with some new toy or some new friend, yet readily giving these up for anything novel that presents itself. This is childhood in every generation: we neither wonder nor blame, nor indeed, upon the whole, wish it otherwise in this season of forming thought.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I thought as a child, I understood as a child,” said

one who afterward thought as a man, if anybody ever did. When a child can reason upon any subject, he can have religious thoughts; when he can obey his parents, he can give obedience also to divine laws; when he can intelligently love earthly friends, he can love God; yet in everything we may expect the immature understanding, the changeable feelings, the half-done duties of childhood. The great encouragements are, that a child's faith may be saving faith; a child's love to Christ, true love; and a child's imperfect obedience, the first steps in the pathway of more complete service. Let experience judge of the value of early training. There is a happy preservation from evil for those whose youthful years are passed under pious influences; there is a maturity of instruction in those long trained in Christian nurture; there is a vigour in settled habits, which makes it easy for those who are thus educated to go forward in ways of righteousness: usually those who have done most to form a worthy character and to exert a righteous influence, owe most to the excellence of their early training.

"Suffer me," said the venerable Dr. Wither-  
 spoon, "earnestly to recommend to all that fear  
 God, to apply themselves from their earliest youth  
 to the exercises of piety, a life of prayer and com-  
 munion with God. This is the source from which  
 a real Christian must derive the secret comfort of  
 his heart, and which alone will give beauty, con-

sistency and uniformity to an exemplary life. . . . Youth, when the spirits are lively and the affections vigorous and strong, is the season when this habit" [and indeed every other habit] "may best be formed. There are advantages and disadvantages attending every stage of life. An aged Christian will naturally grow in prudence, vigilance, usefulness, attention to the course of Providence, and subjection to the divine will; but will seldom attain to greater fervour of affection and life in divine worship than he had been accustomed to in his early years."\* We doubt not conversions to piety may take place in later years; but they who earliest learn the fear of God will most consistently maintain the duties of religion, be most ardently attached to them, and awaken the fewest reproaches from an opposing world. Youth is the season for religious training, and those who have not enjoyed opportunities for religious education go forth to life's duties under serious disadvantages. For when youth are best trained it is an important season which sees them go forth to temptations where many fail; and multitudes crowd the downward way, because few human duties are more lamentably neglected than those which relate to the young. The parents of Obadiah may have been among the few that were faithful in Israel when so long a series of kings followed the example of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. It is a sad

\* Witherspoon's Works, iii. 103.

thing to live in times of growing degeneracy ; yet in the decline of morals among any people, by all means let families be only the more careful to train up their children in the fear of the Lord.

Let Obadiah teach us how false and vain are the excuses so often made by sinful men to satisfy themselves for their neglect of religion. How many claim that in different circumstances they would surely serve God ! Yet piety may belong anywhere, and depends but little upon a man's external circumstances. It depends not upon his years, for a child may be pious ; not upon the times in which he lives, for even in troublous times may men give God acceptable service ; not upon his companions, for he may resist their influence rather than yield to it ; not upon riches, or poverty, or health. Obadiah served God in Ahab's palace— Paul as Nero's prisoner. Men are fruitful in making excuses, but they would *wish* to make none if their hearts were right. How a cheerful heart finds the shallowness of every excuse, or turns the difficulty and hindrance into an incentive or even a help ! And when we see how faithful many have been in circumstances far more trying than any we have ever known, we should be both encouraged and ashamed. How easily might we serve God as compared with Obadiah, and yet how languid our zeal seems beside his ! We may have our trials, but how feeble are they beside his ! And our knowledge of duty, and our motives to a

zealous service, are far in advance of the privileges that belonged to that age.

Happy are they who earliest begin and most consistently maintain the fear of God. Many encouragements of the Divine Word assure us that we cannot too soon enter upon the duties that grow but the more excellent and important as life itself advances. In those who neglect the instructions and habits of piety there is the growing likelihood that these better things will be crowded out by the increasing cares of gathering years. The man who has reached the middle age of life, and has, as yet, given no proper attention to the great interests of life eternal, has lost too much time already, and cannot afford, through neglect or worse reasons, to lose still more.

Is any character more truly desirable for any man, now or hereafter, in life or at the dying hour, as judged by man or as judged at God's righteous bar, than that here ascribed to the steward of Ahab's house? Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, and this too from his youth. Is it likely that he would ever have heartily espoused the cause of God's suffering and persecuted saints if his personal choice of piety had been delayed in his early years, and if this great concern had been still unsettled when he was elevated to the stewardship in the palace of such a king? They who neglect religion while they still are young give tone to their characters usually for life, throw off from them

the better natures of duty, and gather around them the worse promptings of impulse, interest and expediency to determine how they shall hereafter act, and both offend God and destroy themselves through a folly that is often inconsiderate, yet always dangerous and guilty.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### *THE TRUE TROUBLER OF ISRAEL.*

**E**LIJAH did not fear to stand before Ahab when commanded so to do by the word of the Lord. Indeed he gains a victory at the very outset by sending word to the king where he might be found, thus compelling the monarch to wait upon him, rather than appearing himself as a subject before his lord. And the first words that pass between them serve to keep in the prophet's hands the advantage, which he still maintains till the controversy closes. Doubtless, as Ahab journeyed through the land, he saw lamentable proofs on every hand of the desolation wrought by the drought; Israel was in calamity; and when he met Elijah he denounced him as the great author of all these wastes—the troubler of Israel! We need not be surprised at these words on the lips of the king. We commonly find, when men are arrayed in parties against each other, that each side vindicates itself, and uses harsh epithets and makes harsh charges against the other. The purest motives and the most careful diligence of men who are in the right cannot relieve them from the re-

proach ever cast upon them of being the troublers of the public peace. It must be admitted that much of human infirmity and folly, and even wrong, often mingles with the efforts of men who, in the main, are right in aim and effort in human controversies; and so there is some appearance of plausibility in charging wrong upon those who yet are in the right. But the prophet here teaches us the just criterion of judgment. Let a controversy be never so fierce and deadly, no blame should be attached to those who maintain the right; so the whole aim of every true man should be to ascertain where the right lies, and this he should support, no matter whether he is called to aggressive or to defensive efforts; no matter how fierce may be the storm which his faithfulness may gather around him.

There is a sense in which righteous men may be subject to the charge of being troublers. The thunder-storm is a troubler of the atmosphere, yet it comes not till its power is needed to drive away the gathering impurities of the air, and its effects are beneficial. Truth may be a troubler, but only when error has so firm a hold upon men's minds that only a powerful struggle can displace it. Right may be a troubler when wrong holds the dearest privileges prostrate with iron grasp, and earnest wrestlings only can release them. Life itself is a ceaseless agitation, compared with which the reign of death is one of quiet and rest. The

troubles of the world are often the best signs of the world's life. Society would be more stagnant and pestilential than a Dead Sea without the agitations that are needed to purify and to invigorate it. If oppression must be submitted to lest we may awaken strife by resisting it; if error must be allowed to prevail lest we should kindle controversy in our attempts to refute it; if God's worship may be displaced by the profane rites of Baal, and no prophet may dare to raise any disturbance by lifting up his voice against such evils,—then may the world do without these troublers of the world's peace.

If Ahab's charge is just, then in all the annals of our race the true benefactors of men have been the troublers of the world's peace. The same cry was raised in heathen lands against the light-bearers of the gospel, who came in the name of God to disperse the gloom that for ages had covered the nations. "These that have turned the world upside down have come thither also." Acts xvii. 6. All reformations among men have been the uprising of righteous principles against old and strong tyrannies; and the severity and long-continuance of such struggles are the best proof of their necessity. Indeed there is a sense in which every minister of Christ, just in proportion to the success of his ministry, is a trouble among men; and our Lord does not hesitate to avow this effect of his ministry: "Think not that I am come to

send peace on the earth ; I am not come to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother, . . . and a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Matt. x. 34-36. The gospel comes to men at enmity with God, and it fails of its mission when it leaves them at peace in their sins. It calls the guilty soul of man to stand face to face with that Holy One whom man has offended. So the confession of the awaked one is, "I remembered God and was troubled." Ps. lxxvii. 3. Agitation—profound agitation—of the single soul—or of a community—or of a nation—may not be evil. It may be needful, wholesome in tendency, beneficial in result.

But Elijah may lead us to the proper understanding of the charge which Ahab makes against him, and may vindicate their fame who are not properly, but reproachfully, termed the troublers of the public peace. He refuses to bear this reproachful name, but casts it back to the king himself, to whom of right it belonged. He gives us this simple principle to apply to the explanation of all these earthly agitations : that when troubles arise in the contending of any principles or any parties, the true responsibility lies upon the party that is in the wrong. If both parties in any strife are measurably wrong—and this may often be the case through human passions and human infirmities—then both may deserve censure; and even a right-

eous cause may thus come under partial reproach and may receive injury. Yet the just cause should ever meet our support, even though stern efforts are needful to maintain it. If the oppressed and the oppressor, the injured and the injurer, error and truth, wrong and right come into conflict, the mere question, "Which began this strife?" is of no manner of importance. The wrong only deserves the censure. The oppressor, error and wrong are always the true troublers of society. When amputation is necessary, we cannot blame the surgeon for the pain he must needs inflict; we might rather blame him if he lacks decision to do what ought to be done. If Elijah, instead of withstanding Ahab, had joined himself to the prophets of Baal, and had thus fallen in with his scheme, or even had he neglected to oppose them, he would have deserved the name now improperly applied by the king—a troubler of Israel.

The true troubler of the land is not he who brought Israel to grief, but he who brought Israel to guilt. Elijah boldly retorts the charge, and such is the power of truth that the convicted tyrant quails beneath his words. Himself and his wicked schemes had brought these calamities on the land, and long before this would the conflict have ended if Ahab had yielded under the Lord's chastisement. Take away the altars of Baal, and the statutes that legalized them in the kingdom, and the heavens would give rain and the earth

would yield her increase. And Ahab knew his guilt and stood abashed before the upright and intrepid prophet.

To bring the whole matter to a public issue, Elijah, doubtless by divine impulse, makes a definite proposal. He asks that a solemn convocation of the tribes of Israel should be gathered at Mount Carmel, that the false priests who filled the land should be required to be present, and that the question should be publicly settled by actual experiment whether he or these prophets could give indisputable proof of a divine commission. The proposition may have come before the mind of Ahab in a form of such authority that he dared not use even his place as king to venture its rejection. Upon the part of Elijah it was a bold proposition, which required far more than the consciousness that truth and right were on his side to justify its offer. The prophet knew that the great and singular prerogative of working miraculously, granted to so few even of God's eminent servants, vested in his office. We vindicate the propriety of miracles at the hands of Elijah, in the evident certainty that this greatest day of his ministry must have been a failure but for the fire from heaven; we may far more easily disbelieve that there never was an Elijah than question the chief success of that notable day; but for this singular prerogative, that had been a day of presumption, not of faith. Except in the right, Elijah was

the weaker party, and the right that day without the power must have met disaster. He stood alone in the public controversy. For not as yet had he been assured that seven thousand men in Israel were secret worshippers of Jehovah. He stood against the royal authority of the land, and a royal edict had long since set a price upon his head. Besides, the suffering thousands all through the tribes well knew that at Elijah's word the rains of heaven had been so long withheld; and as they left their desolate houses and their starving children to meet this dreaded prophet, we may well suppose that many a dark brow would frown upon him, and that many a desperate heart would entertain thoughts of violent revenge. Reason and justice are not usually the governing motives when suffering has driven men almost mad. Yet indeed God often so arranges the plans of his providence that wicked men are restrained by motives which address their self-interest. What had any man in Israel to gain from slaying this prophet? This mad act would but perpetuate the curse upon the land. For the rain was to come at his word. Elijah is safe, not only as he goes upon the Lord's errand, but also because his changed prayers were needful for Israel's relief.

Some days may perhaps have passed before the assembly was convened at Carmel. Word must be sent through the land, the people must have time to gather; national conventions cannot be assembled

without some preparation. And there is some proof that Jezebel was opposed to the whole thing. During the brief needful delay she exerted all her influence against the proposed "*mass meeting*," and it seems already a victory for Elijah that her opposition could not stay the assembling of the people, nor even prevent the king's presence. Yet it is a significant fact that *her* prophets were not there. Though she worshipped Baal, yet her special divinity was a female, and Jezebel maintained at her own expense four hundred prophets of the groves, *i. e.*, of the goddess Astarte. She may have made the excuse that Elijah's proposition was not fair for them. They were not the prophets of the sun and of the day, but of the moon and of the night; and the challenge to answer by fire is less appropriate to their professions. Doubtless, had they been there, Elijah would have offered some other test, equally fair for them as for the priests of Baal—would have shown that his God ruled equally the light and the darkness; and after using the day for the defeat and destruction of Baal's prophets, would have consecrated the night to the destruction of Astarte's. But Jezebel was crafty as well as cruel. She dared not venture the trial, and she refused to send her favourites. Yet, perhaps, she thus only postponed for a longer period the irrepressible, inevitable issue, and prepared the way for the subsequent defeat of Israel and the death of Ahab. These four hundred men may have

been the same false prophets who brought on, three years later, the battle of Ramoth-gilead, where Ahab was killed. 1 Kings xxii. 6, 37. Thus these prophets were spared to the injury of those who protected them, as men, in their folly and blindness, often cherish the sins which in the end prove their destruction.

This great assemblage of the people of Israel is one of the most important occasions of their national history. Few conventions have ever met whose purpose could at all be compared with the object here purposed, to decide who was the true God of Israel. The place of meeting was Mount Carmel. This is the name of a range of hills on the borders of the Mediterranean sea. Some suppose that this great meeting took place near a bold promontory jutting out into the sea; others think that Elijah named for the place of meeting a well-known spot, where long before an altar had been erected to Jehovah, and where therefore the people had been wont to meet. The narrative makes express mention of a fallen altar of Jehovah, which Elijah restored before he offered his sacrifice upon it. It is well worthy of our mention that Tacitus, the Roman historian, speaks explicitly of this ancient place of worship, and says that Vespasian offered sacrifices there: "Between Judea and Syria is Carmel; so they call the mountain and the god; and the ancients declare that no image nor temple is placed there to the god, only an altar and wor-

ship.”\* And Suetonius† also declares that Vespasian in Judea consulted the oracle at Carmel. This shows that long after these scenes the place was famous; but the existence of the altar there shows that its fame was more ancient than the days of this prophet. Before the temple was built at Jerusalem, the people of the twelve tribes often erected altars to Jehovah, and the practice was tolerated, if not fully approved, even afterward.

The place of meeting was perhaps “on the south-eastern end of Carmel, looking off toward Jezreel.” This was in a conspicuous portion of a densely-settled region, and the spot is revered to this day by the discordant sects around it as the site of the miracles of Elijah.‡ Mount Carmel itself is celebrated in the Scriptures for its great beauty and fertility, and the plain of Jezreel is no less remarkable. But as the thousands of Israel gathered upon this grand occasion, the barren sides of Carmel, and the desolate landscape that spread wide before every eye, were appalling proofs that the nation needed the remedial measures that day to be employed in Israel. The sides of even fruitful Carmel were dry and barren, and the grass was withered and the fields untilled, and the flocks were few upon the great plain of Esdraelon; and the men who gathered there at the call of the Lord’s

\* Tacitus, Hist., ii. 78.

† Suetonius, Vit. Vespasian, x. ch. 5.

‡ Land and Book, ii. 223 sec.

prophet had every mark of wretchedness and destitution from the long-prevailing curse.

Elijah stood in a position never before occupied by any servant of Jehovah. Moses had brought desolation upon Egypt, Joshua had wrought the overthrow of the Canaanites, Samuel had pronounced the doom of Amalek; it remained for Elijah to show God's abhorrence of iniquity in his people, and to declare this heavy curse against Israel. And now the prophet stood alone: spread out before him, as far as the eye could reach, were the effects of the woe which his lips had uttered; gathered close around him were the squalid and exasperated crowds of Israel's degenerate sons. On these very things might be read the seal of his divine commission; the conscience of every man there felt an irrepressible awe before him, and every one could anticipate the issue of the controversy before a word was spoken.

Men may not ordinarily expect that the most high God should decide by signs from heaven the truth or falsehood of the clashing claims of various religious teachings. Presumptuous demands have again and again been made by thoughtless and wicked men that he should do so; and strange inconsistencies have belonged to those who have made those demands; as in the well-known case of an English infidel, who wrote a volume against all divine communications to man, and declares in the preface that by a remarkable sign from heaven he

was directed to publish it! It is not because the great matter at issue is not of sufficient importance to justify the most wonderful divine interpositions. For nothing is of greater importance to man than that he should be able to decide upon divine teachings. But God now affords no miraculous decisions in favour of men who are too indifferent to examine seriously the proofs already offered; for their neglect of what they have shows that they would use no better any other teachings. As for those who are willing seriously to inquire the will of God, he has not left himself without witness. He has decided the matter often enough, in ways which only he could use, and has given proof enough of this to every humble inquirer. Upon this extraordinary occasion, in the most public manner, Elijah proposed a test which should declare before all Israel that Jehovah alone was God.

He proposed that he, on the one side, and the priests of Baal, on the other, should each offer a sacrifice, but without fire, and let the God to whom the sacrifices were respectively offered kindle himself the fire upon the altar, in token of his existence and of his acceptance of the worship thus addressed to him. The people esteemed the proposal as entirely fair, and the priests of Baal could make no just objection to it. The controversy turned upon this question: Is the burning sun a god or a creature? If he is a creature, no wonder that, far more obedient than rational man in Israel,

he should, through this long drought, avenge the insult offered to his Creator and burn up the fields of an idolatrous people. If he is a god, let him smile upon his worshippers, and looking down from that cloudless sky, let him kindle the fire upon his own altar. And as the test was fair, so Elijah gave them a fair opportunity to do all they could. They were allowed to begin in the morning and to use the hottest part of the day, in the vain effort to bring fire from his burning orb. It may be they trusted to some trick by which they hoped to secure a seeming wonder; but the scene had too many spectators to allow any deception, or the prophet used such precautions as defeated their attempts at imposture. So all their measures were adopted in vain. They made all their preparations; they began their invocatory dances; they cried aloud upon Baal. As hour after hour passed away and no reply was secured, they became frantic with passion, invoked Baal more vehemently and cut themselves, after the heathen manner, with cruel gashes. It may be that this long and vain effort became wearisome to the spectators, but it silenced every cavil that could be uttered. They had every opportunity for success and had failed. Toward midday Elijah mocked them. Ridicule is not always a proper test of truth; the most sacred things can be made to appear in a ludicrous light, and many a scheme of wickedness is promoted by raising a laugh at better things. Yet some things are too

absurd to demand serious reasoning; and but for the serious consequences involved in it, and for the hold it has upon immortal minds, idolatry in all its forms seems too absurd for argument. Elijah expected not to win these prophets of Baal to the true faith, but he would put to shame their false pretensions for the sake of the assembled thousands. Why made they all this ado if theirs was truly a God and worthy of worship in Israel?

“There was no voice nor any that answered.” Yet just then their god had the greatest power; the people, oppressed by his heat, had full proof that the sun was wide awake, and Elijah tauntingly asked if their inattentive god was not asleep? If ever irony has a place on the lips of serious men, we may look for it here. When the glowing, silent sun looks down upon these chattering, frantic priests of Baal, when he halts at the zenith, when his rays are hottest, and yet the altar stands lifeless and unanswering, every word of the prophet tells. Cry aloud: he is a god, yet he must be deaf! Send up your boisterous petitions. Perhaps he has other engagements! He is busy with some one else; he is hunting; he is pursuing his foes; he is asleep and you must make noise enough to waken him. It is remarkable, on the one hand, that heathen writers speak of their gods just as Elijah does. Homer declares that Jupiter went on a journey of twelve days, and Lucian ridicules the idea of the gods sleeping. And, on the other hand, it is inter-

esting to know that ironical exposures of such folly have repeatedly revealed their delusions to many idolaters. How can gods that see not, nor hear, nor know, hear or help their worshippers? If Elijah's ridicule had no good effect upon the priests of Baal, yet it may have put to shame some of the degenerate Israelites not so hardened as they.

Now, indeed, this whole controversy upon Carmel was one which should have been easily settled in the minds of those who were congregated that day from the tribes of Israel. There was trouble in the land, everybody knew; and the question, who was the true troubler, was one which ought to be easily settled. But then, as it commonly happens in the agitations of human society, the charge was brought where the blame did not belong. Had every man there served the true God as faithfully as Elijah had done, the rains of heaven would not have been withheld. Possibly, indeed, if Elijah had been silent as a prophet, he might have escaped the charges now laid against him. But this would have involved him in the guilt of the people. Those who stand up for truth and righteousness are not to be held responsible, before God or man, for the griefs which spring up incidentally from their faithfulness to their duty. It will doubtless be so that the faithful but disregarded preaching of the gospel in the ears of sinful men will prove their aggravated condemnation; yet this should be of no influence to deter ministers from preaching

the truth faithfully. To shrink from this duty, because men may refuse to believe, is but to put their own souls in jeopardy. If the watchman sees the sword come . . . . and gives warning, and men care not to heed the warning, they perish in their iniquity; but as to the watchman, he delivers his soul.

It ought to have been a very easy thing in Israel to decide which was the true god, Jehovah or Baal. Perhaps there were many there that day who knew well enough where the truth lay and what their duty was. But, deterred by fear of Jezebel, or won by the gains of some paltry service at the queen's appointment, or choosing the licentiousness of wrong before the restraints of right, they kept up that rebellion which had brought such ruin upon the land. It takes more than the half conviction—more than the full conviction—of the understanding to lead men to do their duty. Before we censure too much the folly and guilt of Israel in Elijah's days, let us ponder the estate of a people far nearer our own times and nearer home than they. Have we any difficulty in deciding that this world is as little worth making a god of as the shining orb that rolls above us? What is our god? Is it honour, or fame, or wealth, or ease? Can it hear when we cry? Can it help when we are needy? Can it deliver when we are in danger? Do we ourselves, in our own consciences, approve of our own standing in the most

important of all interests? Yet no sword of persecution compels our departure from the true God. We are more guilty than Israel, if God is not our God and his service our delight.

## CHAPTER IX.

### *THE DECISION OF THE GREAT QUESTION.*

ELIJAH afforded the priests of Baal every opportunity they could demand to draw down the fire of heaven upon their altar. But evidently in the sight of all Israel their service was a failure. They could not meet the proposed test. The true prophet makes preparation for his share in the day's proceedings. He might have assumed their altar as his, and have kindled the fire where they could not. But both altar and sacrifices were polluted by their consecration to a false god, and must not be used in Jehovah's service. And, as before remarked, there seems to have been upon Carmel an ancient altar of Jehovah; and in a spot already consecrated to him Elijah would recall the tribes to the worship of their covenant God. There was a silent rebuke in the very act of repairing a broken altar of Jehovah, and another reproof, quite as significant, in taking *twelve* stones with which to repair it. Elijah thus intimates that they had forsaken the true God, and that at least in religious matters the twelve tribes should still be one. After making a ditch around the altar,

and arranging the wood, he again brings the number twelve to their attention by causing that many barrels of water to be poured upon the altar. This thoroughly wet the whole—altar, wood and sacrifice—and filled the trench; and thus in the entire proceedings all just reason for suspecting that the fire was kindled by trick or natural means was more than avoided. We know not whence he obtained the water. In Elijah's faith that now the drought was nearly over, it may have been water fit for drinking, and brought upon the ground for the use of the assembled multitudes; or it may have been water from the marshes at the foot of the mountain; or the Mediterranean Sea, which dashes against Carmel on the western side, may have supplied what he wished.

We may mark here a great difference, even in the manner of worship, between Elijah and the priests of Baal. The false worshippers are full of noise and rant, and furious efforts to awaken excitement; the true worshipper reverently bows before God in humble, serious, devout prayerfulness. He makes a simple appeal to Jehovah that he had done all these things by divine direction, and that he sought only the divine glory. We suppose his words could not be heard very far over an assembly so large as that; but his venerable form could be seen, his posture of prayer could be understood, and all knew that the decisive moment had come for which they had gathered to Carmel.

And what awe fell upon that crowd of apostate Israelites as they saw the tokens of his presence—the God of Abraham and Moses! The fire of Jehovah fell like a fierce flashing from the sky, and not only consumed the sacrifice, but, as it blazed and crackled upon the altar, it rent the very stones and licked up the water in the trench. This sight was more than impressive. It was terrible and awe-inspiring. With one impulse the people fell upon their faces, and the echoes of Carmel were awakened by their united shout: “The Lord, he is God! the Lord, he is God!”

If there were any irregularities in the offering of this sacrifice, yet the prophet is fully vindicated by this triumphant result. Elijah may or may not have been of the tribe of Levi, and authorized to offer sacrifices; offerings by others than the priests, and in other places than Jerusalem, not without their precedents, may have been irregular, yet the fire on the altar is proof of divine acceptance. Thus we may believe God marked his acceptance of Abel before Cain; thus he gave token of his presence to Moses when he dedicated the tabernacle in the desert, Lev. ix. 24; thus also to Solomon at the dedication of the temple, 2 Chron. vii. 1. In later times we need no better proof of God’s presence in his sanctuary than the gift of his Holy Spirit, like a baptism of fire, to awaken and renew the souls of men, and to kindle a true and holy devotion upon the altar of consecrated hearts.

This scene of worship ended, the authority of the prophet is exerted for the destruction of these idolatrous priests. He commanded the people to take the four hundred prophets of Baal—the true troublers of Israel—and leading them to the brook Kishon, at the foot of the mountain, to put them all to death. This was in strict accordance with the genius of the Mosaic dispensation, and with the letter of the laws then existing among the Israelites. We do not need to question the justice of their doom. They had brought desolation upon the land, and true prosperity could never belong to Israel so long as the people were still under their influence. And if, under the later teachings of Christianity, we are not authorized to suppress the spread of false religious doctrines by the sword, it is not because error is less dangerous than before, or less displeasing in the sight of God. The difference is to be assigned to the different constitution of the Jewish commonwealth from every other government upon earth. All civil governments have their just basis in divine appointment; all civil rulers are the servants of that God who rules over all; but the Jewish people were under divine rule more directly than other people ever have been. Hence many religious offences were punished with severe civil penalties; idolatry was equivalent to treason, for it threw off the authority of God their King. Other rulers are not competent judges of spiritual offences as such; therefore can

neither denounce nor execute penalties for offences purely religious. Error is as dangerous and may prove as mischievous as ever; but lordship over conscience is entrusted to no human hands, and persecution for religious opinions is no duty for the Church or the State.

The meeting of Elijah with the people of Israel on Mount Carmel was a scene of extraordinary interest indeed. None of us ever saw so solemn a meeting, and probably in this life we never shall. But we send our thoughts back to those ancient times, because principles are involved in these scriptural narratives that are of permanent interest in every age and to every soul of man. In the character of a prophet of the Most High, Elijah gathered the tribes of Israel before him upon that eventful day, and he gave them his rebukes and expostulations in the name of his God. That God they had forsaken, his altars they had thrown down, his prophets they had slain, his honours they had transferred to Baal. It made the matter no better that the like their fathers had done for generations back. Now they bowed before the Lord, and now before an idol; now they repented, and now they were hardened; now they caressed, and now they persecuted the prophets of God: this had been Israel's manner from the days of Egypt. Yet all this was wicked and ungrateful and unwise. The God of Israel was the Creator, Preserver, Benefactor of that people; he had led them from the

house of bondage; he had given them a large and fruitful land for their inheritance; he had sent them prophets and teachers above the nations; he had made them illustrious promises. So might he expostulate with them upon their ungrateful returns to him: "The Lord hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel. O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me." Micah vi. 2, 3. How great was their folly! So Elijah reproveth these continual vacillations. If your God is not worthy of your honour, turn away from him and choose Baal. If Jehovah is worthy, turn to him with all your hearts. A divided heart is unworthily offered to One who has claims so supreme, so excellent, and so necessarily jealous of all opposing claims.

We may notice it, as a mark of the substantial unity of the scriptural writers and of the fitness of these teachings for human instruction everywhere, that the principles involved in Elijah's demand upon the people at Carmel are just such as elsewhere in the Bible lay their claims on all its readers; just such as our Lord Jesus expressed when he declared that no man can serve two masters; just such as belong to the permanent instruction of our race in every age; and just such, therefore, as should be addressed to every people by their religious teachers. Halting and indecision, when addressed by the claims of true religion, are

wonderfully characteristic of man. Not to Israel alone, but to us all, belongs this unhappy tendency to hang back from the service of the living God, rather than to press forward in it; and we are prone to be wavering, undecided, neglectful, indifferent, or hostile toward those most important duties, where we could so easily justify firmness, interest, zeal and warm affection. Yet nowhere else is such a state of feeling more wicked, ungrateful, unwise and dangerous than in these religious concerns.

Elijah addressed that assembled multitude as though one common charge lay against them all. Nor was this in forgetfulness that various classes of opinion and character were there upon Carmel. Rather, it was with a wise and true discernment which points out a single principle common to them all. There is a radical source of man's hostility and of man's indifference to true religion; which indeed is also the true secret of hesitancy and lukewarmness and transient zeal in many who are not wholly undecided or neglectful. The prophet meant not to imply that the people before him were all alike, all equally guilty and entertaining the same opinions upon these momentous matters. There may have been some present who in the confusion of religious throngs in Israel may have been disposed to put away all thought of any God—Baal or Jehovah. There were present four hundred prophets of Baal, men of open hostility to Israel's God, who

had bathed their guilty hands in the blood of Elijah's brethren, and who that day were to pour out their own under the righteous law of an avenging God. There was Ahab, who had sold himself to work iniquity, who was yet for ten years longer to resist the divine warnings, and whose blood at last the dogs should lick. There also were men who had bowed to Baal through cupidity which grasped eagerly at the honours, the ease and the gain held forth by the liberal Jezebel; men who indifferently fell in with the prevailing temper of the times for wrong or right; men whose fears had driven them to the cruel service of Baal; and there, too, men whose consciences could own Jehovah alone as God, and who had carefully kept aloof from all that Jezebel demanded.

So the multitude on Carmel was no unfit representation—not in exact forms, but in substantial principles—of the congregations brought together upon every returning Sabbath in our Christian sanctuaries. What wide extremes of sentiment and feeling exist in every such assembly! There may venture among them, from time to time, men who decidedly refuse to honour the sacred Scriptures and their glorious Author. There may sometimes be those whose wavering thoughts call in question the divine existence; sometimes those who are unbelieving toward his word; often there are those who profess doctrines that are at war with the direct teachings of God's revealed will; and

often many who have scarcely any thoughts of their own upon these momentous matters, but think and feel and do as the whim of changing humours or the prevailing tendencies around them dictate. We may well wonder at the listlessness, indecision and ignorance of thousands whose opportunities have been every way favourable to learn the teachings of divine truth. Experience proves that men may sit for years under an intelligent ministry, and have considerable familiarity with the letter of the Scriptures, and yet have very vague and indefinite ideas of what true religion is, or of what is demanded of them in order to the due course and the desirable end of a godly life. Not only have they given little serious attention to the abounding evidences that these teachings are of divine origin, but many persons who have had some acquaintance with the Bible all their lives long are quite unable to give any sensible account of the distinctive principles of Christianity. Ask them concerning that holy law of God which they have broken, whose obligations are upon them and under whose fearful curse they already are, and they have but low conceptions of its spirituality or of its just claims upon them. Ask them of man's fallen estate, the evidences of which force themselves into the notice of every serious mind, and though they will acknowledge that they are sinners, they know little of the heart's depravity, and poorly see the necessity for the soul's regenera-

tion. They have heard of the gospel of Christ, and indefinitely understand that it is a plan of divine mercy for man's salvation; but how herein the justice and mercy of God are made to harmonize, what is the relation of Christ's sufferings to the demands of the law, and how a righteous God can forgive the guilty, are all matters very seldom considered and very little understood by thousands who are accustomed to hear the gospel. Having ears, they hear not; having eyes, they see not, nor understand. Then there are others who know more of the teachings of the Scriptures, who recognize their necessities as sinners, and who know their duty to seek the grace of Christ; but they linger along, irresolute and halting respecting the most momentous duty that can belong to this earthly life.

Perhaps there is an important sense in which it is proper to describe all irreligious, indeed all unconverted persons, as undecided and halting. Even those who talk much on religious topics, argue against essential teachings of the gospel, and avow boldly sentiments the most mischievous and unbelieving, are not so settled as their words, or even their thoughts, seem to indicate. Very often the boldest profession of erroneous sentiments is either an assumed cloak for the heart's depravity, or a form by which depravity displays itself: it answers the purpose so long as the sinner is prosperous and at ease; but he is easily alarmed, and the world is

easily undeceived, then some unlooked-for calamity unveils the soul's true character. It is a well-known thing in human experience that infidels have been put to shame by the terrors of sudden exposure to peril, and converted by awakenings which furnished no new arguments in favour of the truth. We may account for this by claiming that God will not allow the soul of man to be truly satisfied by any falsehood; confirmation in error is never so settled as to allow no room for reopening momentous questions; and many doubts, misgivings and inconsistencies forbid a serious man to be anything else than halting and undecided so long as he is in the wrong. The men who are most firmly fixed in falsehood are those who are too ignorant and too stupid ever to think at all. Thoughtful men—men who seriously ponder the question of salvation, and who have any knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord—can never find rest for their souls till they find it in him. So the reproof which Elijah's words gave to the assembled people of Carmel conveys also an admonition that is well worthy of being repeated in the ears of men in all our worshipping assemblies.

How wide, then, is the circle of careless men who may be described as halting and undecided in matters of religion! More or less dissatisfied with their own opinions, how many are continually changing their views, and because they give no due and prayerful attention to it, are gradually sliding

down to grosser errors! And yet the boldest are liable to have all their boastings silenced, and their firmest confidences subverted by the scorching power of tribulations or the awakening power of conscience. Many there are who before their fellow-men seem decided enough in the choice and pursuit of error, who yet know that the ultimate solution of this question must be before God, and who, before his eye, are filled with anxiety and fear touching the result. Many resolve with themselves that they will not always live as they are now living; they form many plans; and repentance and faith and final salvation always make up a part of that prospective life by which their fancy keeps quiet a half-awakened conscience; and they pass their most favoured years in indecision, till the matter is cut short by an unexpected and an impenitent death-bed. Promise after promise is made by sinful men—made only to be broken while they so long halt between two opinions.

Let us dwell not longer upon the characteristics of irresolution and indecision in sinful men, where each person may have peculiarities of his own. The challenge of the prophet implies the folly, the unhappiness, the guilt and the danger of such a state of mind in any of its stages, and calls the unsatisfied and the hesitating to decide promptly for the living God.

Every reasonable thought showed the folly of Israel in choosing Baal before Jehovah; but, in-

deed, the folly of rejecting the gospel of Christ is the most palpable. One thought alone should be enough to declare this: that men are usually profane and irreligious just in proportion as they are thoughtless of divine claims and reckless of human duties; and men never become exemplary and consistent Christians, except by serious reflection, such as becomes a rational and moral nature, and such as accompanies a manifest improvement in life's duties. The folly of indifference or indecision in religious duty is manifest upon any serious reflection. Surely we have nothing to attend to of superior importance to the claims of the immortal soul. If we are to live for ever, if there is even but a possibility that this may be so, the charge of sin lies justly against us, and thus the question arises, How may sinners meet a righteous God? Here are thoughts that should overshadow all the minor studies which our earthly life can know. When men readily acknowledge that learning, wealth and pleasures are of no account when weighed against a man's life—since to lose the life is to lose these—we should more readily say there is no profit in all man can gain of earth if the soul is lost. Now we have in our hands the means of solving all these indecisions. We may put beyond all reasonable doubt these momentous questions. We may know there is a God; that the Scriptures are his word; that we are sinners going forward to the judgment-seat and to eternity; that

the gospel of Jesus Christ provides a salvation intelligently and efficaciously suited to us; and that every humble believer in Jesus shall be saved. Thousands have settled firmly and happily upon the Rock, and we may here find peace. Some, indeed, who are true Christians have their anxieties and disquietudes, but these always regard themselves and not Christ. They doubt not his power, and they wish no other refuge; and they can find full peace by drawing nearer to him. Here may men find satisfaction, and certainly nowhere else in the world can they find it. And the folly of living undecided is the greater because men deal so with nothing else except with their souls. When sickness invades the body, when misfortunes threaten the property, when slanders assail the reputation, men are not willing to sit idly still and make no efforts for relief. They are ever anxious and restless till every undecided matter is either settled or put in the best shape for settlement; they use all the means they can to secure success. It is only in religion—the last place where such conduct can be justified—that men are indifferent, irresolute and thoughtless. Yet the value of the soul is unspeakable.

To be unsettled in any important matter is an unhappy state of mind, which men can scarcely bear in any other than religious things; nor would they here, except as the heart is hardened to it by ignorance, by erroneous views, or by deceitful prom-

ises of different engagements hereafter. Doubtless many are truly wretched—especially at times—when serious thoughts are pressed upon their attention, who might easily find true rest in the gospel of Christ.

The GUILT of man's disregard of God and of his claims is the chief matter, after all. Let us not speak of this iniquity as it involves merely the loss of the soul, though great is his guilt toward himself who so wrongs his own soul as to neglect the salvation of the gospel. But God's claims upon us are so excellent in themselves, and so supreme and perfect in rectitude, that opposition, refusal, neglect and indifference are but different degrees of criminality. Think of God as our Creator and constant Benefactor, and can our forgetfulness of him be less than the basest ingratitude? Think of God as our Ruler. His authority is legitimate; his laws are wise; his government beneficent and just; yet we slight his rule. Is it treasonable to disregard a human government, and less criminal to rebel against God? Think of him as a Father. What judgment would any father form of a son, who should live in careless wickedness, away from the home of the family, and say that for years he was trying to make up his mind whether he should or should not love and reverence and obey his father? Could a dutiful son ever ponder such a question at all? Is not the son already undutiful and wicked so long as he

lives thus estranged? Yet, indeed, every similitude we can use to express the truth in this case falls far short of expressing the guilt of men who live unreconciled to God when called to obey the teachings of the gospel. God has laid us under infinite obligations; even in our sinfulness he has pointed out plainly our way of escape from sin and hell; he has shown his love and forbearance in a thousand ways, and none of us are ignorant, or need remain in ignorance, of every duty required of us that we may serve the living God and find his everlasting favour.

The man who has not chosen the service of God heartily and decidedly lives in increasing danger of the soul's final loss. No man can tell when his mortal life shall end, and thus every impenitent soul may be only a few hours distant from the abode of the lost. But even those who may yet live many years spend all their time in gathering perils. Every year spent in sin makes it more likely that the next year will also be so spent; the engagements of life become more entangling and engrossing, to exclude, rather than to help, all serious reflection; every new time finds new reasons for neglecting what has already so long been neglected; and experience shows that in the worst path a man can take through life he may find reasons for persevering in it, whether these reasons deceive him so that he justifies his course, or whether they arise from the desperate conclusion that it is vain

for him to try to do otherwise. The chief danger in the paths of irreligion is the danger of grieving from the soul the strivings of God's Holy Spirit. The Scriptures give us serious warning touching this great sin. When God calls on our hearts by the movements of his grace, whether in the sanctuary or in secret thoughts, perhaps upon our beds, man should yield. Better a man had never been born than to grieve finally from him the Holy Spirit.

The prophet's words are full of thoughts which we should seriously ponder beyond the time we now allot to them. See here that God admits no rival, but demands that our hearts should be yielded to him. We wish to pay a half service, and many compare themselves with others, as if God might accept them because others are worse than they. Will a human government accept a man's services who is half a traitor and half loyal? The nearest approach to piety, which yet withholds the heart from God, is impiety. In religion we have to do with the HEART SEARCHER! Nor will the prophet's words allow that any hindrances to our duty can excuse the guilt of disobedience. Many a man in Israel might have chosen Jehovah that day to the peril of his mortal life; and every man may find difficulties in his pathway. Yet God claims our service, and every hindrance should be pressed aside that we may serve him.

Every man stands on one side or the other of the

great line that divides the friends and foes of God. Some indeed are unwilling to call themselves his foes, who still do not claim to be his friends. But this is a matter that must be settled by his laws, and not by our opinions. It is of infinite importance that so great a question should stand in no doubtful posture. Too long has it so been with many already !

## CHAPTER X.

### *ELIJAH PRAYING UPON MOUNT CARMEL.*

THE incidents now to be noticed are few; but we consider important things in the divine government, in providence and grace.

After the eventful and busy day upon Carmel the prophet, wearied by toilsome and responsible duties, might gladly seek repose and refreshment. Indeed, in the brevity of these narratives we cannot decide that a single day was enough for those great transactions: time enough for doing all that was done we are bound to give to one who was no laggard worker, though no record is made of the days spent in the whole matter. Doubtless Elijah made no needless delays, but could now say, with his greater Lord, "My meat is to do the will of" my God, "and to finish his work." The reformation of a people is not to be accomplished in a few hours or days. Elijah's work was far from its completion; and there was less done than now the sanguine prophet hoped. But an important blow had been given to the prevailing idolatry; and he looked for God's favour toward Israel, and the first token of it in rain upon the earth. No sooner was the

slaughter of the false prophets ended, then he bade Ahab get up and eat and drink. This may be understood, Go up from the valley of Kishon, or it may be figurative language, Rise up from humiliation; for, perhaps, Ahab mourned and fasted for the calamities of Israel. So the sound of rain may refer to a noise in the mountain or in the tops of the trees, which in the East is a sign of rain; or it may have been the prophet's *believing* anticipation of the coming storm, though none about him looked for rain but he. He uses the common language of the Orientals; for they say there is a *sound* of rain where we say there are *signs* of rain.

Here is the first mention made of Elijah's servant.

Many things like this find a place in the scriptural narratives only incidentally: the history is too brief to allow all desirable details. Eastern customs differ greatly from ours; a prophet's servant, however, was usually a pupil; sometimes, as in the case of Elisha, a successor. Some conjecture that this servant was the son of the widow of Zarephath. Elijah went up upon the mount to a spot that commanded a view of the Mediterranean Sea; cast himself down upon the earth; assumed a posture which is not used by the Orientals in their prayers, but which seems to us a natural and humble attitude of devotion, and prayed earnestly to the God of Israel for rain upon the land. With the formal offering of prayer we are sufficiently

familiar; indeed, our very familiarity with it may keep us from fairly considering how serious is the duty, how exalted the privilege, how beneficent the power of prayer! It is the direct intercourse of sinful man with his adorable Creator. Elijah's prayer may give occasion to some reflections upon the consistency of human prayers with divine purposes. Elijah's prayer is directly offered for rain upon the earth. So the narrative declares; so a later writer in the New Testament expressly affirms. We may gladly recognize the important connection, devotionally and practically; and in the teachings of a true and high philosophy we may vindicate the truth that the Most High listens to the voice of man.

The prayer of the prophet was believing prayer. We do not mean by this simply that he was persuaded that his voice would be heard. Two things should be known and carefully distinguished here. Faith and presumption differ widely in their nature, operations and effects, yet are they often confounded. Both may include a persuasion, more or less confidently entertained, of God's favour toward us. But they differ thus: true faith rests its expectations upon just ideas of God's character or a just understanding of God's promises; while presumption confides in fancies, impressions or prejudices, with no true reliance upon God as he is, or upon what he says in the true intent and force of his gracious promises. The prophet's prayer, at this

time, recognized God's forbearance and tender mercy, but specially rested upon the promise given by God when he commanded Elijah to show himself to Ahab: "I will send rain upon the earth." We are not taught in the Scriptures that the faith that addresses God's throne of grace must ever rely distinctly upon an express promise from his lips. Faith often relies upon the divine character and the principles of the divine government; yet these principles must be correctly comprehended and interpreted, so that God shall be honoured both when we ask and when he answers.

The character and word and providence of God encourage us to offer prayer for blessings not expressly promised. Many scriptural examples and many experiences of later times encourage us to ask for things that the divine dealings ever *seem* to withhold or deny. The indications of Providence seemed all unfavourable to the offering of Abraham's prayer for the Sodomites; yet was his acceptable and believing prayer. So Jacob plead with THE ANGEL, and refused the words of the divine wrestler, "Let me go." So Moses plead successfully for Israel against the Lord's just threatenings. Faith may not always rest upon an express promise; it may act against the apparent indications of his providence; but it comprehends the principles which give honour to God, and it animates the believer's desires, and regulates his petition accordingly.

Let it not be thought that the prophet's prayers were unnecessary because God had expressly declared that he would send rain. This, we know, is the substance of the objection made against all prayer—that man cannot affect the divine purposes; what God designs to do he will do, whether we pray or not; what he does not design, prayer cannot induce him to do. But the objection goes a great deal too far; cannot possibly be carried out by any man touching the relations we sustain to God, and is as contrary as possible to the true teachings and spirit of piety. For the entire government of God over a rational universe implies and includes the subordination and use of proper means to secure an appointed end. Yet no philosopher has ever been able exactly to point out the precise relation of means to their end—of a cause to its effect. We know that man must plant and sow, or he cannot have a harvest. Yet God has promised that harvests shall never cease while the earth remains. Are we to argue that men need not sow because God can give harvests without seed, has promised harvests, or will not change whether men sow or refuse to sow? Rather, God's methods of providence and his promises of increase are man's encouragement to sow. We would not sow but for the divine pledges that we shall reap. These pledges are verified in man's experience, and we sow in firm confidence that the harvest shall come. So the pious mind reasons in spiritual matters. So

Elijah reasoned. He will pray because God has promised to send rain. The more reason he had to expect an answer, the more reasonable it was for him to pray.

The prophet bade his servant watch for tokens of an answer while he prayed. At first no signs could be seen. He bade him go again seven times. Doubtless, this is a definite number put for an indefinite. He went to plead till the answer came. This may lead us to notice that in scriptural teachings on the subject of prayer singular encouragement is given to lead us to continued and importunate pleadings; and this seems to imply that there is a necessity for such encouragement. So, then, we need not wonder if the answer to our prayer is not immediate, if we must pray often, and if there seems to be denial when God but uses his ordinary methods of answering. God's promises may be regarded as addressed to the *habit* of devotion rather than to the *act* of prayer. Many reasons justify the divine delays. God is a Sovereign, and would teach us to *ask* rather than to *demand* of him. God is wise, and knows the manner, measure and time for giving better far than we. Delays prove the reality and the strength of our faith. We have no record of Elijah's pleadings upon that memorable occasion. Indeed, if we had his very words, the form of Elijah's prayer would no more impart his pleading spirit than to wear Elijah's coat would make a man a prophet. Our prayers should be expressed

as correctly and pointedly as possible; but the chief matter before the eye of God respects the spirit of the worshipper.

The rain storms of that region generally arise from the Mediterranean Sea, and a small cloud, that increases with astonishing rapidity, is the usual forerunner of a tempest and torrents of rain. For this the prophet bade his servant look. Though he expects the answer from God, he anticipates that he will employ the usual natural agencies to effect the end.

Elijah praying on Carmel teaches us the power of prayer. He prayed that it might rain, and God gave the needed blessing. The people of God have for ages rejoiced in the efficacy of prayer. In all times of human necessity, when natural blessings are needed or natural calamities are to be averted, prayer is man's appropriate means for securing the divine favor. Yet there is a skeptical philosophy which affects to disbelieve the connection between the praying of man and the working of God. This philosophy argues that God has established the universe and its affairs in infinite wisdom; that the natural laws ordained by him act with entire uniformity; and that the prayers or desires of men can have no power to change the divine purposes or in any wise to influence his working. In a blinded or cavilling spirit it seems to imply that the prerogatives of God cannot be maintained, and that the laws of the universe must be changed

that prayer may be thus answered. Yet indeed none more carefully honour God as the great Ruler over all, none more distinctly recognize the wisdom and uniformity of his natural laws, none have a higher estimate of his authority, than those who, consistently with these thoughts, implicitly rely upon the efficacy of prayer.

We are among those who highly prize human philosophy in its legitimate teachings, yet we know that false philosophy is, of all things, the most absurd and contradictory. Human researches have not always been kept within their proper boundaries. True philosophy is an humble inquirer after all the facts that may be gathered in every direction; these facts it recognizes even when it is unable to explain them; and it notices the connections of various events, though not always able to show how they are related to each other.

Now, it is a matter of observation, proved by every class of witnesses capable of bearing testimony in the case, that prayer is instrumental in securing blessings from the hand of God; and we demand that true philosophy should recognize the facts in this case as in any other matter. Rain has been sent after seasons of drought; health has been given in times of sickness; special deliverance has been granted in impending perils, and other evils have been abated when they have occurred, or their occurrence has been wholly prevented through the offering of prayer. These are truths upon whose

verity testimony may be received, and upon which as large testimony may be gathered as concerning any truths in the wide circle of human philosophy. *First*, the Bible testifies, with a truthfulness which none can gainsay without rejecting also the irrefragable proofs of its divine authority, that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man” has efficacy to secure the divine favour. We need not exhibit the testimonies on this; every reader of the Scriptures is familiar with them, and they are conclusive proof to all who receive these records as authoritative. *Secondly*, God leaves himself not without witness in all the earth; and men in all lands and in all ages have believed that supplications do avail for human relief. *Thirdly*, every believer—that is, every man who really offers availing prayer—knows the truth of its efficacy. And, *fourthly*, many recorded facts—as distinctly observed and as truthfully attested as any facts known to man—give proof of the power of prayer.

There is no more room for objection and difficulty here than in other matters of human knowledge; the only difference that can be discerned is this, that the skeptical and cavilling spirit in sinful man is peculiarly bitter and persistent against religious teachings. Let all facts carelessly noticed be set aside; let false reasonings be rejected; let improper inferences be discarded, here as elsewhere; yet let plain and important truth be candidly recognized. And when we maintain most

fully that God hears the prayers of men, we do not set aside the ordinances of heaven or make the Most High less a ruler over his creatures. It is no part of the Bible idea of prayer that man should *only* pray. Rather, every true believer quickens his duty by his devotion. If he can do anything himself to promote the object at which he aims, then he must labour, or his prayers are inconsistent and presumptuous. Believers have never thought that the fullest confidence in prayer inspired any less confidence in God's providential laws or cut the sinews of human effort. If man can do nothing, let him only pray. If he can do anything, as God's providence bids, let him be both dutiful and devotional. If the husbandman prays for a harvest, let him also plough and sow and reap. If Hezekiah prays for longer life, let him use means to recover his health and to preserve it. If Elijah cannot gather the clouds over Israel, let him plead for divine interference; yet even then, expecting that God will work through his own laws rather than against them, let him look for just such a storm as that land had often seen.

But when an earthly philosopher carries out his cavillings, and supposes that we are not to look for the influence of moral causes to produce effects in the physical world, we charge him with passing the boundaries of a true philosophy. He not only dictates what he thinks ought to be instead of observing what is; he not only thus presump-

tuously prescribes less to the Supreme Ruler, but indeed he degrades the blessed government of God over man. The scriptural teachings are far better than these low thoughts. Man is God's noblest earthly work because he is a moral and immortal being, and the government of God over man would be unworthy of him and of us if it did not include moral laws and moral ends. God's physical and moral worlds are connected; must be, ought to be; the physical should be subordinate to the moral, and its laws, while not subverted, should be controlled for moral ends. The observed facts of human philosophers can show nothing contrary to these principles. There are inexplicable mysteries in deep investigations into the relations of causes and effects; we may err in assigning efficacy where it does not belong; in this matter the scriptural philosopher, taught by the plain word of God, has the advantage of the natural philosopher. And certainly no sound philosophy can forbid that the moral government of God may be carried on over men in entire consistency with the existing laws of nature; and it gives us nobler conceptions of God and higher ideas of man's duties and destinies to know that such a government exists.

Moral and reasonable beings should have a moral governor. Can we believe that God would establish a series of natural laws which he himself could not control for the better purposes of a moral government? It is to the honour of the Divine

Ruler that his natural and moral government are both firmly established; both work according to principles given by him; and without collision or jarring, harmoniously co-operate. The whole philosophy of man is at fault if this is not so. We can give no kind of explanation of a thousand facts, continually occurring, if God is not a moral ruler to whose moral government the external and physical must be subservient. True thoughts here not only vindicate the divine answers to prayer, but they also reach much further. God's hand should be recognized controlling the events of human history; God's avenging justice should be seen in the detection and punishment of human crimes; God's voice is heard in the whisperings of the human conscience: thus man may see the finger of God in the current events of life; and every wise man should acknowledge a moral government simultaneously carried on with the providential ruling of the world, and using that providential rule to promote purposes still more important.

It is admitted on all hands that God works by means. Yet no man is competent to decide that prayer must be excluded from the means which man may employ subordinate to the divine blessing. Prayer to the Supreme Ruler is as reasonable as any other duty we owe to him. Indeed any other idea than this tends to set man free from responsibility to God, sets his obedience to physical laws separate from moral accountability, and robs

God of his personal character and influence among men. The falsehood may issue in either extreme—fatalism or atheism. If God cannot control his own laws, or if there is no God to control these laws, the practical result is much the same. When morality becomes mere policy, and God is unable or unwilling to be the hearer of prayer, the world has lost its ruler.

Happily, in the orderings of divine wisdom, a profound knowledge of causes, principles and connections is not needful before we can reap the benefit of his wise orderings. Men breathed the air of heaven and enjoyed the light of the sun thousands of years before they knew how to analyze the atmosphere, or knew—if even now they know—what the light is. A fool can be nourished by his food, though he knows not why, as truly as the philosopher who speculates profoundly respecting the nutritious properties of this or that article of diet. Let us not undervalue principles; let us investigate every subject wisely; and yet because our ignorance is always far larger than our knowledge, we must not refuse to take advantage of plain truths because there are some things about them we cannot fully comprehend. Man's practical philosophy is always far in advance of his theories, and the theoretical is to be corrected by the practical. Nowhere is this more true than in reference to prayer. Thousands upon thousands of humble souls in all ages have known by sweet experience that God

hears and answers prayer. They may have thought little of inquiring how the divine agency was exerted; they may even have thought it irreverent to judge that the Most High could not make his own laws harmonize, or they may have been alike ignorant of the puzzlings of false philosophy or of the solutions of true. As there is a practical life that uses and enjoys life's blessings though having much or little acquaintance with philosophy, so our practical faith should secure and enjoy the advantages of piety, whether we can or cannot investigate every principle. Without practical experience all philosophy is vain. What would the philosopher's life be worth if he only analyzed food and air, but never breathed nor ate? They only are wise who are praying men. We are dependent upon God; God calls us to recognize this; God promises blessings, and does give them, in answer to prayer. This is fallen man's inestimable privilege; it is sinful man's first duty; that we may believe God's gracious promises is the sole privilege that is superior to our pleading them in prayer.

We cannot easily overrate its advantages. The example of Elijah thus pleading on Mount Carmel for rain upon that thirsty land may encourage our approach to God; may teach us that as our petitions are not successful for the sake of the offerer, so our personal worthiness is not to be regarded as our qualification to come before God, and may bid

us ask large favours from his hand. Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are; we are definitely bidden to come in the name of Christ. We may specially ask for spiritual blessings; we may honour him by making large requests; we often defeat ourselves by the feebleness of our faith.

We may have, as Elijah had, special reasons for praying with importunate earnestness, as spiritual distress is more dangerous than temporal; a drought from the withholding of the gracious outpourings of his Spirit has more disastrous effects than when the rains of heaven are restrained. And shall God hear the prophet who plead for this miraculous relief for a suffering people, and shall he not hear when his people humbly ask that the refreshings of divine grace shall bless his heritage? We have larger reasons to expect that he will hear us when we truly plead for the Spirit.

## CHAPTER XI.

### *EFFECTUAL, FERVENT PRAYER.*

IN the New Testament the Apostle James has brought the prayers of Elijah before the Church with such interest and promise, and has given us such wise and encouraging suggestions to help us to pray as the prophet did, that we may well give his words our careful thoughts; if even we may now and then repeat somewhat that we have already said. He tells us something about the man, but he tells us more of the characteristics of his prayers.

I. The apostle bids our thoughts dwell on the man who prays—Elijah, a man subject to like passions as we are. He pays no special attention to the fact that he was a prophet, for this has nothing to do with this duty. God's prophets should be men of prayer, and by reason of their office should be devotional. But prayer expresses not a man's office, but his necessities, and the privilege extends far more widely than to the office-bearers in the Church of God. He had before said, however, that Elijah was a *righteous man*, and stress is laid upon this when he declares that the prayers of such prevail much. Yet this righteous man was one subject to like passions as we are.

So, then, this pleading suppliant is a sinner before a holy God; we might even, if we so wished, enumerate some of his infirmities; suffice it to say, that it was not the excellency of his personal character that gave success to his pleadings. Like every other praying man of whom we have any record in the Scriptures, he presumed not to ask blessings for his own sake. While Abraham pleads, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right;" and Daniel, a man greatly beloved, says, "We do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies," Gen. xviii. 25; Dan. ix. 18; so Elijah pleads for the honour of the Lord his God. 1 Kings xviii. 36. No man, in any age, would be heard in pleadings urged because of his own righteousness. Indeed, when our prayers regard our own interests, they necessarily begin with confessions of our unworthiness, and their petitions are designed to tell our necessities; and let it not be thought, because the prayers of a righteous man are here especially commended, that therefore the prayers of the guilty are forbidden or even discouraged. If the guilty may not pray, the mercy-seat is shorn of its chief glory. Rather, he who calls sinners to repentance will open his ears at their cry, when they humbly kneel before him to tell the tale of their penitence. Let any sinful soul draw near to God with sincere confessions of his sins, acknowledging the righteousness of the law he has broken and whose curse he fears, recog-

zing the grace of the gospel whose blessings he solicits; let him draw his encouragements from the character and grace and promises of God, and the greater his sins the less can he afford to decline from this duty and the more importunate may he reasonably be. God commands him to draw near, and he cannot refuse without increasing guilt. Large are the encouragements held out to the humblest and the vilest: "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." Psalm xxxiv. 6.

II. We should notice the characteristics of the prayers of Elijah.

We will neither understand the prophet nor the apostle unless we notice that the prayer here spoken of is intercessory prayer. James speaks of brethren praying for each other, and Elijah plead, not for himself, but for Israel. Of this we have briefly spoken in the preceding chapter. It has much to do with a proper understanding of the case; and it ought to be obvious that while an enemy of God may bow before him and plead for forgiveness and reconciliation, yet none but those who are already reconciled should presume to ask his blessings upon others. As for the foes of God, let them cease to be foes before they ask favours for others.

This was believing prayer. Without faith it is impossible to make any acceptable approach to God. According to the Scriptures, faith is not, as some imagine, a strong persuasion of the truth of any

particular thing. Many a man is firmly convinced that certain teachings are true while he is entirely mistaken, for they are totally false. True faith is the belief of the truth. The evidence may sometimes be clear and sometimes obscure. Sometimes we plead in prayer, supported directly by the express promises of the Scriptures; sometimes we must believe against apparent threatenings of God's providence, and sometimes faith secures a victory by pleading against divine refusals and denials.

When Daniel prayed for his people's restoration, he knew from the sacred books that the time of God's promise was at hand. Dan. ix. 1. The apostles prayed for the coming of the Spirit, for their Lord had promised his speedy outpouring. Acts i. 4. In these cases faith rested directly on the divine word.

But when Jacob wrestled all night with the angel and prevailed, he feared and was in great distress; for the near approach of Esau with intentions apparently hostile seemed contrary to the promise of divine protection. And when the angel said, "Let me go," the patriarch's faith refused, saying, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." Gen. xxxiii. 26. When Esther ventured in before her royal husband to plead the cause of her people, she went with a trembling heart. For many days now she had not seen the king's face; she feared that her race was known and that she was included in the proscription; she knew that not always was

the golden sceptre stretched out. Even when calling upon the God of her people, ever assured that he would work enlargement and deliverance, she trembled lest he might not work by her. So faith in her was the cry of distress in trouble, hoping God might hear. But see yet more what faith may venture. Abraham plead for Sodom, though God told him that he was about to do contrary to these very petitions, yet every petition was favourably heard. And in one of the most remarkable intercessions ever offered by human lips, Moses turned away the divine wrath just about to smite, and seems almost to withstand the expressed purpose of the Almighty. Exod. xxxii. 10. And the poor heathen woman in the gospels gained her point because she would not be repulsed by the silent indifference, the repeated repulses, and the tones of severity that seem so strange on the lips of Jesus. Faith need not always rest upon direct promises. Faith must honour the divine character, must aim at the divine glory, must submit to the divine will, and must cast out all elements of pride or rebellion or dictation. Yet may we boldly ask for things which no man will venture to expect, unless he has large conceptions of the grace and wisdom and power of God.

The example of Elijah may encourage our petitions. We know not his warrant for prayers so extraordinary, but the extraordinary answers show the divine approval. And the argument to help

us to pray is that called by logicians *à fortiori*. Much more may we expect God to hear us than him. Elijah plead that God would *set aside* his usual working in nature, and God heard him. May we not expect to be heard when we ask him to do *according to his* usual methods in grace? Elijah plead *against* the covenant people, our prayers are *for* the church of God. Elijah plead apparently without a promise. Shall we not find acceptance when we make mention of God's own promises and plead for their fulfilment?

When we form proper conceptions of God, of his nature, government, grace, word and methods of dealing, we have a just rule of faith. And we offer the prayer of faith as our devotions conform to these conceptions of him.

The apostle says that Elijah prayed *earnestly*. Earnestness secures success where success is possible. An earnest mind is bent on reaching its aim, has warm desire for it, and acquires, as if intuitively, the tact of turning obstacles into motives for greater exertion. Earnest prayers are likely to gain an answer. "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence." This has no reference to manner, but to that deep engagedness of soul that becomes this serious service. Let the priests of Baal cry aloud and cut themselves with knives, but Elijah reverently bows and pleads.

Earnest prayer implies a special object. Let us not make the mistake of supposing that all accept-

able prayer must be fervent and agonizing. There are many ordinary acts of worship, serious and sincere, lawful and acceptable, in which we present no special petition. We give daily thanks for daily mercies received; we ask daily for the supply of common necessities; we are truly thankful and dependent; but the strong emotions which properly characterize special petitions cannot possibly be felt with the ordinary pleadings of the closet, the family or the sanctuary. All prayer should be truthful, serious, humble; in oft-repeated petitions special care should guard against formality; but only particular exigencies arouse our strong emotions. A friend is sick. This is the case the apostle mentions when he commends Elijah's example. It is in the nature of the case that earnest pleadings should be special. So are all the scriptural examples. Strong feeling springs from urgent necessities; the burdened heart presses near to God with a particular errand. Hear the cry of the publican—his conscience awakened, his offences in array against him, his sense of unworthiness bidding him stand afar off; yet with downcast eye and smiting on the breast, and heavier beatings within than without, he presses near enough to be heard in that effectual plea: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Hear the cry of that mother, though he answered never a word, though his disciples interpose in vain, though he declares he is not sent to such as she, and classes her with the dogs; yet with her

daughter's suffering image in her eye, convinced that only he can help, persuaded that his grace will not refuse, and with a thankful humility that can be content with the crumbs of such a table, she secures, not only her errand, but the commendation of her faith.

And these are but types. For thousands of times since have, publican-like, penitents for themselves, and parents for their children, agonized before God that he would hear and forgive and do. And still, let sinful men, who have souls that need forgiveness unto salvation, ponder their true condition and awake to plead at his mercy-seat; let them study the publican's prayer, and begin to understand their unworthiness in offering even that; and yet let the burden of their guilt, the value of their souls and the thought of everlasting wrath forbid them to be silent; and, as ever, God will be heard of them "when they seek for him with the whole heart." And let Christians draw near the throne for unconverted and careless friends, for near relatives, for children. He says not to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain.

Elijah prayed *importunately*. Our Lord explains the term: "Men ought always to pray, and *not to faint*." The very words imply that through divine delays and our impatience we are liable to become discouraged. Yet the scriptural examples, the Saviour's parable and the experience of all ages combine to teach us that God's apparent refusals

are designed not to drive us *from* him, but to draw us *to* him, and that earnest importunity never pleads in vain. Scarcely is anything more amazing in the divine condescension than the lengths to which an humble soul may go in prayer. It is well for us that our Lord's lips uttered the parable of the unjust judge and the pleading widow. Let us ever repeat to our souls, when we feel dejected, these words of such high authority, "Man *ought always* to pray, and NOT TO FAINT."

In describing the prophet's prayer, the apostle uses a particular word, which is used by ecclesiastical historians to express something done under *supernatural influence*. The prayer which the Holy Spirit suggests is availing: "We know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us." Rom. viii. 26. It is our encouragement in prayer that Christ pleads for us in heaven, and the Spirit within us teaches us to pray. Yet, indeed, the Spirit's help within in the hour of wrestling anxiety is not a matter of our direct consciousness. The publican, least of all men, would venture to say, "I have prayed aright." But when, in the teachings of the Bible, which is the Spirit's word, we have true ideas of our need; when we believe that the divine honour may be maintained, perhaps glorified, in granting our petitions; when our souls are filled with earnest yearnings for the things we desire,—all this is entirely consistent with that sense of un-

worthiness that hardly dares look up, of helplessness that can do nothing, of dumbness that can say nothing, and of deadness that can feel nothing. But when thus unhappy, discouraged, almost driven from the throne of grace, we yet have conceptions of our need, of urgent exigency, and of God's mercy, that forbid us to give over praying, then the Spirit makes intercessions for us in the prayers that are so broken, full of groans and sighs, and having no fluent petitions; and these are understood on high, not for their coherency or eloquence, but because "He that searcheth the heart knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit."

Let no man shrink from the duty of prayer because the Holy Spirit indites the effectual petition. It is an important reason for thankfulness. This makes prayer a serious and solemn thing; it makes us humble and dependent; it makes the mercy-seat seem the very presence of God, and this surely is all right. Well may we long to offer effectual and availing prayer. No excellency in us gives power to our pleadings. The effectual prayers of all ages have been offered by men of like passions with us. The terms of prayer banish no humble soul from the mercy-seat. From the voice of prayer let insincerity and pride and hypocrisy refrain. But the empty may come for fulness, the poor for riches, the blind for sight, the weak for strength, and the guilty for forgiveness.

Do we need the aid of the Spirit? If earthly

fathers, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto their children, "how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" Luke xi. 13.

## CHAPTER XII.

### *ELIJAH ON MOUNT HOREB.*

WHAT strange minglings of strength and weakness, of boldness and timidity, of confidence and despondency, of joy and grief make up the varied experience of our human life! How little can we anticipate in one hour of hope and gladness how great may be the reverses and the disappointments of the next! The heart is like a pendulum, if not in its regularity, yet in its restless movings, and we are prone to pass easily from one extreme to another. Apparent success and fair prospects to-day fill us with exultation, but the morrow may rise with dark and threatening clouds, and with sinking spirits we forget not only our prospects and our promises, but our pressing duties; our faith fails, and our heavy hands hang down.

Elijah's victory on Carmel seemed almost complete. With one loud shout the assembled people had acknowledged Jehovah's supremacy, and their hearty congratulations sounded in the prophet's ears like a return from their apostasy. He now anticipated the speedy re-establishment of the ancient faith with all its blessings. The chief mischief-

makers in Israel, whose abominable idolatries had separated between the people and their God, seemed to have lost their power. Ahab seemed subdued, and though Jezebel yet lived, the prophets of Baal lay in their inglorious bed. Not only were the people with the prophet in this great movement, but grand tokens of the divine blessing were not wanting. In gracious answer to the prophet's prayer, God had sent a welcome rain upon the desolated land, and Elijah might well think that both awe and gratitude would bring back the nation to the fear and the service of their covenant Lord. The prophet, after these severe years of trial, was at length triumphant. His commission from on high was sealed; his success was a direct blessing from heaven: not only the witnesses on Carmel, but the whole land, refreshed by the welcome torrents, knew now the faith and the God of Elijah, and it is no wonder that his hopes were full and strong. His ardent mind saw before him a rapid and triumphant career, to the overthrow of iniquity and to the destruction of every idolatrous altar and emblem in Israel.

Filled with these sanguine hopes, the prophet girded up his loins, and even in the midst of the storm outran the chariot of Ahab as he hurried to Jezreel. This is a common method in the East of showing respect to official rank. No matter how furiously a chariot is driven, men, with girded loins, keep just in advance of the horses, and this

for many miles. The distance from Carmel to Jezreel is variously given by different writers at five, twelve and sixteen miles,\* and the prophet could scarcely have done this but for strength given him for the purpose. "The hand of the Lord was upon Elijah." Doubtless the intention of this was to give honour and respect to Ahab in the eyes of the nation. In all the Scriptures great care is taken to maintain the respect due to the civil authorities. Even a weak and wicked king, whose measures Elijah reproves and opposes, is still to be honoured, so long as he retains a monarch's place. So Samuel declared to Saul that God had rejected him, yet he honoured him before the people. So Ahab was here honoured by Elijah. The king's plans had just been thwarted by the prophet; the natural tendency would be to weaken the people's respect for Ahab's authority and to degrade him in their eyes. Yet Elijah had no design "to weaken the government or to encourage rebellion." So he pays this tribute of extraordinary respect to the king. He would show that a man can be faithful to his God as a prophet, yet respectful and faithful to the rulers of the land as a subject; that even those large favours from heaven have not made him too proud for a due submission to earthly authority, and that a man can be true to every duty without becoming an enemy to those he must needs withstand.

\* The Land and the Book, ii. 226.

It may be that Elijah's moderation seemed the weakness of the prophet in the eyes of his enemies, and was interpreted to his disadvantage. There are some minds that gather boldness, even to insolence, from every apparent yielding of those that oppose them; a moderation in dealing with them only prolongs the strife. So may it have been with Elijah's chief foe. We do not know in what manner or with what temper the king of Israel told his imperious queen of the great events on Carmel. As Ahab made no interference with all that Elijah did as he tarried at Carmel, and even stood by in the valley of Kishon till the work of destruction was finished, and returned to Jezreel only at the bidding of the prophet, it seems likely that his pliant mind was disposed to submit to the way of the Lord's servant, and that if left to himself he would not have dared to oppose a thorough reformation. But this was not the temper of Jezebel. She had looked with a careless eye upon Israel's desolation, but she heard with indignation that Elijah had slain the priests whom she had introduced into the kingdom and whom she had specially protected. Congratulating her foresight that had saved the priests of Astarte, her more peculiar care, and misinterpreting the prophet's moderation, she resolved to avenge the slaughters already accomplished. In her first wrath she sent a messenger, announcing to Elijah that she would require his life for those he had slain.

With all her daring, we do not know that Jezebel would or could have carried out her threat. She did not touch him upon his return from Sinai, and now, certainly, if she had not feared the popular feeling, she could as easily have sent to slay him as send to threaten him. But receiving her message, and knowing her cruel and imperious temper, Elijah was greatly afraid. We do not justify him in this. Here is the weakness of a good and great man. We look upon it with surprise, but we can see some reasons for it. Worn out with previous sufferings, perhaps extending back through all the years of the famine; fatigued now by the toil and excitement of Carmel and Kishon and the hurried race to Jezreel, it is less strange that he was prepared for a disastrous reaction at the fierce message of the queen. But the new excitement nerves him to new exertion, and shows us new proof of the mind's power over the body. The prophet began immediately another journey. Perhaps it was with some deliberation, at least after he had escaped the scene of immediate danger. Yet he would make no needless delay. He left his servant, possibly because his lagging steps would not keep pace with his impatient master, perhaps because he would not expose him to the sufferings he anticipated. His route lay directly through the kingdom of Judah, but perhaps Jehoshaphat was already closely allied to Israel, and Jezebel's enemy could find no rest even

in the tribes that owned the God of Elijah as their God.

Let us learn wisdom from the prophet's present circumstances. We are told *he went for his life*. In the idiom of our language this expresses his fear for his life and his concern to save it. The original words may give a different sense. He went *according to his own soul*. Many understand this, "He took his own mind for it, and asked not counsel of the Lord." This he shows is folly and weakness and sin in wise and strong and holy men when left to themselves. Our strength is of God; times of peril should draw us nearer to him, and that is an hour of true weakness when we forget to ask his help. We cannot but look upon Elijah now as a wanderer from the path of duty, and we should not think strange of his dejection and unhappiness. It may have been needful that the prophet should be humbled. He was a man of like passions as we are; there was danger that he would be exalted above measure by the abundance of his privileges, and he is allowed to feel his own weakness and to show the Church that "the best of men are but men." Is this complaining prophet the same man that faced Ahab as the true troubler of Israel, that called Israel to Carmel, and that slew Baal's prophets?

He hardly knew what to do or which way to turn. He went a day's journey into the wilderness, but met no man of the wandering Bedouins, and at

night, faint and hungry, sought the best shelter he could find. In these deserts grows a kind of broom tree—here called the juniper—retaining in the Arabic substantially the same name here given to it in the Hebrew. The ancients believed that no serpent would touch this shrub, and that a man might safely sleep under it. Though the straggling bushes cast but a miserable shade, it is the best afforded in the desert, and the tent of the Arab is ever pitched by them for a shade by day and to protect them from the wind by night.\*

Despondency seemed at its depth, and we need not look for sane or consistent words. The prayer of Carmel and the murmuring of the wilderness seem like salt water and fresh from the same fountain. Yet what a contradiction! A man flying for life wishes to die; one who could not risk the post of duty is willing to perish in the desert; but for his closing words we would say that here is the exercise of only a petulant, unsubmitive temper. We do not doubt that a truly pious mind may even long or pray to die, but men may complain of life while by no means ready for death. There is no better proof of likeness to God than a willingness, indeed, a preference, to depart, coupled still with a readiness to abide in the flesh so long as God may please. To shrink from duty or suffering, to wish death selfishly, as an escape from providential

\* Robinson's *Bib. Researches*, i. 299, 302; Pool's *Synopsis*; *The Land and the Book*, ii. 436.

responsibilities, to find our reasons on this side of death rather than beyond it, may give no proof of piety, but rather show a wicked and unsubmitive flying in the face of God. Some have thought, however, from the closing words of Elijah, "I am no better than my fathers," that he was made aware of God's design to translate him without dying. This would change the whole tone of his complaint. The language then would express humility rather than complaining. He had fled from Jezebel because the use of due means to preserve his life was still proper, even though he was divinely protected. Yet why should such an one as he find any more honourable departure from life than that given to his fathers, who had all turned to dust?

But we cannot receive this interpretation. We judge that Elijah knew nothing of the glorious day still so far before him. Here is folly, not wisdom—murmuring, not submission. Yet his Lord and ours is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and of great forbearance. He visits his people's iniquities with the rod of his chastisement, but his loving-kindness he suffers not to fail. Forward to die is not always fit to die.\* Elijah laid down to sleep, not to die; but an angel touched him and awaked him twice, giving him food to eat for a great journey before him. Knowing the wants of his people in advance, God often gives suitable preparation for coming trials and duties. Elijah went in

\* M. Henry.

the strength of that meat forty days. As Sinai is but a few days' journey from Béersheba, some have conjectured that these forty days include the entire absence of the prophet from Israel. As in the case of Moses and of our Lord, in this long period of fasting he was sustained by supernatural strength. He came to the mountain so famous for the giving of the law, and dwelt there in a cave. The superstition of far later times affects to know the spot, and a chapel has been built to mark the cave of Elijah's sojourn.

But the solitude of Sinai differs far from the solitude of Cherith. *Then*, Elijah was doing the Lord's will; *now*, the divine voice demands, "What doest thou here?" God assigns to each of his people his duty and his place; and every one, watchful of his bidding and his providence, should be ever ready to give an answer to his inquiries, "Why are you here?" and "What are you doing here?" The objects we have in view, and the leadings of Providence to place us where we are, often mark the difference between duty and transgression. A Christian may mingle with worldly and ungodly companions for inclination's sake, through desires for greedy gain and through love to the world's vain pleasures, and this shows a wayward and unrighteous spirit. But he may mingle in the world's most busy and most deceitful engagements; he may be thrown into collision with the world's worst men and worst vices; he may be *in* the world,

and yet not *of* the world, because, like a pilgrim upon the great highway of life, his path must needs be through VANITY FAIR. In judging of our place as pleasing or displeasing to God, we must ask, How came we here, and what are we seeking and doing? Jonah was once tossed upon the angry billows of the Mediterranean, and Paul was in a longer and severer storm upon the same sea; but the one was a fugitive from duty, and must be cast out for the safety of the ship, and the other was himself the safety of the vessel and the crew. Elijah is not a Paul but a Jonah in the desolation of Sinai, and God asks "What doest thou here?"

In reply to this inquiry the prophet pours out his complaint of jealousy for the Lord his God. Sent forth with a divine commission and zealous for its success, he had been deeply disappointed at the slow progress of the reformation in Israel and at the many reverses attending it. His warnings had been of little influence; the famine had not fully humbled the people, and even the solemn scenes of Carmel and the death of Baal's priests had accomplished less than he had looked for. Even after all those things Jezebel seemed as implacable as ever; he had been forced by her threats to escape from the land, and to his disheartened mind, the work of reform seemed as hopeless as at any former time.

The prophet's state of mind, thus even expostulating with God, is the more worthy of our consid-

ation because it is often thus with ourselves. We mourn our existing desolations ; we make earnest efforts and offer fervent prayers for a season of revival ; and it may be our hopes are excited by some tokens of awakening interest, by proof of the law arousing the conscience, by the tear of kindling penitence, or by flattering promises of duty. On a sudden our hopes fail. The promised goodness vanishes like the morning cloud or the early dew. Perhaps ministers, and those who feel special responsibility for the work of Zion, are peculiarly prone to these discouragements. They make zealous but unsuccessful efforts to promote religion ; but those upon whom they have depended stand back ; their zeal, like that of Elijah, brings trouble upon themselves ; none around them seem to reach the proper standard of duty ; everything goes backward, and their jealousy for the honour of the Lord seems in vain. In the midst of general indifference we view the cause of piety through the gloom of our own feelings ; we judge harshly as Elijah did, and hastily conclude that there is no piety where there is no open zeal for the Lord. So, if we believe our own croakings, we live in the worst of times, and we are constantly lamenting the days that are past. Let us here learn that though we may often have cause of sorrow, we must guard against despondency.

For human pride and unbelief have more to do with such dejection than a pure jealousy for the

Lord of Hosts. To say nothing of possible defection in ourselves when iniquity abounds, as the Lord forbears to reproach Elijah's timidity in fleeing from Jezreel, there are misconceptions in these times of dejecting unbelief that dishonour God as much as they distress us. We have indulged in reverie and imagination rather than in the sober anticipations of faith; we have presumed to mark out in advance the pathway of the Lord's workings; and he, who leads his people by ways they know not and who will not give his glory to another, has disappointed our expectations. We need to learn, with the prophet, that God forsakes not his work when he adopts not our measures for accomplishing it. Ours is finite, and his infinite wisdom; we see a little—how very little!—and he sees everything; we are impatient, but he fails not.

That the prophet might correct his own errors under divine teachings, he was called forth upon the mountain, and the Lord passed by. The place of itself and from its associations was awe-inspiring, and now Elijah saw fearful things. A tempestuous storm rent the very rocks of Sinai; this was succeeded by the terrible shocks of an earthquake, and this by a fire—*i. e.*, it may be by an awful thunderstorm, in which the lightnings seemed to fill the air and the mountain with their angry flashings. These were grand displays of Jehovah's power, yet the Lord was not in the tempest, the earthquake or the fire, as he was in that which followed. A still,

small voice struck the prophet with awe; he wrapped his face in his mantle, and retired in humility to the entrance of the cave. Still, he understood not the vision, for when the inquiry was renewed, What doest thou here, Elijah? he renewed his language of self-justification, complaining and unbelief.

This scene upon Sinai was not for his eye alone who looked upon its terrific grandeur. These appearances may instruct believers in all ages when, like this prophet, they are disheartened and bewildered in view of God's dealings with his people. Human nature is sanguine and zealous. We would adopt measures for the work of the Lord that will carry all before them and be rapidly and surely successful. God's ways are not man's ways; his gospel works otherwise, "cometh not with observation," and is more mildly effectual. It may have fearful preparations and resistless energy, yet the kingdom of God is within man. Elijah's bold words and fearful judgments had failed to reform Israel; the Lord was their author, yet he was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire. We suppose the vision teaches us the insufficiency of law and judgment to do the needed work in the Church of God or in the soul of man. The words and workings of Elijah were the truth and power of God; they had broken Israel almost in pieces, but they had not wrought the needful penitence, and in this sense the Lord was not in his own judgments. You may take a rock of ice in midwinter, and shiver

it into a thousand fragments ; but every minute particle still is ice, and ice it will remain so long as the freezing air is around it. To melt the ice you need the warm breezes and the unclouded sun ; it will dissolve sooner if first it is broken to pieces, but the power that melts is, in its very nature, different from the power that breaks. Elijah stood forth amidst all these terrors, but that quiet voice filled him with reverence. Thus might he learn that the thunders of the law must be succeeded by the voice of grace to bring back apostate Israel to the service of their God.

The law of God is not declared in vain, nor are the judgments of God useless, yet theirs is a preparatory work which love and mercy must complete. In New Testament language, "the law is our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ." Gal. iii. 24. After this lesson the prophet was encouraged by new promises of the divine favour, which, however, could find their accomplishment only through years of patient toil. Thus he received better views of his duty and of the divine working. God's judgments were not to be wholly withdrawn, for many in Israel were incorrigible. So Hazael was to scourge the kingdom ; Jehu was to be the destroyer of Ahab's house, and the word of Elisha was to be a savour of death to the rebellious that escaped the edge of the sword. But quiet instruction and the gentle dews of mercy were to be the chief means of working good in Israel. Elijah went back to

take up unobtrusive but important labours among his people. For the next ten years associated with Elisha, and suffering no serious molestation from Jezebel, he was engaged in establishing schools of instruction for younger prophets, who should take the place of those slain in the persecutions. Surely, nothing that human effort can accomplish for the Church of God is more important than to bring forward a race of well-trained ministers, and the schools of the prophets, as they are for Zion's up-building, may well be Zion's care. The results of these years we may trace in the history of the two prophets whose names must henceforward be associated. Elijah's usefulness was doubtless greater, though he was less before the public notice. When all was done that God had promised on Sinai, the efforts of Elijah were successful; for Jehu's sword cut off forever the remains of Baal worship in both Judah and Israel.

Let Sinai, and the scenes the prophet saw there, rise before us to teach us lessons of profit. Let them teach us, indeed, that we need to witness no such wonders, and that our natural longing for the wondrous and the miraculous is vain. How we would like to see a miracle! How we undervalue the still small voice of instruction. Yet the principles of the gospel are of essential interest, and God's best gifts are permanent for all time. His truth to enlighten, his grace to convert, are better than the powers that heal the sick or raise the dead.

The Lord is not in the wonderful thing as he is in the quiet prompting of the Spirit. So let us judge of the workings of law and grace. The law of God speaks terrors to sinful men. When it was spoken on Sinai even Moses feared. But though they saw such evidences of divine power, the hearts of the people were hardened. So God's law still arrests and awakens the conscience, and leads sinful men to anxious concern for their salvation. But something otherwise than terror must bring men to true repentance. The quiet voice of mercy in the gospel speaks peace by atoning blood. Even when the terrors addressed to the soul of man are truthful and legitimate, the sinful heart resists and rebels. The love of Christ and the grace of the Spirit must win the soul. When the heart melts, it is brought nearest to God. The sweetest times of devotion to the believer are when he draws nearest to the foot of the cross, and the most powerful influence to affect the souls of guilty men comes in these quiet forms. The still small voice of the Spirit, and the urgency of his love who bled for us on Calvary, have power beyond the awakening of law and judgment.

Thus may we explain things at which we have often wondered, and which have filled us with discouragements, and with what Elijah here calls "jealousy for the Lord God of Hosts." We have seen men under the pressure of severe affliction. The heavy hand of God was upon them, and they could

but acknowledge it. Their hearts seemed subdued ; they vowed to live differently, they bent the knee in prayer, they promised faithfully to serve and fear him. But as the clouds passed off, and the sunlight of prosperity shone upon them, they forgot their serious thoughts, left their earnest vows unfulfilled, and were even more regardless of God than before. We have seen the sinner trembling under the convictions of his conscience, earnestly praying for deliverance from sin and hell, and making solemn pledges of devotion to the cause of God ; but relief has been found without coming to Christ. So there results a growing indifference, a life that shows no power of religion, perhaps a wide departure from the way of righteousness. We have seen the young promise of piety springing thus simply from an awakened conscience bring forth early declension, and grieving our hearts with sad forebodings of apostasy. Sometimes a community or a congregation is moved by religious emotions that seem of no ordinary power. Anxiety is awakened, serious inquiries and earnest prayers give proof of uncommon interest ; perhaps many join in loud professions of zeal for the Lord, as all Israel shouted as the fire fell on Elijah's altar. But even a zeal awakened by God's law and by the labours of a true prophet, may be the short-lived outbreak of natural feeling, that falls far short of gracious emotion. Nothing is more common, nothing is more dangerous, than to mistake conviction for con-

version. There is no salvation by the law and by terror, but only by the gospel and by love. It is not enough to strike the rock of ice with the hammer of Moses, or even to shiver it to pieces. The ice must be melted. Break it indeed, but melt it also. There are terrors enough in perdition, but it is a sorrow that works only death, because the rays of love pierce not through the gloomy clouds of despair that gather over the abode of the lost. All the sorrows in the world cannot make a Christian. Judgments and sorrows, law and terrors can never be more than guides to lead us, or scourges to drive us away from the world and self to Christ. Divine grace, especially in the cross, must win the heart to love; and "he that loveth is born of God." We are prone to desire feeling, to put too much stress upon it, especially feelings of anguish, remorse and terror. The love of Jesus and simple teachings of him win the heart to God.

God still speaks to man, not audibly, yet truly and individually. What doest *thou* here? He may speak in terrors to the unrenewed mind, and no fears that a sinful soul entertains are beyond the fearful reality of divine wrath upon the ungodly. But the soul that only trembles is still unsaved. He may single you out, place your soul as truly before him as Elijah stood solitary upon the mount, and may address you as it were by name. Saving religion must needs be personal religion. If you have no personal religion, you have none; if you are

not personally prepared to stand before God, you are not at all prepared. The truth that does us good is taken personally home to the heart; sometimes, indeed, this searching word pierces like the keen blade of the warrior. When the attention is fixed, when we hear or read as we ought, when earth loses its power over us and eternity presses home its solemn claims, the feeblest sermon seems a pointed arrow, directly reaching the heart, as though sent from the quiver of the Almighty. And why should we not always thus read and thus hear? By this law your conscience must be awakened if ever awakened; by this gospel your soul must be won if ever won; upon this Jesus you must believe if ever you exercise saving faith; and by the Spirit of grace must you be converted if ever converted. Let every man's thoughts turn in upon his own soul, for God truly asks, and will one day demand, What doest thou here? "I gave thee being; I allotted thy land and age and sphere of life; I gave thee privileges innumerable; by a thousand quiet voices, through my word and my providence and my Spirit, I called thee to my service; art thou serving me now, or hast thou taken frivolous occasion to flee from the post of duty?" Let conscience reply.

But, above all, let Elijah reconcile for us the law and the gospel. The storm, the earthquake and the fire are first; then comes the quiet voice. While the law is not effectual, yet is it not useless. Let

us neither deny its truth nor brave its terrors ; yet, let us learn not lessons contradictory, but lessons further and lessons better. The awakened soul often strives for deeper convictions. He wishes to hear fearful discourses ; he would gladly be filled with remorse. But anguish cannot save the soul ; relief must come from Christ, and convictions are valuable only as they awaken us to flee. As the Lord was not in the storm, he may not be in the keenest pangs of remorse, but the full gospel of his mercy is embraced in the single line : " Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### *AHAB AND BENHADAD.*

WE do not know that Elijah literally performed the duties assigned to him at Horeb, in either of the particulars. We can hardly think that either he, or any Israelite commissioned by him, actually anointed a man to be king over a foreign land, whose reign began many years later by the murder of his sovereign; we know that Jehu was anointed at the command of Elisha, and we have no record of any formal anointing by Elisha. We suppose that the word "anointing" is here used merely to signify the exercise of these offices, and the charge to Elijah simply declares to him the future events that should both bless and punish Israel. By the labours of Elisha as a prophet taking Elijah's place, by the sword of Hazael as an open and cruel enemy, by the power of Jehu, a reforming king, should the great work be done for which now the prophet longed. The chief matter here taught is in the truth implied, that the period needful to complete the national reform should extend beyond the lifetime of Elijah, needing the labours of a successor to complete it. "He that believeth shall not make

haste." The prophet's labours were only unfinished, not unsuccessful.

No doubt, Elijah was much surprised at the assurance now added to this, that there were seven thousand in Israel who had never bowed the knee to Baal. While the prophet thought he stood alone, it was doubtless with much of that despondent feeling that is prone to look on the dark side of things. He had not allowed himself to reflect upon things he must have known; for example, he had forgotten the faith and zeal of Obadiah; and the divine reproof is the more remarkable because the Apostle Paul quotes it, and places it before us in the form of a general truth. We may take courage to believe that the darkest times are not as degenerate as they seem, for God fails not to keep a remnant faithful to him in seasons of prevailing apostasy. Seven thousand in Israel had refused to kiss the image of Baal. How they kept themselves, and how pure they kept themselves, the Scriptures do not affirm. Some may have been, though of humbler name and office, not less bold and decided than Elijah himself, and for this, fugitives in the dens and caves of the land, and fed by the care of many an Obadiah. Some may have owed their safety to their obscurity; the Lord's poor are often the Lord's faithful. Some may have made seeming and even undue compliances to the prevalent customs. Yet, indeed, the entire seven thousand carefully avoided the services of idolatry in heart and

in fact, bowed only to Jehovah, and were ready to sympathize with the suffering cause of their God, all receiving his approbation who sees in secret. Perhaps there never has been a persecution so thorough and searching that hundreds have not escaped, and escaped in their integrity from the toils of their pursuers. It never has been esteemed the duty of those who fear God to defy and court the fury of persecution. Sometimes the boldness that denounces tyranny and dies under its fury may be justified; usually, a calm, quiet waiting at the post of duty is what is required. In the early persecutions of Christianity, as we have before noticed,\* many of those who courted sufferings were not prepared to abide them; the grace of God did not sustain the presumptuous. "We therefore praise not those," says a writing of the early Church, "that voluntarily surrender themselves (to their persecutors); for so we are not taught in the gospel."† Open resistance to Ahab would have availed nothing. Why should others needlessly set lawless power at defiance, when God's own word sends Elijah, first to the solitude of Cherith, and then to the exile of Zarephath? Silently the faithful people suffered. Many of them may have maintained their secret services, may have met together.

"Canopied by midnight's starry dome,  
On hillside or lone glen,

\* Chapter IV.

† Neander's Church History, i. 110.

To hear the counsels of his holy word  
Pledged to each other and their common Lord."

That so many as seven thousand should remain faithful is no great wonder in the light of similar things in far later times. No one doubts the faithfulness of the suffering Presbyterians in Scotland; yet, after nearly thirty years of cruel persecution, after it seemed as if the whole nation must have been dragooned into prelacy, the Revolution of 1688 no sooner began than the Presbyterian party had immediately a majority in the national councils. Of course not all these had been faithful, yet a very large number had been. And we have a most interesting example in far later times. In 1818 the London Missionary Society began the labours of its missionaries in the island of Madagascar. After only ten years' efforts persecutions began, and the missionaries were banished. Yet, though the persecutions lasted more than thirty years, though the native converts were left without foreign teachers or experienced counsellors, though thousands suffered degradation, fines, convict-labour, slavery, imprisonment and death, though every available means was adopted to suppress Christianity, the praying people grew stronger rather than weaker. At the end of the first ten years, from ten to fifteen thousand of the people had learned to read, yet not many—some missionaries say but fifty—were professed converts.\* Yet this little band grew to

\* Liverpool Conference, 334.

thousands without public worship of any kind, and their faithfulness was tested by the severest trials. But the recent changes in that island, favourable to the toleration of Christianity, and welcoming back the missionaries, show a number of faithful disciples more remarkable than the remnant of believing Israel in the days of Elijah.\*

Thinking it strange that Elijah knew so little of these brethren, or that even despondency could think so slightly of them, we may still rejoice that the Lord knew his own. He always knows them; he knows how to deliver them out of temptation; he will show many faithful ones at the last day, to the surprise of the assembled worlds.

The call of Elisha immediately succeeded Elijah's departure from Horeb. He was, perhaps, the son of a wealthy man; it may be that his father's fields had not been ploughed at all for the years of the drought, yet that twelve ploughs were going at once may have been according to present customs of that land, where the farmers join together to break up a field in companies like that here described.† Elisha understood at once the significance of the prophet's mantle laid upon him, and, though the call was to no easy service, he readily obeyed it. Henceforward he was the pupil and associate of the elder prophet. Here the narrative suddenly breaks off from all mention of the

\* Ellis's Madagascar—Three Visits. Public papers.

† The Land and the Book, i. 208.

associated prophets. Elijah was encouraged by the divine promise and by the cheerful piety of Elisha; and their services to Israel, though quietly pursued, were doubtless of great value. The narrative bids us turn aside for a brief consideration of the wars of Ahab with the Syrians.

Here the beginning appears of the prediction that Hazael shall join with Jehu and Elisha to scourge guilty Israel. Yet Ahab and his people are not divinely punished, whether they are guilty or not; rather, every opportunity is afforded to show whether they will or will not fear God; and these first conflicts between Israel and Syria, through the manifest favour of God, issue in favour of Ahab. The kingdom of Israel was greatly weakened at this time, and the Syrians were strong. Formerly immense armies could be levied in Israel; now the two armies marshalled in successive years by Ahab are described, first, as "seven thousand men," and next as "two little flocks of kids." 1 Kings, xx. 15, 27. The king of Syria took advantage of Israel's feebleness. Gathering an irresistible army, with thirty-two petty chieftains under him, he advanced and laid siege to Ahab's capital, and Ahab, conscious of his inability to contend with him, was disposed to grant every possible concession. Yet so exacting was Benhadad that despair rather than hope bade Israel resist. We can easily understand the scene; the scornful, boasting challenge of Benhadad, and the temperate, yet manly reply of

Ahab. We feel an unusual measure of respect for Ahab, notwithstanding we know his wickedness, when we read his wise message: "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."

Just here the mercy of God comes to help the ruler of his people, and to give Ahab another opportunity to forsake wicked dependence and to fear Jehovah. An unknown prophet—perhaps one of the earliest pupils from Elijah's newly-founded school—assured the king of success, and directed him to marshal his young men and to lead them in person to the conflict. No longer relying on his walls, the king went boldly forth to battle; and perhaps the very fewness of his men, giving presumption to the enemy, was the providential means of giving him the more easy victory. Benhadad was guilty of the folly, so common yet so inexcusable in military commanders, of indulging in drunkenness. But the despised army of Israel was victorious. A panic began in the Syrian camp; the whole were soon in a disastrous flight, and the vain-glorious Benhadad was himself forced to flee.

The same prophet then gave notice to Ahab that he might expect a renewal of the conflict in the ensuing year. Doubtless the Syrians were led to this from mortification at their shameful flight, from the consciousness that Ahab had no forces to withstand them, and from the belief that only the God

of Israel had wrested the victory from them. The heathen mythology, numbering so many among the gods, with finite powers and separate jurisdiction, gave the guardianship of particular places to different deities. Knowing that Solomon's temple was on Mount Zion, that the Israelites consecrated high places, perhaps that Elijah had brought down fire upon Carmel, and that their great defeat had been on the hills of Samaria, the Syrians concluded that Israel's God was a God of the hill country, and that upon other ground they could defeat them. This reasoning resulted in their renewed defeat. Jealous for his own honour, the Lord would not now allow them to succeed. Yet this time they acted with greater prudence. Setting aside the leaders whose birth rather than their abilities gave them command, they put tried and able commanders in their stead. When the armies met both sides were cautious. Neither party ventured an attack for a week, though Ahab had the promise of victory; this was to be secured by prudence and valour, and gave him no reason to act rashly. Considering the immense disparity of the armies, the hesitation on the part of the Syrians proved their fears for the result, and showed that the moral advantage lay with Ahab. The second slaughter was even more terrible than the first, and was greatly increased, perhaps, by an earthquake which overthrew the city of Aphek, in which the fatigued army of Benhadad sought repose, and

completed the overwhelming disaster. 1 Kings xx. 30. This singular destruction of the remnant of the Syrian army finds a remarkable illustration in the overthrow of the town of Safed, January 1, 1837. This town is situated exactly like Aphek, so that the ruin produced by an earthquake would destroy almost all within the walls; and, indeed, at Safed scarcely one in a hundred escaped.\*

Nothing now remained for the haughty king of Syria but to make humble submission to Ahab and to secure the best terms he could. And in duty to his own people Ahab should have made such terms as would have destroyed the warlike character of the Syrian kingdom, for the maintenance of future peace between the two nations. They dwelt too near, and stood on terms of too great hostility, to make any mild measures safe for Israel. Long after this did Israel pay dearly for the guilty folly of Ahab after these triumphs had been given to him. Benhadad sought opportunity to recover strength, and by his flatteries Ahab gave all he could desire. They speak here among the Syrians, of the kings of Israel as merciful kings. Doubtless, in comparison with other warriors, this reputation was well deserved. The tide of war usually knows little of mercy; ancient wars were more cruel than modern; ancient warriors might often be described as Homer described the great hero Achilles, as "prompt, passionate, inexorable and

\* The Land and the Book, i. 427-433; ii. 53, 54.

fierce." The severities of the Hebrews against the Canaanites were different from their usual wars of defence, and doubtless they deserved the character here ascribed to them, especially as compared with heathen warriors. The government of ancient Israel was constitutional; the peace and liberty of the citizens were in general well secured, and perhaps just at this time the cruelties of Jezebel had produced a reaction that forced Ahab to pay more regard to law. Besides, this king, with many warlike qualities, was of a pliant and easy temper, and now, approached by flattering lips, he sacrificed his well-earned advantages and the welfare of his kingdom to the deceitful lip of an implacable foe.

The ambassadors of the king of Syria came to Ahab with ropes about their necks, in token of complete submission. This is the first mention in the Bible of this significant act of subjection, but upon the Egyptian monuments, still existing, figures with ropes about their necks are frequently seen. These men were prepared for almost anything, and expected severe terms, but they were ready to catch at any intimation of favour from their unexpected conqueror. How easily Benhadad forgot his former insolence! how ready was he to seek a clemency so little deserved! And now, as Ahab had won his victories by especial divine help, he should have made his treaties with the divine counsel. But to be addressed in flattering words by a great monarch made him neglectful of high public interests.

Advantages of the greatest importance to him and his kingdom he threw gratuitously and recklessly away. Speaking of Benhadad as a friend and a brother in unfortunate circumstances, the crafty Syrian counsellors assured him that he was a brother in rank and feeling, and induced him to send for him. He received him to sit by him in his chariot, and, it would seem without waiting for a word from the vanquished monarch, dictated a most disastrous treaty. Indeed he gave Benhadad all the benefits of these two great victories, and enabled his immediate successors to humble Israel at their feet.

There is a peculiar ambiguity in the conversation between the two kings which gives us our only knowledge of the treaty. We do not know that the Syrians had ever made streets in Samaria, *i. e.*, had the privilege of building up a certain portion of the city to be governed by their own laws, as now in the East certain sects occupy quarters of their own. If this is the meaning here, Ahab not only gives too easy terms, but, contrary to true Israelitish policy, makes arrangements for a closer intercourse between the nations. But in the English Bible the proper names are supplied, and some interpreters understand Ahab to be the speaker all the way through. This treaty, on this understanding of it, restores every advantage and encourages Benhadad to build up his capital city. It seems almost incredible that Ahab's folly would go so far

as this, yet we know that he was wickedly recreant to his duty, and that this treaty was so contrary to the divine will that it brought upon Ahab the severe displeasure of the God of Israel.

The guilty king was soon made acquainted with the divine displeasure. His reproof was self-pronounced. It came through one of those symbolic actions, partaking of the nature of a parable, by which the ancient prophets sometimes led the conscience of an offender to see and pronounce upon his own guilt. A certain man of the sons of the prophets—perhaps a pupil from the school of Elijah—commanded a neighbour in the name of the Lord to smite him. It was a strange request; we can hardly sympathize with a severe punishment laid upon one who refused to do this, perhaps from kindness of feeling; yet it is no light thing to disobey the Lord's word by a prophet, and this disobedient man was slain by a lion. Another man was commanded, and did it, inflicting a severe hurt upon the prophet, as if he had suffered in the recent battle. Assuming the disguise of a wounded soldier—thus, on the one hand deceiving Ahab, that he might not penetrate his design, yet, on the other, giving him the benefit of any kindly sympathies in the king's own heart, while he was really deciding his own case—the prophet waited by a road where the king was to pass, and set before him a parable in the light of an appeal to his justice. He represented himself as having been engaged in the

late battle, and that another—of course a commanding officer—had given a prisoner into his charge, declaring at the same time that he would be held responsible for the prisoner. The narrator proceeded to say that while he was engaged in various things, before he was aware of it, the prisoner had made his escape. He did not intend to let him go, he had not even noticed just when he did go, he may even have regretted his escape. But he was gone; and now the wounded soldier appeals to the king to know whether he must be held responsible for this event.

The king easily decides the case. If there was anything in the suffering appearance of the soldier to incline him to a lenient judgment, he allows it to have no influence. He knows that the duty of this soldier was to guard the prisoner; he should not have allowed other things to turn his attention from his main duty; and to plead that he neglected his duty through attention to other things was but to aggravate his offence. So he declares that by his own narrative the soldier has passed judgment upon himself.

How great was his dismay when this appellant puts off his disguise, appears before him as a prophet of the Lord, and addresses him as Nathan did David, "Thou art the man!" In applying the parable the prophet makes the recent conflict one between Benhadad and the God of Israel, whom he had insulted; he reminds Ahab that a prisoner of

no ordinary rank had been put into his hands, and that he had let him go; and now his own lips had decided the wickedness, the responsibility and the doom of the case. And the judgment was fulfilled. As soon after his disasters as he could gather strength to do so, Benhadad renewed the war, and instead of reciprocating the clemency of Ahab, he gave express orders to his captains to care chiefly for the destruction of the king of Israel; and though Ahab disguised himself in order to escape their special notice, he perished in battle with the very king whom now he sends away upon so easy terms. Had the disastrous influence of the treaty stopped here, it had been less matter. But the wars between Israel and Syria continued long after this; and especially Hazael, the warlike successor of Benhadad, scourged the guilty people as had been declared to Elijah.

The parable of this unknown prophet may remind us that men usually bear about with them the elements of truth, which, rightly used, may serve to convict them of their sins and follies. When our Lord rebukes the man who sees the mote in his neighbour's eye and overlooks the beam in his own, he calls our thoughts specially to that deceitfulness of sin which often blinds a man to his own serious faults, and forbids us "to see ourselves as others see us;" but also he reproves this as not merely the man's misfortune, but as the proof of his insincerity and guilt. Men

know enough to reprove their own faults, and they show this by the censure they cast upon others. The disposition to look at others and not at ourselves, to judge others harshly and ourselves leniently, to shelter ourselves behind the follies of others, as though we were less responsible because they are guilty, is a disposition that belongs to every age. Yet every man knows enough of the principles of justice to decide rightly in all such cases when they are laid before him divested of their personal application. So the prophets, in ancient days, set forth the truth in parables, which secured the unbiassed judgment of their hearers, that the moral of the story might be the sinner's self-conviction. So Nathan came before the guilty David with such a narrative as aroused the king's indignation and led him to pronounce judgment upon his pitiless self. So this unknown prophet come to Ahab, and the monarch easily saw the guilt which, indeed, was his own.

And if, from the very nature of a parable, we have significance here beyond the mere form of words in which it is clothed; if we judge that a soldier must keep safe his charge, and be responsible even to his own life, not only for dismissing a prisoner, but as truly for suffering his escape by neglect; if thus guilt and peril attend even heedlessness, why should not every soul among us apply this principle to those immense responsibilities which our God has laid upon us, and the issues of which

reach forward to the eternal world? Surely no authority of an officer over a soldier is more legitimate or irresistible than the divine rule over us; no charge committed to a soldier's care can be more important in itself, or enforced by plainer intimations of what we should do and of what must result from our unfaithfulness; and no other engagements or interests, as compared with the great stake of the soul's salvation, have value enough to give even a plausible excuse for our neglected duty. In the great battle of life that is now going forward, and in which we all must bear a part, there has been committed to each one of us a charge of infinite importance. Let us make no enigma of this, but let each one say, as we may often have sung,

"A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify;  
A never-dying soul to save  
And fit it for the sky."

And it may be true of some of us that up to this time of our lives we have been busy here and there, giving our thoughts and care not to the only thing upon earth really worthy of enlisting our sleepless energies, but to almost everything else than this. It is within the bounds of the soberest truth to declare of many, even in our Christian congregations, that if any one else should treat them as they treat themselves, they would be filled with indignation. If you could give that priceless jewel

—your own soul—into some other man's charge, and bid him secure its salvation, and yet he should take no more care of it than you yourself now take, you could not withhold your indignant judgment of his unfaithfulness.

Let every sinful man remember that no excuses of any kind can be a sufficient apology before God for the neglect of the soul's salvation. Read over the prophet's parable; apply it to yourself, and know that God will hold you responsible for disregarded duty. It will not do to reply before him that you were thoughtless, negligent or busy at other things. Doubtless many have been busy here and there with what seemed the pressing concerns of life; yet this is a world that perishes, and they have been neglecting the only everlasting things specially by God himself committed to their care. If this conduct was wholly reversed, it would be true wisdom. Should a man gain the soul's everlasting life and lose all the world can offer, it will matter little a few years hence. Every reasonable thought urges that nothing is so well worth our care and diligence as to secure the soul's eternal life. But if a man's thoughts and time and heart are taken up with other things—no matter how important he may esteem them, or how urgently they may press themselves upon his attention—if at that solemn judgment-seat, where we must all appear, this man, giving an account of his stewardship, is compelled to say of the soul's salvation: "While thy servant

was busy here and there it was gone!" will not the sentence from his lips irreversibly declare: "So shall thy judgment be; thyself hast decided it?" And speechless from all reasonable reply will be every negligent soul who hears the final sentence, Depart from me accursed!

## CHAPTER XIV.

### *THE VINEYARD OF NABOTH.*

WE know little of Elijah during the quiet years that followed his return to social life. The silence of the history gives assurance that Jezebel gave him no molestation; yet as policy, and not love for Elijah, has disarmed her vengeance, we infer that the prophet has gained a public influence which she dare not resist. In all free governments public sentiment sways public policy; the rulers cannot always do as they wish, but rather as they can, and often results are reached every way different from the wisest anticipations. Let us not adopt the flattering maxim: *Vox populi vox Dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God. Rather let us say that the popular wave often moves with the high and resistless spring-tide of fanaticism or party passion; that intelligence and virtue are the necessary preparatives for self-government in any people, and that both calamities and blessings may spring from popular movements. Our wisest judgment in the whole matter is to discern that God wisely rules, holding in his hands the hearts of ruler and people, arraying even their passions and pre-

judices against each other to accomplish his purposes, and thus sometimes allowing them to dash against each other to fulfil the judgments of his righteousness, and sometimes to hold each other in check when his mercy would restrain the wrath. Amidst the mad and clashing array of passion in human affairs, a divine hand holds the famous "BALANCE OF POWER" of which we read so much; and while thus the busy actors cannot foresee the end that may be near at hand, HE controls all for judgment or for mercy. Even a Jezebel dares not carry out her threats, not because she fears God, but in the changed state of affairs in Israel, and Elijah is allowed to go on with his quiet labours, watching with jealous care and promoting with diligent zeal the interests for which he was lately so despondent.

It is wonderful to see how soon a desolated land may show proofs of returning prosperity. The victories of Ahab were glorious; the disastrous effects of his wretched treaty were not immediately felt, and pomp and luxury began to grow. Besides his residence at Samaria, the well-fortified capital of the kingdom, the king had built another palace in the town of Jezreel. This is a place of some note in the history of the people. In the *valley* of Jezreel Gideon defeated the Midianites; at the *fountain* of Jezreel fell Saul and Jonathan on one bloody day; in the *plain* of Jezreel afterward drove the rapid chariot of avenging Jehu, and the *city* of Jezreel commanded a wide and magnificent view. The

residence of the king had been made here before the time of our present thoughts; but now, in the hour of pride and victory, he entertains new schemes of enlarging and adorning. Perhaps now Ahab built a palace of such cost and extravagance that the Scriptures call it "a house of ivory. 1 Kings xxii. 39. In all probability the adornings of the rooms, or at least the furniture, the beds and couches and tables, were beautified by the inlaying of this costly material. The luxurious princes of Eastern countries were accustomed to decorate the ceilings, panels and doors of their houses with ivory, to adorn articles of use and luxury, and to make statues, some of which were of great magnificence. So the prophet Amos declares the judgments of God upon the ivory mansions of the Israelitish princes. Amos iii. 15.

From the beautiful site of Jezreel stretches out the plain of the same name, bounded toward the sea by the ridge of fertile Carmel. Having perhaps rebuilt or refitted his splendid palace, aided by the spoils of his great victories, Ahab wishes to enlarge and lay off the grounds around it, not only in beauty that might gratify the taste, but in fruitful gardens ministering to his appetite. The most desirable piece of ground for his purpose was held as a vineyard by a citizen of Jezreel named Naboth. Ahab offered to purchase, either in exchange for other lands or for the price of it in money. According to our ideas and our ways of dealing, there

was no wrong in this offer. The desire to enlarge and adorn the grounds around his palace was not intrinsically evil, and Ahab may up to this time have shown no improper spirit. To desire another man's property, to be willing to buy it of him, to effect the purchase, may all be without wrong. Covetousness is an undue longing for another's possessions, envying him what he has, and grieving that we cannot make it ours. If the owner wishes to part with his property, we may give him the just price for it. If he wishes to retain it, we should withhold even our thoughts from any invasion of his entire right so to do. In the case before us it is not clear that under Jewish law Naboth had the right to part with his vineyard, and we may understand his reply to the king to affirm that he had not. This was the inheritance of his fathers, and it belonged to his family rather than to himself. When a piece of property lay entirely inside of a walled town the owner could sell it; when it was a farm or vineyard, he could not dispose of it, though he could give up his right till the ensuing year of jubilee. Lev. xxv. 23, &c. Possibly Ahab disregarded the law; it may have fallen into disuse; but Naboth was a true-hearted Israelite, was disposed to abide by the law, even at the risk of giving offence to his powerful neighbour; and, aside from his personal attachment to the lands on which he was born, he may have regarded the transaction as altogether unrighteous.

Pride and power cannot easily bear reproof or disappointment; and Naboth's refusal, implying both, was a source of great vexation to Ahab. He returned to Samaria heavy and angry, and like a pouting child would eat no bread. He was ill indeed; for no ordinary disease is so bad as the most wretched of human passions that now throws the king of Israel upon his bed. An envious covetousness is worse than a fever in the veins; guilt in the conscience is worse than pain in the bones; and the heartache is harder to bear than a headache. This would be a wretched world if such feelings prevailed more; it is wretched because like passions do abound.

And now, standing by Ahab's sick bed, we get a homeside view of Jezebel. Even the wicked of the world have their kindly feelings, their warm affections, their tender sympathies. It is a false idea of human character which supposes that any one is all perfidy and wickedness. Every liar speaks many truths; the most cruel are not always fierce; and Jezebel may be an attached wife, soon noticing her husband's uneasiness, and easily drawing from him the cause of it. Before, we saw this haughty queen ardently attached to her national religion, and the munificent patroness of four hundred prophets. So here she is the attentive wife, quick to discern and ready to relieve her husband's grief. Let us not only learn that monsters of cruelty may do kindly things, but let us also see that the exer-

cise of social virtues is quite consistent with the absence of true religion, and that men may love their kindred while they hate their God. "If ye love them that love you, what reward have you? Do not even the publicans so?" See Jezebel's iniquity in the very means she uses to please her husband. She ridicules the scruples or the cowardice that keep him from gaining the end he had set his heart upon; and, perhaps without making him immediately acquainted with the plan she has in mind, she assures him that she will secure for him Naboth's coveted vineyard. But her guilt is his, for she but carries out his wishes; his seal is entrusted to her to give the needful authority; he expressed no disapprobation of her measures, and he was ready to take advantage of her success.

Times seem to have changed in the land since Jezebel's high-handed persecution of the prophets; and the haughty queen, aiming now at the life of a single man, dare not go contrary to the forms of Jewish laws. When the kingly government was established in Israel, Samuel wrote the form of the kingdom in a book, the first example of a written constitution—the surest guarantee of a people's freedom. Doubtless Jeroboam and his successors did not dare to change this fundamental law when the kingdom of the ten tribes was set up; and the kings of Israel were not despotic, but must be bound by constitutional law. This land belonged to Naboth, and Jezebel must beware how she exer-

cised arbitrary power. But even good laws demand upright magistrates. A wicked public opinion, a wicked ruler, a wicked or time-serving judge, may pervert the best institutions to evil purposes. What are the best laws against the influence of false witnesses, false pleadings and false judgments? The crime of Naboth's murder, if he had been smitten in secret or publicly mobbed in the streets of Jezreel, would have been less malicious and wicked by far than the queen made it now by an arraignment, a mock judgment and a capital punishment under the laws of God himself. Death itself was a small matter compared with this unjust and cruel manner of it; the mockery of a trial, the disgrace of a public execution, only in part relieved by the conviction in the public mind that accuser, witnesses and judges were alike perjured and partakers of the guilt of innocent blood.

The unscrupulous queen took the king's seal and wrote letters to the magistrates of Jezreel, commanding them to bring Naboth to trial upon a charge of blasphemy against God and the king. She indeed cared nothing for any blasphemy he could utter against the God whose altars and prophets had been the objects of her hatred. But it suits her purpose to dissemble, and even Jezebel can affect a zeal for Jehovah. We may hope that few magistrates in Israel would have complied so readily with this base proposition, but men's interests too often prepare them for any injustice. The

elders of Jezreel may have felt flattered by the residence of the royal household there, though it was scarcely permanent, but rather occasional. Doubtless the improvements made and projected by Ahab promised much for the attraction and wealth of their city; and his fellow-citizens may have felt indignant that Naboth should be so wanting in public spirit as to resist proposals so evidently for the benefit of the place. Selfishness easily leads on to injustice; and this poor but upright man had no helpers but his own approving thoughts. Yet here have we a complicated crime indeed. Ahab is guilty of the murder of Naboth; so is Jezebel; so are the elders of Jezreel; so were the witnesses that swore his life away; so were the citizens so far as they sympathized with known injustice. Not free from blame were they who saw and hated the wrong with no sign of protest. Moral responsibility cannot be divided so that many may bear its separate parts. It made this matter worse that no party uttered a word against the wrong.

The hypocrisy of the proceedings is as great as the injustice; and here is a flagrant violation both of religion and of law. A solemn fast-day is proclaimed, as if the divine honour must be vindicated or some grievous sin lamented. The nation is so changed that Jezebel is a professed Hebrew, and she who once trampled on the Lord's prophets must use the Lord's name to conceal this legal murder. We do not know whether Naboth had

any opportunity to defend himself, or whether he could directly impugn the testimony of the false witnesses. Little matter whether or not. Testimony and argument are alike useless where the judges are forsworn and the cause is already prejudged. The unhappy Naboth was condemned and put to death. Possibly his family shared his fate; for years afterward ( 2 Kings ix. 26) Jehu is said to have avenged the blood of Naboth and his sons. According to the Jewish law, blasphemy involved treason; and even if in the apostate kingdom there was any change here, Naboth's indictment charged him with speaking against the king. Modern Jews say that the estate of a traitor was forfeited to the crown, and the conviction of this man may have included the confiscation of his property.

Though Ahab was not so hardened as to plan this crime himself, he is ready to reap the advantages of it. But he met an unexpected barrier to peaceable possession. The providence of God only seemed to slumber. The deed of treachery and fraud is not hindered, yet the death of Naboth is not to pass unnoticed. Let not Ahab think that all that is done with impunity; indeed the crime is no sooner completed than, while Ahab passes to Jezreel to take possession of the vineyard, Elijah is sent to meet him on the coveted land, and to denounce upon him there the divine displeasure.

The very sight of this faithful man of God

awakened the terror of the guilty king. There is nothing more wonderful than the power of the guilty conscience to keep quiet its own convictions, unless indeed the ease with which the mind may be awakened to agonizing remorse is still more strange. Ahab knew what he had done before he met Elijah; he knew how contrary all this was to the law of God. Men fear those who rebuke sin, yet fear not sin itself; they dread that men should know their wickedness, yet are careless, though it is spread out before the eye of the All-seeing; their remorse is awakened when a man speaks, yet they are indifferent at God's word. If Elijah had not met Ahab, he would have been as guilty, yet his heart might have been hardened to indifference. When he saw the prophet his courage sank; he knew what he had to expect; his conscience troubled him, and he calls out against him as the enemy to his peace. Elijah made no remark upon this title, and yet it was most untrue and unjust. The prophet had never given the slightest token of personal hostility to Ahab. He might now have expostulated with him in the language afterward used by Paul, "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell the truth?" Gal. iv. 16. He might have reminded him of Solomon's teaching, that real hostility lay in a lying tongue and that flattering lips led on to ruin. Prov. xxvi. 28. A man's real foes are those who countenance or promote evil, either against him or in him; and his truest

friends are those who are most faithful to warn or rebuke every word or deed or tendency of evil. The reproving Elijah was less an enemy to Ahab than was the flattering wife of his bosom.

Yet indeed now it was too late for the faithful words of Elijah to benefit the guilty king. Time was—perhaps it is even here intimated that a true and permanent penitence was not impossible even for him—certainly time was, when the prophet's word, received and obeyed, would have been Ahab's life. But now the prophet speaks in severity, and with great earnestness and plainness he declares the Lord's just judgments upon him. Ahab's blood should fall upon that same plain of Jezreel where the innocent blood of Naboth had fallen, and Jezebel should meet a shocking end: she should fall from the window of that ivory palace, be trodden down on the border of the coveted vineyard, and be eaten by the dogs of Jezreel beneath the city's walls. And men stood by to hear Elijah's bold words who were to witness their fulfilment, and in part to put them in execution. 2 Kings ix. 25. These terrible declarations Elijah made to the trembling king in the name of a sin-avenging God. Not the Tishbite, but the Lord came forth to meet and trouble the sinner. The truth of the charge and the justice of the judgment were the chief elements of terror. So ever, when the conscience of man answers back to a reprover's words, the true weight of responsibility lies upon the sinner.

The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and the disobedient. They who complain of rebukes and judgment should complain most of themselves for doing that which deserves them. The sinner who is restless and angry under reproof is his own worst enemy—first, because of his sin against God, and next, because he rebels against that divine forbearance which uses rebukes rather than immediate judgment, that the guilty may be led to repentance.

Ahab was not so hardened in iniquity but that Elijah's words filled him with alarm, and one cannot think that he ever enjoyed the estate thus ruthlessly seized. He knew that Elijah's solemn denunciations would be fulfilled, and his soul was terrified. So much was he disturbed that he put on the external appearance of a penitent, and gave signs of a troubled heart. Yet his was the "sorrow of the world that worketh death." A half-repentance feels alarm and grief, and makes fair promises, and often deceives the man himself and those about him. But it omits important matters, and it is usually short-lived. Ahab rent his clothes, put on sackcloth, assumed the posture of humility, and went softly; but we do not read that he let go his hold upon the lands of Naboth, or reversed the ignominious judgment against the innocent, or gave any permanent proof that he then became a better man. Even these feeble tokens of penitence in a public man were allowed to delay the coming judg-

ments, God thus showing how readily he would have given his mercy upon a full and true repentance. And it is important for us to notice that even the most abandoned men—those who sell themselves to work iniquity until there are none like them—may be troubled by the word of God, may have their pangs and their tokens of repentance, may assume a religious garb, and yet be unreconciled to God and obnoxious to his wrath. We need beware, not only of gross sins, but of an imperfect and insincere repentance for our sins. True repentance not only fears sin, but hates it, is therefore ready to renounce it, and turns from it to the cheerful and hearty service of God.

This tragedy of the Jezreelite is a page of God's providence given us in his word to aid us in explaining the mysteries that belong to every age, and that even with divine teachings often perplex and distress us. "Lo these are the ungodly that prosper in the world; they increase in riches!" we are often ready to say, as we contrast the unequal dealings of the divine hand with the sons of men; and sometimes these things almost lead us to skepticism and desperation. So was it with a tired believer of ancient days: "As for me, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well-nigh slipped." Ps. lxxiii. 2. An innocent man quietly dwells in the inheritance of his fathers, and the monarch of the land takes a fancy to build a sumptuous palace near this humble home. Soon after the new-comer

casts a covetous eye upon the fields of his neighbour. Naboth had a better title to his land than Ahab had to the throne upon which he reigned; but the king desires a larger garden, and right and justice must not thwart his wishes. Even if Naboth acts from virtuous principle—which may stand firm against inducements to which expediency or policy would yield—his piety does not shield him from this gross injustice. Innocence and piety are unjustly accused; speedy condemnation follows; he, and perhaps his family, suffer death, and the estate passes into the guilty hands that are stained with his blood.\*

Nor is this a rare chapter in the world's providential history. God's people have often been perplexed by similar occurrences, and God's prophets and ministers have often been called upon to furnish a solution of the mystery. Yet, indeed, one single thought may be a key, that, fitting all the intricate wards, may unlock the door of this chamber of providential mysteries. God rules the world, and sees the right and wrong in human character and doings, and administers righteousness

\* The LXX. and Josephus place the narrative concerning Naboth before the wars with Benhadad. This may have been done to throw together the entire narrative of Ahab's dealings with Syria; but it is little matter whether the death of Naboth occurred a year or two earlier or not. Yet we account for the king's wealth, as shown in building his palaces, more easily by supposing that it resulted from the two great victories.

in truth and equity, BUT NOT ALL HERE AND NOW! The good things of this life, argued Augustine many centuries ago,\* are not God's best gifts; he bestows them upon his foes; he withholds them from his friends; there are better things hereafter, of which the wicked shall have no share. So again, if all sin received its manifest punishment in this life, men would refuse to believe in a future judgment; yet if no sin was judged here, they would disbelieve a providence. That the righteous fall into evil, and are not delivered, that sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, and that sometimes evil workers seem to escape with entire impunity, are all proofs that this world is not the final place of divine judgments, but that there is a judgment to come, where God will vindicate his righteousness.

True, there are perplexities here. Superior suffering is neither a proof of greater sinfulness nor of greater righteousness. These may not be greater sinners because they suffer such things. Some men may suffer both here and hereafter; to be wretched here is no preparative for happiness there. It is not the suffering but the cause that makes the martyr. We must regard not only what is suffered, but who suffers, and how and why and to what end. In the same fire gold is purified and stubble is burned; by the same process of threshing chaff is scattered and wheat is purged; by the same deal-

\* See the *Civit. Dei*, lib. i. ch. viii.

ings of providence may either faith or unbelief be strengthened. Happy are they who learn like Asaph in the sanctuary of God, and choose divine guidance through the dark leadings of providence. Better Naboth's death than Ahab's, after all. And had Ahab died in peace and unrebuked so far as this world is concerned, the divine vindication would one day be fully made. "Yet surely I know," says the inspired wise man, "that it shall be well with them that fear God; . . . it shall not be well with the wicked." Eccles. viii. 13.

Ahab also shows us how much men, especially how much some dispositions, are influenced by evil companionship. This prince did not lack courage and enterprise, yet was he easily led to evil by a more commanding mind. Unhappily for him, the ties of nearest relationship were used to draw him to evil. He sold himself to work evil at the solicitations of Jezebel, his wife. Doubtless many a man makes his wife, many a woman makes her husband, worse or better than they would otherwise be; but as it is easier to drag down than to raise up, evil workers have the advantage. How important is the influence of our associations, especially our relationships; salvation or damnation may result from the choice of even a casual companion, yet even permanent relations are often thoughtlessly entered into. Still, all responsibility leaves each individual under his personal obligations. If Jezebel was guilty in stirring up Ahab's passions, Ahab was

guilty in yielding. We must resist the influence of our nearest friends to evil, and cling more closely to right and duty the more they endeavour to mislead us. And where evil associates can be shunned they should be. So dangerous are the allurements of ungodly companions that our prayer to be kept from temptation demands that we do all we can to avoid the scenes of evil and those who would tempt us to engage in them.

There is no more dreadful sight on earth than an impenitent sinner summoned to appear for eternal judgment before the bar of God. When we think of the stern Elijah meeting the king of Israel surrounded by Jehu and Bidkar and other guards (2 Kings ix. 25), on his way to that splendid palace, and there foretelling his dreadful doom, we judge that the guilty king may well tremble. When Naboth refused to gratify his covetousness he became sick, and could not eat. Well may he lose his relish for royal dainties at Elijah's stern words. And yet the sentence of condemnation is written in the word of Elijah's God against many an impenitent soul who remains careless and unconcerned. Against every unrepenting sinner abides the wrath of God, and the words of Elijah were not more certain of fulfilment than are the solemn threatenings that address themselves to us. We all are sinners; but let us give careful thought and humble prayer to this great thing that we be not impenitent sinners. Even Ahab might have found mercy had he truly

humbled himself at the prophet's rebuke. And sinful souls, now justly exposed to God's displeasure, may find salvation by confessing and forsaking their sins.

## CHAPTER XV.

### *THE DEATH OF AHAB.*

WE have given our thoughts somewhat to the character and life of Ahab; we have seen somewhat of his rebellions against God, of his disregard of solemn warnings and of his insufficient repentance. Now the end has come of God's long forbearance with an impenitent sinner, and this man, who has wrought more evil than any of the kings before him, must obey that summons which no mortal can resist. The life of one who sins thus against God is a fearful preparation for death; rather it is an utter want of preparation. Yet, indeed, it is not to the circumstances of the death of such a man, or to the impressions made upon those that are around him, that our thoughts should chiefly be given. Ahab died in battle, perhaps with the reputation among many of a patriotic prince, and the connection of Elijah's words with their fulfilment may have been at least somewhat overlooked by his contemporaries. Our true judgment of death should consider it as it appears in the sight of God, and we should remember that no earthly praise or earthly pomp can help the guilty

sinner as he passes on to the world beyond. "When he dieth he can carry nothing away."

Three years have passed since the last victory over Syria—one or two perhaps since the death of Naboth and the transient penitence of Ahab. It may be Elijah's words are half forgotten, yet their fulfilment hastens on. The kings of Judah and Israel at this time were in close alliance. A dozen years before this time—perhaps earlier than Ahab's greatest wickedness—Jehoshaphat had married his son to Ahab's daughter, and thus the two kingdoms were at peace. Now Ahab proposed to Jehoshaphat that they should join their forces and make war upon Syria. It is likely that the immediate occasion of this was the refusal of Benhadad to fulfil the treaty that Ahab had so foolishly made. Easy terms, and even those not fulfilled, show how much the king of Israel had lost. The strong town of Ramoth Gilead had originally belonged to Israel; it was doubtless one of the cities that were by the treaty to be restored, yet the Syrians still held possession of it. Doubtless Ahab seemed to act but the part of a patriotic prince when he resolved to take this city, which was his naturally and by treaty. Just at this time, it would seem casually, the king of Judah paid a visit to Samaria, and was invited by Ahab to assist him in the expedition. We see no reason why he should join his forces to attack Syria, with whom his kingdom had no quarrel, and he himself is unwilling to consent

to Ahab's proposal until he has asked divine counsel. We suppose that Ahab cared little for all the prophets of the Lord would say; he makes no sincere requests to know the divine will; yet out of compliance with the well-known opinions of his visitor, and desirous of his assistance, he cannot but do as Jehoshaphat wishes.

The king of Judah here is wholly out of his place, and puts himself in great peril through his improper intimacy with this wicked associate. But we chiefly turn our thoughts to Ahab, who here displays to us the madness and yet the deceitfulness of an impenitent heart. He ought now to have been specially careful of any rash movements, since he had been divinely warned that the displeasure of God was upon him and that his life was forfeited. And as foolish men sometimes boldly do too late what would have been well done if done earlier, so Ahab has lost the favourable opportunity for humbling the power of Syria. It is of no avail that the right to Ramoth Gilead was his, that Jehoshaphat was his friend, or that the lying lips of four hundred prophets flatter him with promises of success, for indeed he is reckless of advice; to go up is his full determination, and even a new warning from a faithful prophet has no power to hold him back from rushing upon his destruction.

When the king of Judah requested that the voice of the prophets should be heard, an assembly of about four hundred of them were gathered at

Samaria. We cannot suppose that these were professedly idolatrous prophets, for Jehoshaphat would refuse to regard them at all. Yet they were not the faithful servants of Jehovah. We may repeat the opinion before expressed, that at no time in Israel had the mask been openly thrown off and the service of Israel's God positively renounced. This is not the usual method of apostasy in any land or age. The calf at Sinai and the calves of Jeroboam were symbols of the true God; the people served Jehovah and Moloch at the same time, (Zeph. i. 5), and even the worship of Baal and Astarte may have been mixed with professed reverence for the Lord. These prophets before Ahab may have been the same that "ate at Jezebel's table," and who were saved by her cunning from slaughter at Carmel. They were therefore professedly true prophets, yet they were false prophets. They prophesied therefore as they knew the king desired them, and strengthened his purpose to go up to the battle.

But Jehoshaphat is not quite satisfied: perhaps he knew just who these prophets were, and intimates that he would rather see a prophet OF THE LORD. No doubt he knew Ahab well enough to suspect that he sought to be pleased rather than profited by the teachings he invited. He may even have missed some one among the Israelitish prophets whose voice he ought to hear upon so great an occasion as this. Where were Elijah and

Elisha when the two kings take counsel for an important war? Their word would be worth more than the counsels of four hundred. He asks for another. It is too much to expect that Ahab would name Elijah as his counsellor for any occasion. Yet better far if he had, for truth is independent of all personal feeling. There is another prophet whom the king names. This is perhaps the same man who had reproved him for his release of Benhadad three years ago, and some think that for that he had ever since that time been imprisoned. Certainly now an officer knew just where to find him, and after this interview he was sent to prison. This man, whether upon that occasion or some other, had given offence to the king by some reproof, and Ahab hated him because he had not the flatterer's lip for a wicked man. Yet to please the king, Micaiah, the son of Imlah, was sent for. While he was coming, the prophets reiterated their declarations that the expedition should succeed, and one of them with horns of iron symbolically foretold the utter destruction of Syria.

Meanwhile the king's messenger to Micaiah besought him not to contradict the other prophets, and perhaps made promises of freedom and promotion if his words pleased the king. But we may well mark the contrast between a wicked man who is unfaithful to his own interest and his own soul, and a good man, who is faithful for others, for

truth and for God, though he puts his life in peril. Ahab hates the man who speaks the truth, though indeed what truth can speak good to a man who is perversely bent upon wickedness? Micaiah will speak the word of the Lord. It is evident that the advice of this prophet was first given ironically. He told the king to go up and prosper, for the Lord should deliver the city into the king's hands. In words this seems exactly like the other prophets, but the king, who wished just such words, evidently takes no such meaning from them. There is no falsehood in irony, even though the words are not the truth, for a man's tones are as much a part of his meaning as his speech. Tones and words may, either of them, be used ambiguously, but when a truthful impression is designedly made, the interests of truth are maintained, even though it requires tones, gestures, looks and words, all combined, to make the impression. Ahab knew the prophet's meaning. Yet what deceitful words are these upon the lips of the wicked king! He who hates the prophet for speaking the truth, yet solemnly declares that he ever wished only to hear the truth. Doubtless this was in part to please the king of Judah, though Ahab also may have practised deceit upon himself.

A solemn adjuration, like that here used by Ahab, always has the force, in scriptural usage, of putting the person addressed as if upon oath to answer truly the whole case. So this prophet,

thus solemnly spoken to, answers to the serious form of the adjuration, whatever may have been the speaker's mind. He declares a vision he had had of Israel, as sheep scattered upon the mountains without a shepherd, and of the voice of the Lord saying, Let them scatter, each to his home. This parable was easily understood, and then the prophet related a vision still more expressive. Several passages of the Scriptures speak as if the fallen as well as the holy angels are allowed access to the divine presence. So Satan came among the sons of God when the divine permission was given him against all but the life of Job. So here lying as well as truthful spirits go forth to influence the prophets. This much is meant certainly, that good and evil are equally under the divine control, that even these false prophets, not without divine permission, speak their messages, and that thus they are both "deceivers and being deceived." Nor let this seem contrary to the divine character. We cannot explain the mystery of the existence of evil, but we can easily decide that something far more dreadful than sin in its worst forms would be the doctrine that God himself cannot control it. He does control it. It goes not one step farther than he pleases. Why he allows it to exist, and to go so far, are things known only to him. But its worst aspects are by his allowance, and not in spite of him. He is the ALMIGHTY. These were false prophets, and they spoke to please man, not

God, and at the will of a wicked prince, and God allows them "to eat the fruit of their own ways, and be filled with their own devices." A lying spirit deceives those who love lies. And so it is yet. The apostle warns us in far later days that "evil men and seducers will wax worse and worse, deceivers and being deceived." (2 Tim. iii. 13.) A chief danger of sin is in its miserable increase.

This solemn warning of the prophet should have produced some effect upon his hearers. This at least they knew, that no motive but the love of truth could influence him in this testimony. The other prophets had their base motives; this man could but gain frowns and a prison. His words kindled the indignation of his auditors. One of the false prophets, proud of his office and presumptuously supposing that he was taught of the Divine Spirit, gave good proof that he was not by blows and insulting language. The calm reply of Micaiah is what we might look for in one taught from above and conscious of his truthfulness. But Ahab had no design originally to be influenced by any counsels contrary to his wishes, and he had art enough to persuade Jehoshaphat to accompany him to battle, notwithstanding the faithful remonstrance of Micaiah. As for this faithful prophet, his reward was to be cast into prison—absurdly made a hostage for the refutation of his words. Yet he was bold enough, in the very face of the sentence, to maintain the truth of his previous dec-

larations and to reaffirm the warning that Ahab was now hastening to his own death.

Perversely refusing the last warning given by faithful lips, the guilty king went forth to the conflict. Yet when he drew near the field of battle he was not so careless as external appearances would indicate. The fears of wicked men may be repressed by false shame, they may boastingly declare that they know no fear, yet they are often ill at ease. And now Ahab feels it necessary to use double precautions against the dangers of which he had been forewarned. The king of Syria, whose life he had spared, gave special orders that his warriors should make every effort to slay Ahab; and though these orders may not have been known in the Israelitish camp, the king of Israel uses efforts to secure himself. But he uses devices more cunning than honorable. He is willing to shield his own life and to expose that of his friend and ally. Ahab disguised himself; *i. e.*, he dressed himself as an officer of some inferior rank, so that he would be placed in no special danger. With this we should find no fault, if a like expedient had been adopted by Jehoshaphat; but Ahab expressly urged him to put on his royal robes. This was nothing less than putting the king of Judah to special exposure in order to save himself. Guilt thus not only makes a coward of Ahab, but betrays also the hollowness of his friendship. Indeed, the friendship of a wicked man usually carries him only to the limit

of his own self interest. And how can we judge that any one who disregards his duty to God, as did Ahab, would deal faithfully by his friend? Yet this is worldly friendship in all ages, and the professed servants of God, who, like Jehoshaphat, make alliances with the enemies of their Lord, put their souls in peril, because they are thus led to engagements not divinely approved, and because their treacherous companions take particular pains to put them in special exposure; and they congratulate their own sharpness when they are successful. This conduct of Ahab was the more base, because the quarrel was his, and the advantages hoped for were for Israel, and not for Judah. Shall we blame most the credulous simplicity of Jehoshaphat or the crafty meanness of Ahab?

Rather let us learn more carefully the practical lesson, that the friendship of the world is enmity to God. We often see professedly pious persons warmly attached to the society of the ungodly, drawn by them into their worldly amusements and engagements, and often thrust forward as if some special attention was thus paid to them. Yet truly the flattery and false representations which thus make such a one the leader is like the treachery of this cowardly king, who takes the meaner rank to save his wretched life, and adorns Jehoshaphat that he may take all the risk and exposure. The king of Judah should not have been there at all, warned as he had been by the faithful Micaiah;

and few servants of God are thrust forward into scenes of guilty indulgence without the warnings of faithful pastors and the upbraidings of their own consciences; so that it only adds to their guilt that they prefer the deceitful flatteries of the ungodly to the earnest voice of truth. As this battle proceeded Jehoshaphat was exposed to great danger.

The leaders of the Syrians imagined that they saw in him the king of Israel, and the ungrateful Benhadad had commanded them to aim expressly at his life. As there were thirty-two captains, all under the same order, it seemed impossible for the object of their vengeance to escape. If even the king slew one and another, if he changed his place upon the field of strife, everywhere he met new foes aiming directly at him. Perhaps several bodies of selected troops, with energetic leaders, surrounded the life-guards of Jehoshaphat and threatened to overwhelm him, and he was forced to retreat so repeatedly that the true state of the case was made evident. Ahab had laid a cunning plan; it seemed every way successful; and the betrayed Jehoshaphat may well fear for his life. In his extremity, surrounded by the enemy, he cried to God for help; and though he had gone into danger contrary to divine counsel, God delivered him. The enemy learned that this was not the man they sought, and under divine restraint they departed from him. 2 Chron. xviii. 31, 32.

But if a righteous man, overreached by the

cunning of the wicked and sinfully disobedient to the divine will, is yet mercifully delivered in the perils into which he has ventured, the cunning of the wicked, though apparently successful, cannot succeed against the divine purposes. The men specially charged to destroy Ahab do not recognize him, and specially overlook him in the meanness of his disguise; and it may be that exulting thoughts of his security swelled in the bosom of the wicked king as the progress of the battle left him unharmed. But Ahab's great quarrel was not with Benhadad, but with the living God, whose eye no disguise can escape, and who never lacks agencies to execute his will just when and as he pleases. In this case the casual nature of the agency gives only the clearer proof of divine vengeance. An unknown soldier in the Syrian army shot his arrow, as men often do in the thick conflict, without any particular aim. We wonder how it is that so many shots are thrown away, when in the array of battle one would think that every bullet must strike some man. Yet facts show that a very small proportion of the shots fired do any harm at all. A random shot seems almost certainly a shot thrown away. But this man's arrow, beyond his knowledge either when he shot or afterward, had a special commission from God. We read in the history of Philip of Macedon that having given offence to a celebrated marksman, the archer took deliberate revenge for the insult. Being

among the defenders of a certain town against the king's attacks, he wrote upon an arrow: "To Philip's right eye," and then shot the shaft directly to that mark. This was human skill. But in the case before us not the skill of the bowman, but the directings of God's providence, sped the fatal arrow to the joint of Ahab's armour. The divine will had already been expressed in the language of Micaiah, that Ahab was to fall in the battle, and this unaimed arrow is God's messenger of death. Under his disguise the king wore iron armour, but even this could not avail him in the hour of his predestined doom. The fatal shaft entered at one of the joints; so serious was the wound that the king at once ordered his chariot-driver to bear him off the field, for both the wound of the arrow and the words of the prophet assured him that this was a fatal stroke. Yet then he seems in his desperation to have countermanded the order, or perhaps he returned after his wound was dressed; he bid them brace him up in his chariot as though still unwounded, and continued in a still fiercer conflict, fighting the Syrians as long as daylight lasted.

No sinful soul can escape the just judgment of God. Even the plans that seem successful cannot succeed against the Almighty; but every rebel may be sure his sin will find him out. God can use the most casual and unexpected agencies to effect his purposes. And let us not be diverted from the serious consideration of Ahab's impenitence by the

courage with which he sustained the fierceness of the battle even after he received a deadly wound. The main matter touching every man's real character pertains to his standing before God, and not to the discharge of earthly engagements. Ahab died in battle for Israel, seeking to win a city that belonged of right to his kingdom, and worldly lips might say that his was the death of a brave warrior. Yet the judgment of God is according to truth. This man was a wicked despiser and persecutor of God's prophets; one who sold himself to work iniquity; one who hated to hear the faithful counsels of truth; one who trifled with his own best opportunities; one who fell now by the direct judgment of his angry God. The very casual manner of his death requires that we should attribute it to the divine hand. For in all the Scriptures the direct, minute and universal control of God in providential matters is plainly affirmed. This was a chance shot so far as man was concerned, but there is no chance before him.

The battle was adverse to Israel. At the close of the day a proclamation was made: Every man to his own city, and every man to his own country. Oriental armies, in ancient times, were composed of men called forth by the king's command, without the regular enrolment and pay of our modern practice. To a large extent each man brought his own provisions; the army was a gathering of undisciplined men, and after a defeat the whole was fre-

quently disbanded, each man being directed to seek his own home. Thus, after this great battle of Ramoth Gilead, the vision of Micaiah was fulfilled. Israel was without a shepherd, and every man returned to his house. Yet of course there were chosen bodies—especially the king's own guards—not subject to this law of easy dispersion. These took care of the body of Ahab, who died that same evening. His chariot was washed in the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked his blood. Yet we may notice that the original words of Elijah, that the dogs should lick his blood in the vineyard of Naboth, were fulfilled in his sons and not in himself. For upon Ahab's repentance it had been subsequently said that this evil should not come in his days, but upon his sons. 2 Kings xxi. 29.

Josephus says that the false prophet Zedekiah encouraged Ahab by alleging a contradiction between Elijah's prediction and this of Micaiah.

Let us not fail to notice in this friendship of a good man and a bad one that God was displeased with both Jehoshaphat and Ahab, and did not withhold the evidence of his displeasure from both. There was indeed a very great difference between the two men, as the professed servants of God may deserve rebuke and chastisement, while yet they are not as bad as their wicked companions. Jehoshaphat in general was an upright man, sincerely, though not with sufficient firmness, seeking the divine honour, and there were good things

found him in seeking after God. But his inconsistency—too easily influenced by flattering lips—put his life in great danger; only divine forbearance was his guard; and upon his return home from this battle-field the prophet Jehu was sent to rebuke him for this ungodly alliance, and to declare that the further wrath of God should be upon him. And every professed lover of God in later times, easily misled to worldly conformity and to sinful associations, should hear the solemn warning of this prophet in the ears of this king of Judah: “Shouldst thou help the ungodly and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord!” 2 Chron. xix. 2. It is the sin of many Christians to look with mildness and toleration, and even with complacency, upon many things that are dangerous to the souls of men; they join in easy familiarity with those whose opinions and practices are thoroughly worldly and indeed impious; and they even justify efforts to unite worldly follies with Christian consistency, though they are warned that these attempts are displeasing to God, dangerous to themselves and ruinous to others.

Wickedness does not change its nature, no matter what flattering forms it may assume, no matter in whom it may be found; and every man acts presumptuously, and may well fear the wrath of a holy God, who does contrary to his holy commandments. In the divine mercy, Jehoshaphat did not perish; yet not all who venture to follow his sin

may find the deliverance he did. And no doubt many griefs belong to inconsistent Christians, because they love them that hate the Lord; hopes are clouded; fears are prevalent; comforts turn to pangs; for the Lord will smite and chastise his disobedient servants. Many a man can easily discern, if he faithfully judges himself, why it is not with him as in months that are passed; and he can find renewed peace only by a true repentance. But let men that are impenitent in their sins learn profitable lessons from the death of Ahab. If we look back over the life of this man, we may see that God hedged up his way by serious warnings, and calls to repentance, and opportunities of doing right, and invitations to the divine service. But Ahab became only more sullen and obstinate under these divine dealings. Let us not say Elijah dealt too sternly with him. Let us rather acknowledge that Ahab's guilty heart was his worst enemy. Nor can we find any apology for him in the influence of Jezebel, or in evils already in progress when he came to the throne. There is an individual, personal responsibility belonging to every sinner, that remains entire, however he may be influenced for good or evil by the circumstances or persons about him. God so deals with every man that his judgments are according to righteousness for all that the man is and for all that he does; and thus no reasonable motive can ever justify man's rebellion against God. The sinner cannot disguise himself

from God's eye; he cannot clothe himself in armour where an arrow divinely directed can find no unguarded spot, and unwitting instruments may work the divine vengeance. Nor is any man more safe from the messengers that God sends, though he should keep himself from the field of battle and live in the security of his quiet home. God's arrows execute his commissions at noon or midnight; they never miss the mark nor strike the wrong man. Let those who disregard the word of the Lord fear the hour—all unknown and unexpected—when the final messenger shall come. Ahab was warned of the very day: we may not be. Even in the hour of highest health and security and exaltation may the fatal arrow be aimed in secret at the heart.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### *FIRE FROM HEAVEN.*

**M**ANY of these narratives of the Old Testament are doubly interesting and instructive because they are mentioned, explained, illustrated and applied to practical uses in the New Testament; thus often furnishing us with both text and commentary by divine inspiration. So in the next scene of Elijah's history we may first see his doings, and then notice the reply of our Lord to his disciples, when upon a certain occasion they wished him to follow Elijah's example, in calling down fire from heaven to consume those who had refused to befriend him.

Evidently the contest upon Carmel and the putting to death of the priests of Baal had all the effect of a great victory for the cause of truth. Perhaps even Elijah's faint-heartedness, when he fled from the threats of Jezebel, may have led the people to give the due honour to God, and have kept him humble while yet the good work went on. Every intimation proves that Baal worship declined; even Ahab and Jezebel recognize Jehovah's worship and observe the forms of Israelitish law; and

for ten or more years Elijah's quiet labours were prosecuted among his people. But Ahab died, as he had lived, without token of true repentance; and his son and successor gives proof that he is in heart devoted to the bad principles of his parents. Indeed, as Jezebel still lived, her son was doubtless controlled by her imperious will, as her husband had been. After a reign of between one and two years the new king met with an accident, which discovered his idolatrous temper and resulted in his death.

He fell down through a lattice. The houses of the East are built with flat roofs, upon which the people walk and often sleep; and by habit they become careless of the danger of falling from them. The laws of Moses required that every man should make a "battlement" or balustrade around the roof, to prevent persons from falling; and they held the owner of the house responsible for the injury done if no such protection was upon the building. Deut. xxii. 8. Perhaps this was the "lattice" here referred to; it may have given way when the king leaned upon it, and allowed him to fall upon the marble pavement of the court beneath. The outer "battlement" is generally a wall; the inner is a railing. The injury was serious, yet not necessarily fatal. The king sought supernatural aid. Though he was a worshiper of Baal, it is likely that these services were not so boldly rendered as they were a few years before; his own kingdom now possesses

no oracle of idolatry ; so, desiring to consult one, he must needs send to Ekron, one of the five cities of the Philistines, where was a special temple of Baalzebub. The name signifies the Fly-God. While it gives evidence of the decline of idolatry in Israel that the king must send to a foreign land for this oracle, it shows the incorrigible idolatry of Ahab's house, aggravates the sin of Ahaziah, and makes it more appropriate for Elijah to interfere.

This new display of rebellion against God must not go unnoticed, and the rod of divine vengeance must again chastise the house of Ahab. As the messengers of Ahaziah passed toward Ekron, they met a man clothed in coarse camel's hair, with a girdle of leather—the usual rough garments of a Hebrew prophet. With a voice of authority which they dare not gainsay he sent them back to the king, with an earlier and more certain reply than they could have secured from Ekron. He told them that their errand was an insult to the God of Israel, and that for this the king should die. When the overawed messengers returned, Ahaziah easily knew, from the description of the man and the tenor of his words, that this was the resolute opposer of Ahab's house. Yet was he not dismayed or humbled at the sentence of death against himself, or, growing desperate because he knew he must die, he was highly incensed at the prophet, the only man in the land who would dare thus to resist and thus to address the king. Resolved to

secure Elijah, and to avenge the quarrel of his family at any cost, the king sent a band of soldiers to take him prisoner.

Judging from his haughty words to the prophet, the leader of this band had much of his master's spirit. But Elijah now comes in judgment to Ahaziah and to men in Israel like minded. In answer to the captain's haughty tone he called for fire from heaven, and at his fearful word the lightnings flashed forth from the sky and consumed the entire band. The king, hearing of this result, sent another company, and they likewise perished at the prophet's word. But these captains address Elijah as a man of God. Perhaps they gave him this title in derision, and were justly punished for their mockery. But indeed it would make the matter no better to say that they recognized his full right to the name, for in that case they should have spoken respectfully. But the second captain speaks even more imperatively than the first. How obstinate the king seems, who can still send a third company after two had been so terribly destroyed! But the commander of this band was a wiser man than his master, and learns salutary lessons from those who preceded him. Laying aside the demands of authority, he came as a suppliant to the prophet's feet, and besought him to deal otherwise with him than with the others. No man can harden himself against God and prosper: this captain gained his life and his errand by humility

and submission. At the divine command Elijah went with this man; he had nothing to fear from the dying king, and it was well to repeat his message fearlessly before the very court, perhaps also in the presence of Jezebel. Thus the authority of Elijah's God was boldly and publicly vindicated. No man dare attempt to revenge Ahaziah. The king's death, which soon occurred, made the lesson more impressive, and as he had no son, his brother Joram or Jehoram reigned in his stead.

This solemn judgment upon a hundred men was from the lips of Elijah, but directly by the power of God. The life of this prophet consistently exhibits the spirit of law: we first read of him shutting, and next opening, the heavens to withhold or give rain upon the earth, and in this, the last public act of his ministry, calling down fire upon the despisers of divine authority. Let us not omit to notice that these particular characteristics of his ministry are in the book of Revelation attributed to the two witnesses, whose office is to prophesy in sackcloth during the prevalence of the great apostasy, xi. 3, *seq.* Not only like Moses should they possess the power of turning water to blood, but, like Elijah, power to open and shut heaven, to destroy their foes by fire, and to ascend up in the sight of their enemies. We suppose whatever may be the full meaning of the particular expressions or the fulfilment of the prophecy that the mission of these who should resist the apostasy should be

one like that of Elijah, of law, calling the people to repentance and reformation; yet not indeed successfully, for they were to be slain. But to denounce divine judgment seems the appropriate and necessary work of a divine messenger in times of abounding wickedness, and Elijah is the exemplar of the reforming prophets.

Yet indeed it is our privilege to look upon a greater than Elijah. We learn only half the lesson of this fire from heaven, as it flashes forth from that angry sky, and leaves Ahaziah's messengers dead at the prophet's feet. Let us turn from the Old Testament to the New; having learned the lesson of law, let us be prepared to receive also the teaching of the gospel. From Elijah the servant let our eyes look upon Elijah's Lord. We are told that the disciples of Christ, when they passed through this district of country with their Lord, and the inhabitants refused to show them the common duties of hospitality, were exceedingly indignant. Perhaps Peter and John, because they had a little while before this seen the glorified Elijah upon the Mount of Transfiguration, and because now they were in the very region where Elijah did this thing, were forcibly reminded of the fire from heaven, and thought that the greater dignity of their Lord should be thus terribly vindicated.

The Samaritans, in the days of the gospel history, were a mixed race, half Jews, half Gentiles. They were not esteemed Gentiles, for they dwelt

within the holy land, kept the law of Moses, practised circumcision and refused idolatry; our Lord, who never preached but "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," yet preached to them; and the apostles preached at Samaria (Acts viii.) at a time when they would not have preached to the Gentiles. Acts x. 28. We may properly call the Samaritans a sect of Jewish errorists. They recognized the only living God, received a part of the Scriptures, and kept the Jewish services in part. But they had built a temple of their own upon Mount Gerizim, and, refusing the worship at Jerusalem, they showed no sympathy with those that paid service there. Between the Jews proper and the Samaritans existed many prejudices and alienations. "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John iv. 9) we are told in one passage. Yet this does not mean they never held intercourse. On the contrary, our Lord remained among them upon their own invitation; and we read that in various ways they had some communication. Perhaps the indignation of the sons of Zebedee was roused for the very reason that the Samaritans refused to receive our Lord upon religious grounds. He was on his way to the feast of Jerusalem, and therefore they would show him no hospitality in a Samaritan village. We do not know with how many attendants he journeyed. He may have gone with fewer than usual; for John's gospel assures us (viii. 10) that he went up "secretly" to this feast. But the reason

of refusing him their hospitalities was, that he was on his way to Jerusalem. James and John thought this so insulting that they would have it punished as Elijah destroyed the companies of Ahaziah's soldiers. But their Lord looks upon the matter in quite a different light, gives them a mild rebuke of the temper they cherished, and calmly seeks shelter in another and more hospitable village.

An old writer remarks significantly, "When two persons do the same thing, it is not the same."\* The justifiable acts of good men may be universally copied, through differences of time, circumstances, motives and results to be secured; and it becomes us here to note the differences, that we may both vindicate Elijah in calling down fire from heaven and our Lord in refusing so to do.

There is obviously a very great difference in the offences. The sin of the king of Israel was a direct and flagrant contempt of God and of Elijah as his servant. The controversy between Ahab and Elijah was one of many years' standing; many judgments had already fallen upon the family and upon the kingdom through the iniquity of the royal house; this son, instead of showing any disposition to serve the Lord, gives every token of an incorrigible and impenitent mind; he committed this presumptuous fault of sending for Elijah to take him by force, at the very moment when he was himself doomed to die for his tendencies to

\* Chemnitz, Harmon. Evang. ch. xcvi. p. 1787.

idolatry; and it seemed highly important to give proof that Elijah's power to reprove had not expired with the death of Ahab.

The offence of the Samaritans was every way different, in itself and in the motives that prompted it. Theirs was a serious error, so far as the principle is concerned that lies at the root of it. It is the same error that has wrought much mischief in various ages; the same indeed that belonged to the two zealous disciples of Jesus at the very moment of their indignation against the Samaritans. These villagers judged that to maintain their own worship implied non-intercourse—perhaps intolerance—toward those who worshipped not with them. Yet true religion does not justify them in refusing the rites of hospitality to needy travellers, simply because theirs were different religious sentiments. While the sacred Scriptures never make men indifferent to truth, or teach us that the difference is trifling between truth and error; while indeed they bid us not receive into our houses or bid God-speed to those who array themselves against the truth; yet all this is widely different from the spirit of intolerance or persecution, or even of judgment shown toward those who differ from us. Nothing is of higher value than truth; therefore must we ever prize it, must we refuse all compromises with error, must we earnestly pursue it ourselves and urge its claims upon others. And so we should not receive as religious teachers those who proclaim serious

errors, nor give them the welcome of our hospitality, nor throw our influence in their favour, considered as religious teachers. Still this is very different from denying their claims upon our humanity, and still more different from saying that because we may not favour men's opinion, we may persecute their persons. The highest estimate of truth leaves us free to hold some intercourse with those who do not embrace it, to extend kindness and the offices of humanity to its bitterest foes; to keep ourselves in a right frame, however wrong they may be, and to rely upon the influence of the truth to secure truth's best victories.

We need not think it strange that neither the Samaritans nor our Lord's disciples understood the true principles of religious toleration, nor could discern the just medium between countenancing and persecuting religious opinions. The rights of conscience were but poorly comprehended for many subsequent ages. Our Lord himself, of course, understood the whole matter, so he refused to listen to his indignant friends, and meekly turned aside and sought hospitality elsewhere. And we should judge of the error of the Samaritans as he did, with due allowance for their prejudices and for the age to which they belonged. Besides, their refusal to entertain them was attended by no harsh reproaches; to say the most of it, it was the mildest form of religious bigotry, so that, upon the whole, their wrong was vastly less reprehensible than the

great wickedness of Ahaziah for which Elijah had called down the fire from heaven.

There should also be noticed a very great difference between the prophets. Christ was indeed greater than Elijah, and his well-known deeds of mercy should have insured him a welcome wherever he went. Yet the Samaritans may have known him less than the Israelitish king and his soldiers knew Elijah. But *these* differences we should rather note—that Elijah was a prophet of the law, come to announce the displeasure of God, and addressed men in the sternest tones; while Christ is the author of the gospel, secures salvation for men, and calls them in mercy to lay hold upon it. The divine dispensations to which they respectively belong are wonderfully different. We do not say these things as excusing Elijah. He needs no apology, for his severity can be fully justified. In no proper sense does the grace of the gospel come into collision with the righteousness of the law. This is the glory of the gospel, that finding no fault with the law or with those who teach the law's lessons, it secures what the law cannot. So, though our Lord here does not follow Elijah's example, he expresses no censure upon the judgment wrought by the prophet. And not only the author of the gospel, but every sinner accepting its mercy, is led to magnify the excellency of the law, from whose curse he is delivered. The spirit of the law differs greatly from the grace of the gospel. And this

same John, who would now call down fire from heaven, came back to Samaria in later years, after the outpouring of the Spirit, to preach the gospel in many of their villages to the saving of souls. Acts viii. 14, 25.

Besides, there was a great difference between Elijah's purpose in calling down fire from heaven and the apparent object of the indignant disciples. The prophet did not this important thing through the petulant impulse of personal feeling. To any call of private revenge no such answer would have been given from the skies. He did thus to vindicate the majesty of the God of Israel against the wickedness of Ahab's house, especially against this new insult of King Ahaziah, and to maintain his authority as a prophet against the king's menace, for Ahaziah sent these soldiers on no peaceful errand. No such plea could justify the disciples. The Samaritans declined to receive our Lord and those that were with him ; but they made no threats, and we have no intimations that these were incorrigible sinners, who might now receive the speedy wrath of heaven.

And doubtless our Lord's reproof to his disciples may remind his people in all time that we are often ignorant of ourselves, and that our apparent zeal for him is not always as pure as we imagine. Christ's disciples, under his eye, and their brethren ever since, might still need Christ's reproof for exhibiting an unchristian temper. Some persons are

prone to be censorious from natural disposition : this unhappy temper grows by indulgence, until they are always on the lookout for other people's failings ; they imagine that they are zealous for religion, when, indeed, there is a large admixture of self-ignorance and personal depravity, and they need to beware lest the censure of the Saviour truly pertains to them. Yet, indeed, this improper spirit belongs to no particular class ; it is the sin of our fallen nature, and it may often be found where we least look for it. It was the beloved disciple, the mild and gentle John, that forbade one to cast out devils because he followed not his Master (Mark ix. 38), and who joined in this request for fire upon the Samaritans. Let those who love Christ watch against indulging a temper so different from the mind of Christ, and learn to know indeed of what manner of spirit they are.

The necessity for watchfulness is the greater because there seems good ground for our zeal, and we can even plead the example of faithful men. The disciples thought to punish a heinous affront, and that so doing they would be copying Elijah. So we are not without our reasons for the feelings we indulge. We may but blame those that deserve blame, but we cannot correct wrongs by allowing ourselves to do it wrongfully ; by using too great severity of word or act ; by arraying our pride against another's pride, our indignation against their anger. We must guard against the deceitful-

ness of sin, even in our desire to promote the interests of piety. We often take credit for virtuous activity when we are but putting forth the actings of poor, fallen human nature. All that passes under the name of jealousy for the honour of religion is very far from being pure zeal for the Lord. As Elijah knew not what manner of spirit he was of when he fled to Horeb, so did not the disciples at the Samaritan village; so often we do not.

We are not to excuse the sins of others. They may be really as guilty as we think them to be. Let us do them no injustice by judging them harshly; let us do no wrong to righteousness by approving of sin. But let the Saviour's words recall us to a just understanding of our position with reference to abounding evils: "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." So then, while we should be grieved, and may be indignant at sin around us, we must not forget that the spirit of the gospel is a spirit not of judgment, but of love. Looking at Christ, imitating his spirit, and obeying his gospel, we must especially bear with personal injuries, rather than resent them; while the temper we manifest against offences that are public, and contrary to the interests of piety, must be guarded from all vindictiveness.

If we take either the example or the teachings of Christ for our guidance, we may be assured that the maintenance of a proper spirit toward others,

as it is exceedingly difficult for us, is also one of the highest proofs of Christian discipleship. This, itself, should make us desirous of knowing truly what manner of spirit we are of. Nor are there wanting other reasons to induce our watchfulness. How excellent is Christ's personal example! Who ever suffered more, or more unjustly, or with meekness compared with this one? He was never in the wrong; every insult laid upon him was uncalled for; he was keenly sensitive to all the wickedness of men against him; he gave no provocation when they wrought most maliciously to injure him, and, without imputing a single false charge to any, he saw how grossly his enemies sinned against God's law. In all these things we have less reason to be bitter and vindictive than he. We are often mistaken as to the guilt of others; in our differences with our fellow-men we also are partly to blame; we judge harshly; we allow our passions to dictate rather than a wise judgment. His mildness and our liability to error should soften our decisions and forbid censoriousness.

Besides, we are not ourselves able to abide the test to which we would subject others. How would these disciples have fared if their Lord had applied their own rule to themselves? They would destroy the village that received not the stranger to its hospitalities; what would, after this measure, have been the fate of the disciples, who not long after all forsook their well-beloved Master, and left

him in the hands of his enemies? Or of that Peter, who so sadly denied him? And we who have so many failings, not just such as are censured, but as truly contrary to the teachings of the divine word, should ponder well our thoughts, when tempted to judge severely of others.

And let not Christ's disciples forget that our Lord has made the exercise of a proper spirit toward others the test and proof of our own acceptance before God. We are taught to pray, forgive as we are forgiven, for as he expressly teaches, only as we forgive are we forgiven. Our zeal for God must therefore be ever tempered with the kindly spirit that seeks the good of those whose conduct we disapprove. However justly they may be obnoxious to the divine displeasure, vengeance belongs not to us. Zeal without knowledge and zeal without love we must watch against.

But the love of the gospel is not mercy without righteousness. We may not speak as though sin in any man may look for nothing but impunity. Let us not forget that Elijah and Christ are both right. The prophet taught the law and denounced its judgments upon incorrigible iniquity. Christ speaks in the tones of the gospel, and shows its forbearance toward man, who may yet be brought to repentance. Nor is it hard to vindicate what each of them both do and say. The law and the gospel are not in conflict. Under the operation of one or the other must we all come. The law

speaks in tones of righteousness, binds us to obedience, condemns our guilt. The gospel addresses the guilty, recognizes the claims of the law, and delivers us by satisfying these. And they who will not receive the gospel, rely upon its promises and obey its injunctions, must expect the judgment of fire which the law calls down. And surely the judgment must be more terrible if it is preceded by our perverse refusal to accept the mercy offered in the gospel.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### *THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH.*

WE now come to the closing scene in the life of Elijah. The last moments of any man are serious, but amidst the infinite variety of such scenes we have one here altogether impressive and extraordinary. This man is not allowed to die. As Enoch, many centuries before, had been translated that he should not see death, the like privilege was granted to Elijah, and to no man since in all the world's history. And this is one advantage respecting the prophet, that the circumstances of his translation are given us for him, as they are not for Enoch. Perhaps this event was not wholly unexpected. Whether Elijah referred to this or not, ten years before (1 Kings, xix. 4) the sons of the prophets and Elisha had some premonitions, though they may not have known just what was before them. The sons of the prophets were doubtless the pupils of Elijah and Elisha, and they, and especially Elisha, were deeply interested. Perhaps it was well understood that the younger prophet had been divinely designated as the suc-

cessor of the elder, and a strong attachment and confidence, ripened by ten years of intimate association, existed between them.

But the day of separation drew near. In preparation for it, Elijah and Elisha visited the different schools they had established, and though nothing was said upon this express topic, the prophetic spirit in the sons of the prophets discerned that to-day they looked upon the face of their great teacher for the last time. It may have been to test Elisha's faith that Elijah asked him to tarry behind, but he would not, and they went together. One of the schools was at Bethel, as though Elijah would show his determined opposition to Jeroboam's idolatry by establishing a theological seminary in one of the very cities given to the worship of the golden calf. Another was at Jericho, and here, after again vainly attempting to send back Elisha, the two prophets crossed the Jordan. It may have been at the very spot where Joshua, five hundred years before, had crossed with all the hosts of Israel, that they also crossed. Elijah now repeated the miracle of Joshua's time, and taking his mantle he smote the river and the waters separated, and the two prophets passed through dryshod. Thus he shows that the power of working miracles remained with him to the last, and in this act is a significant symbol of his approaching departure. Elijah, in passing through Jordan, passes unchilled, untouched by its cold water: he is about to pass

from the world, but the icy embrace of death is not for him.

Doubtless the two prophets spent their opportunity in delightful conversation. The time of pious friends is doubtless often misspent; but if the things of the kingdom lay nearer our hearts, they would oftener burn within us as we talked by the way. Luke xxiv. 32. And surely here is a special occasion to make religious conversation of still deeper interest. Two friends, that have loved each other and laboured together in the service of the same Lord for many years, are talking together for the last time. It was not like the last interviews often held between a feeble, dying man and the friends around his bedside. These two prophets possess their full faculties of mind and body, and they are conscious that they must soon part. We are not told what was the special topic of conversation, but from Elisha's last request we may conjecture the subject. We suppose Elijah laid before Elisha more largely than ever the plans of usefulness he had devised for the Church, and told him that upon him must now rest the labour of carrying them out.

This great difference must ever exist between living for selfish ends, and living for the welfare of man and for promoting the divine honour—that when a selfish, worldly man dies he can carry nothing away, his plans end, his wealth passes into other hands; but at the death of one who lives for

great purposes his schemes can as well be carried on by others. The prophets die, but succeeding prophets take up their work, in a like spirit and to the same end. The minister of God is but a workman engaged upon a magnificent temple; the chief Architect ever lives; the original design remains unchanged, though many successions of workmen pass away; each does his part toward completing the building. Upon Elijah's last day, just about to receive his honourable discharge, he has not lost his interest in the work of his life-time. That he spoke of it, and of his interest in its going forward, we may gather from Elisha's last request.

The wish of the younger prophet does great credit to his character. He asks not the distinguished honours, the majestic powers, nor the wide influence of Elijah, but his spirit. We read it, "let thy DOUBLED-PORTIONED SPIRIT be upon me." The full meaning of it refers us to the extraordinary character borne by the elder prophet. Up to this time in the history of the Church, only three persons—Moses, Joshua and Elijah—had joined to the office of prophet the extraordinary power of working miracles. This was the double-portioned spirit, above the gifts of an ordinary prophet, and not usual in the Church, that Elisha desired. So great a gift Elijah dare not promise. He knew that Elisha was to be his successor; but THIS is a matter that must be referred directly to God. All therefore that he could do was to give a token by which

Elisha might know the acceptance or rejection of his request. If he was allowed to witness Elijah's departure, this would be a token of divine acceptance; but if the prophet should be mysteriously and invisibly snatched away, then his request would be denied. Elisha asked a great thing, but he desired to use these great gifts for the divine glory. We may admire the riches of his grace, that no man is reprov'd for having too large desires after spiritual gifts or graces.

As the prophets walked together, still engaged in conversation, they were suddenly separated. Elisha saw what he desired to see. Celestial messengers, like a burning chariot drawn by horses of fire, bore away the elder prophet from his side. In the great grief of the separation, and in token that he saw him, he called out; and Elijah answered by another token that he was done with the earth, and that he rejoiced that his friend's request was granted. The mantle of the ascending prophet dropped from his shoulders as he was carried up, and Elisha gladly received it at once as a sacred memorial and as a token of his own future duties.

When Elisha returned to the Jordan he put his newly-gained "faith of miracles" into direct exercise. He smote the waters with the mantle of Elijah, calling upon Elijah's God, and passed dryshod through the divided waters. From that time onward he was for many years a prophet in Israel, and exercised the double-portioned spirit of his

predecessor. We need make no comparison between them upon the score of piety; his character was milder, his miracles more numerous, but of mild and beneficent tendency, in contrast with those of Elijah: in his times religion had more influence than in the present age; but for this, doubtless preparation had been made by Elijah's labors; and Elisha's services were longer than those of Elijah. But without instituting a comparison between the two, we may rejoice in that divine care which watches over his Church. The fathers are removed, the prophets do not live for ever, yet when he removes one servant the great Head of the Church gives another to occupy his room. Here Elijah is taken away, but Elisha lifts the fallen mantle of the prophet; so in far later times and far differently, when Stephen died a martyr's death, divine grace gave the Church his successor in the persecuting Saul.

The translation of Elijah is an event so extraordinary in the history of the Church that we should ponder the lessons taught by its record upon the sacred pages.

We may well regard this great event as a special mark of the divine favour to Elijah's eminent piety, though indeed any service that man can render to his God is but our reasonable return for many given; and thus we all may say with David: "Of thine own do we give thee;" yet God is pleased with the cheerful, believing obedience of his people.

And when we consider the times in which he lived, the severe and long-continued trials he endured, and his boldness and faithfulness in duty, we may well esteem Elijah as an earnest and faithful follower of God. He was an eminent believer. The voice of prayer from his lips had power with God to shut or open heaven, or to bring down the fiery answers of mercy or of judgment. Yet his faith did not lift him above the necessity of suffering: rather, it may be that his faith found its severest exercise as associated with his patient waiting by the brook Cherith and in the house of the Gentile widow. Strange that one who can do such wonders must still be a patient waiter; yet thus we see Elijah's piety and his utter dependence upon God. All through his history we see his boldness and zeal, only the more remarkable for the proofs that he was not exempt from human infirmity.

We easily judge that such a mark of God's favour would be given only to a servant highly approved; yet let us not rashly conclude that no other prophets or believers ever stood so high as he, because no man since his day has made such a journey to the sky. No man but an eminent believer would be translated; yet servants as approved and beloved as he may have passed through the grave. It is a difficult and delicate task to compare the character, the piety or the usefulness of two persons of acknowledged excellence; and it is still more difficult to judge of the divine favour

toward men from the dealings of providence and grace as we can discern them. Some of the most active and earnest Christians have met death without any marked testimony to Christ's supporting grace; and some have died triumphantly whose previous life has given but little evidence of superior faith.

The translation of Elijah had its public bearings also upon the faith of God's people, declaring things they should believe, and perhaps rescuing important truths of revelation from special reproach cast upon them in that degenerate age. When the smoke of Baal's altars had darkened the sky of Israel the true light must again shine. Amidst the chaos of religious opinions then to be found in the land, skepticism came among the clashing dogmas that claimed men's thoughts, and some men argued because there were many religions there really need be none. In all ages this is the fruit of human depravity. We are less surprised that it was so with the long-lived race before the deluge. For then men lived to years that seem to us almost interminable; they became hardened in sin by long impunity; they saw their fellows gradually sink around them in the dust; but the future life was an invisible existence, and they may have argued that there is no future life. So the translation of a holy man like Enoch gave proof of the soul's immortality. And in the miserable days when Elijah preached there was need to repeat the lesson, and

the prophet was borne away on a chariot of fire. But in the sacred Scriptures the immortality of the soul is not an isolated doctrine. THE BODY of man is redeemed dust through the gospel's power. Salvation is both of the soul and of the body. Death, as it ordinarily occurs, is the separation of soul and spirit; therefore they are not so one that they cannot exist apart, but both are to be possessors of immortal life. So the translation of Enoch and Elijah were significant examples to teach the Church that, soul and body, shall believers dwell with God. Yet also the falling mantle of the ascending Elijah may have suggested that such changes would occur as would lift them above all earthly necessities, for their bodies would be fashioned to suit the spiritual engagements of the upper world. And doubtless in heaven itself the gathering hosts of the redeemed have been allowed to see in Enoch and Elijah what their bodies shall one day be when the Redeemer's power shall raise them from the dust.

Perhaps not less important in this extraordinary event was the proof afforded that death is a conquered foe. Christ's salvation, even before his sufferings on the cross, was a victory over death, especially since he took away the monster's sting and robbed the grave of victory. It is not because his arm is too weak to hold back our foe that any of his people must meet death. The claims of justice, as such, are satisfied. The right to trans-

late *one* implies the right to translate *every* righteous man; but for important reasons death occurs to men redeemed by the blood of Christ. Yet the translation of two in those former days gives assurance that salvation is both of the body and the spirit.

And we can hardly think of Elijah's translation without being reminded of the ascension of Christ. To him Elijah held the relation of servant. We therefore look for a great superiority in the Master's ascension. This belongs in part to the fact that our Lord's ascension was preceded by his resurrection from the grave. In Elijah death was deprived of a victim. For the most important reasons, the Mediator first submitted to the stroke of death, and then reclaimed his uncorrupted body from its power. He did not escape from death, but he conquered this great foe. So he proves more fully than the prophets the resurrection of the body.

And the ascension of our Lord was itself superior to that of Elijah. That was indeed a splendid passage to the sky when the faithful prophet was borne upward on a chariot of fire. But the celestial chariot rather gives evidence of the prophet's weakness. But for the chariot he could not have gone up. With the Redeemer it was far otherwise. He needed no aid. Even in the days of his humiliation he could walk upon the stormy waves and calm the raging waters to peace. So also, when his humiliation was past, it was fit that he should

pass through the air by his own power. It is proof of his dignity that no visible chariot waited upon him and bore him away. The servant could not otherwise go; the Master could. Yet was he not unattended. The day of Christ's ascending on high was a jubilee in heaven. He had left the glory which he had with the Father before the world was; before the wondering gaze of angels he had become a man of sorrows; heaven itself had been filled with amazement and sympathies unknown before, as angels and redeemed saints had pondered his earthly mission; and he had declared this great work FINISHED as he hung upon the cross. Can we think less than that his return in triumph would fill heaven with joy? The hosts of the blessed world throng the portals of paradise to bid him welcome; angels, who worshipped him at his entrance into the world, would more devoutly worship as he left the earth; redeemed souls would rejoice as he led captivity captive.

We are not indulging here in any flights of fancy. The inspired writers tell us that crowds of attending holy ones welcomed the Redeemer's ascension. In Ps. lxxviii. the prophet declares that twenty thousand chariots and thousands of angels should attend the ascending Saviour. The Apostle Paul quotes the passage and applies it to the ascension of Christ. Eph. iv. 8-10. And the responses of Psalm xxiv. suit this great occasion. It seems to represent the assembly above gathered at hea-

ven's doors for the coming of the triumphant King and the crowd of attendants approaching in his company. These sing in responsive utterances. First, the ascending thousands demand entrance for him and his triumphant train: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in." The others answer, "Who is this King of glory?" The answer is made and demand repeated, "The Lord, strong and mighty: the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O ye gates, even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in." Then again the responses swell: "Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory."

Elijah's separation from his work on earth should serve to remind us that a life of faith in God's service here is very near to a life of glory in God's presence in heaven. From walking with his disciples in the halls of Bethel and Jericho, and with his fellow-prophet on the banks of the Jordan, the transition is swift to the streets of the new Jerusalem and a walk upon the banks of the river of life. We cannot overlook the manner of this, for though the manner is not the thing of greatest importance, it teaches much. It is worthy of notice that each of the three great dispensations of the Church of God has been signalized by a bodily ascension to heaven. In the patriarchal times, Enoch; in the Levitical age, Elijah; in the Chris-

tian dispensation, our Lord himself ascended up on high. We have no reason to believe that Christ ascended to a different place than that where Enoch and Elijah already were. The Romish Church, seeming to delight in imaginary dogmas that rob God of his glory and saints of their bliss, not content with her unfounded notions of purgatory, has affirmed that believers, dying before the death of Christ, were not admitted to heaven at all, but detained in a kind of prison to await his resurrection. And there are some who deny now that dying saints are immediately received to glory; they also must await their own resurrection. The word of God gives no reason to judge either of these things true. Elijah undoubtedly passed to glory (see Luke ix. 31), and the change was complete from earth to heaven. One moment walking on earth, talking in earthly language, with earthly affections and of earthly things, and the next changed in soul and body, "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. xv. 52), in preparation for heaven, borne upward in a chariot of fire; allowed to enter upon new scenes, new engagements and new joys, and associated with companions from whom he should part no more for ever!

And little as we seem to realize it, such a change awaits every humble follower of Elijah's faith. Not a translation indeed. This we need not, in order to gain every substantial benefit given to Elijah. There is now also a touching reason why

believers, even shrinking from the tomb, should not wish to escape it. The grave was the resting-place of our glorious Lord, and we should not care to avoid the lowly pillow where he laid his head. The dark ground is robbed of its terrors since the Lord of life lay in the tomb and rose from it.

“The graves of all his saints he blessed,  
And softened every bed.”

And the same essential blessedness, before the same God, in the same heaven, and with the same sudden transition, awaits every believer. However gradual its approach and with whatsoever premonitions, the change itself will be suddenly complete and will be glorious beyond our imaginings.

“In vain the fancy strives to paint  
The moment after death,  
The glories that await the saint  
When yielding up his breath.”

One moment a sinner, filled with fears and anxiety, and breathing only sighs—the next, free from sin and fear and grief for ever, and borne by the angels into Abraham’s bosom.

Believers in Christ do not live up to their principles unless they live in anticipation of this great change, and strive to remember that it may very soon occur. It may be that Elijah had some notice of his coming departure. Providential tokens are often given to us. The gradual march of time, the

natural waning of bodily strength, or the attacks of disease may bid us look forward to our early decease; but we all are liable to meet the last foe without forewarning of his hour, and our earthly plans may at any time be interrupted by the sudden summons away. Nothing more becomes us than that holy and spiritual life that constantly waits for life's close. Happy they who so care for the interests of religion and the souls of perishing men that the King's messenger does not surprise them as slothful servants, and whose last words and thoughts are for Zion. The very ignorance in which we are kept of life's closing day should keep us ever watchful. We certainly know that it is nearer now than ever; should to-morrow come for us, death will be that much nearer than it is to day; thus we seem to reside next door to eternity; and we may, upon any day, step over the narrow boundary.

It becomes us to live in constant preparation for the inevitable change that may be so glorious. Let us remember that it may come equally unexpected, as it is equally certain, whether we are prepared or not. Ahab and Jezebel, both as suddenly as Elijah, left the scenes of their earthly labours. In the morning the guilty king, forewarned of his fate, went forth to battle, and as night fell upon the earth he entered the more gloomy night of the eternal world. As we cannot imagine Elijah's change, we wish not to follow the departing spirits of his wicked opposers. Certainly no chariots of

angels waited around the smitten king of Israel, no songs of praise attended him to eternity. An infinite difference exists between the dying sinner and the dying saint. The manner of departure is of small consequence. The dying beggar may have dogs only to lick his sores; the dying Dives may be attended by every act of friendly kindness, but heaven and hell may separate them with a gulf impassable. And if a friend of God may at any hour be called upward, an impenitent sinner may at any moment sink to hell. The dread portals of eternity stand ever open, and men every hour pass away from time.

We can only pass safely over the final Jordan when we have something of the prophet's faith, and say: "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### *POSTHUMOUS INFLUENCE.*

IN 2 Chron. xxi. 12 we read in a brief abstract of the reign of Joram or Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, this singular announcement: "And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet." The contents of the letter gave severe threatenings against the wicked king for his iniquities. We need not suppose that these were immediately fulfilled, though the record of their fulfilment follows immediately the copy of the letter. The peculiarities of the case are two: First, that here we have the only instance of the exercise of Elijah's prophetic office toward the kings or the people of Judah; his ministry being otherwise confined to the kingdom of the ten tribes. Secondly, that apparently this writing came after the prophet had left the earth, being, as some suppose, sent from Elijah in heaven, or as others think, dictated to Elisha. Others suppose that there is a misreading in the passage, and it ought to read: "there came a letter from Elisha the prophet;" or that it was written in the spirit of prophecy, and

left to be sent at the proper time; or again, that another prophet, bearing the name of Elijah, but not the Tishbite, sent the letter.

If this letter came from the translated Elijah, it is the only instance in the Scriptures of direct influence upon living men by any of God's servants who had ceased from their earthly duties. Labours performed, words spoken, writings prepared, often have far larger influence after the death of pious men than during their lives; but the rule of God's house has been that the close of earthly life is the close of earthly labour. We need not wonder that Elijah sends this reproofing letter to the king of Judah, for the commission of the Hebrew prophets might surely be to the entire Hebrew people, since they did not hesitate to reprove the Gentile nations around them, and by making alliances with Ahab, Jehoshaphat and Jehoram had become partakers of his sins, his judgments and his rebukes, especially from the lips of Elijah.

The perplexities of this passage will perhaps be sufficiently solved if we show that the letter could have been both written and sent during the lifetime of the prophet, and that in all likelihood this is the true statement of the case. The record in 2 Chron. xxi. 12 seems to occur so long after the translation of Elijah as to leave the impression that the event was a late one. But, as we have already intimated, the entire passage is a brief abstract of the whole reign of Jehoram, and as this is the only

mention in the Book of Chronicles touching Elijah at all, we cannot decide that it gives an anachronism unless we can show that the prophet's translation preceded the accession of Jehoram to the throne of Judah. If Jehoram was reigning as king of Judah while Elijah was still upon the earth, if he deserved the prophet's rebuke for his wickedness, then we may reasonably conclude that this warning letter, preceding its own fulfilment by perhaps ten years, was yet written before the translation of its author.

Doubtless Jehoshaphat was still alive after Elijah had left the earth. He engaged in a war with Moab as the ally of Israel, when both kings were compelled to appeal to Elisha for help and deliverance. (2 Kings iii.) But it seems just as certain that his son Joram or Jehoram was associated upon the throne of Judah with Jehoshaphat during the father's life-time, 2 Kings viii. 16; and indeed the death of Ahaziah, king of Israel, which took place at the word of Elijah, occurred in the second year of the reign of Jehoram, *i. e.*, of his reign as associated with Jehoshaphat his father. (2 Kings i. 17.) So Jehoram was king while Elijah was still on the earth, and being the son-in-law of Ahab, and attached to the follies of that idolatrous house, the prophet easily foresaw his wickedness and declared his miserable end.

We may add to all this that the record gives no token, as though some surprising thing was said,

that here is an account of a mysterious letter from the ascended prophet.\*

The prophet Elijah is further remarkable for expectations awakened concerning him by declarations of the later Scriptures. The prophet Malachi, in the closing words of the Old Testament, speaks thus of him: "Behold I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." The singular, mysterious manner of Elijah's disappearance, and the fears expressed by the sons of the prophets that the Spirit of the Lord might cast him down, may have led to fanciful interpretations of these words of Malachi. As Elijah was taken away bodily, so the Jews expected his literal return in the flesh. An early trace of this opinion may be found in the Apocrypha, though this seems indistinct. (Eccles. xlviii. 10.) And in the New Testament times the coming of Elijah was looked for before the advent of the Messiah, and to this day the Jews look for it and pray for it as preceding that of the Christ. And many literalists among Christians believe that all is not yet fulfilled which the Scriptures declare concerning the coming of Elijah.

But we suppose that in the coming and in the prophetic mission of John the Baptist we have the fulfilment of the words of Malachi. That in some sense John was the Elijah spoken of should be

\* See Witsius, *De Prophetis et Prophetia*, l. 61, b. xlvi. &c; Buddens *Hist. Eccl.*, *Smith's Dict. Bible*.

esteemed indisputable. When the angel foretold to Zacharias the birth of his child, his words have an evident reference to the language of the Old Testament prophet, Mal. iv. 5, 6: "He shall go before him in the spirit and the power of Elias to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." Luke i. 17. And our Lord Jesus expressly taught his disciples that John was the predicted Elijah. Matt. xi. 14; xvii. 10-13.

We suppose nothing more is required to fulfil the prediction of Malachi than may be found in the character, commission and engagements of John the Baptist. It is no serious objection that John himself declared that he was not Elijah. He was not personally, and as "Moses wist not that his face shone," John may not have been conscious of the honour thus given to him. It was not the ascended Elijah that should return to the earth. He was to be represented by one who as to his personal appearance and manners, and still more as to his official character and influence as a prophet, should have Elijah as his exemplar. Elijah dressed in coarse hairy garments, used great abstemiousness, watched closely over the morals of the people, and was a stern Reformer. So John in the wilderness was clothed in raiment of camel's hair, ate the wild products of the region around him, and awakened the guilty consciences of a degenerate people by his alarming discourses. As Elijah's

ministry was one of law and judgment, whose influence was preparatory to larger success under the milder ministry of Elisha, so John's preaching spoke much of the wrath to come and of the necessity of repentance.

And in this respect, John or Elijah ever comes before Christ, the law before the gospel, that for a people, or for an individual soul, there is a preparatory work of awakening and instruction that is introductory to the workings of grace. "The spirit and power of Elijah" the soul of man must feel before he is prepared to rejoice in the great and gracious day of the Lord.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### *THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION.*

SCARCELY less remarkable than the translation itself was the appearance of Elijah with Moses, nine centuries later, at the glorious Transfiguration of our blessed Lord upon what one of the apostles calls the Holy Mount.

A full consideration of this scene pertains to the life of Jesus, yet cannot be properly omitted in our meditations upon Elijah. Three evangelists give us the account. Taking with him his three favourite disciples, Peter and James and John, our Lord went up to a mountain top for purposes of devotion. We need not attempt to settle the question, Upon what mountain did this glorious scene occur? Tradition fixed long on Mount Tabor; many still maintain this view, though later investigators, finding reasons for refusing to believe that Tabor was the place, have inclined to one of the crests of Mount Hermon.\* But the Transfiguration itself was wondrous, occur where it may. The humble form of the Son of Man took on it a splendour his disciples had never before seen. The glory of his

\* See the Land and the Book, i. 348.

person was revealed, his face and raiment shone with unearthly brightness, and he was suddenly attended by two celestial visitors. That the disciples intuitively recognized these as Moses and Elijah, may intimate that heavenly recognitions will be easy, even of those unknown before. But what three persons are these together? Moses, the giver of the law, Elijah, its restorer, Jesus, its author and fulfiller—the three great workers of miracles in the Church of God, perhaps, including the disciples, the representatives of the entire Church of God, —standing thus together with their blessed Head. Moses represented the great body of glorified saints whose bodies were yet in the dust, and who therefore look forward to the resurrection as the day of their full redemption; Elijah, possessing already his glorified body, was thus a representative of all the Church as it shall be, and Peter, James and John representatives of the earthly and still militant Church.

These celestial visitors appeared in glory; that is, they were inhabitants of the world of glory, and so appeared as they were wont to there. It is needless here to conjecture whether there was a visible difference between them; the body of Moses was buried; the body of Elijah was carried upward in the glorious chariot. We know too little of the mode of the soul's existence in the eternal world to allow of more than vague conjectures, in which now it would be unprofitable to indulge.

In this great vision the opinions of the Jews around Jesus that he was Elijah, or one of the old prophets (Matt. xvi. 14), were refuted, for here Moses, Elijah and Jesus are three distinct persons; the difference between the servants and the Master is sufficiently shown; and the chief prophets of the Old Testament renew their testimony to the great Messiah. This Transfiguration scene was a marked epoch of Christ's history, and may have been designed to prepare the Mediator, now in his estate of humiliation, for the great engagements before him. The three disciples long remembered the Transfiguration for the testimony there given to their Lord's dignity. Not only his changed appearance, but the voice from heaven expressly recognizing him as "my beloved Son," made a deep and abiding impression upon them. Doubtless they were prepared to do and to suffer more in his service, since they were thus allowed to see and hear the lessons of this "holy mount."

And how can we think of this scene without recognizing the unity of the Church of God—disregarding, not only the separations of centuries, but the separations between time and eternity? The chief representatives of the Old Testament Church wait upon and pay every respect to the founder of the New Dispensation. Representatives of what the Church is and shall be in glory come down to talk in earthly language and of earthly events with the Redeemer, who yet wears his earthly garments.

So the Church of all ages is one; so indeed the Church in heaven has but made further advancements in the same service, and they too are one with us :

“One family we dwell in him,  
One Church above, beneath ; . . . .  
One army of the living God,  
To his commands we bow ;  
Part of the host have crossed the flood,  
And part are crossing now.”

The great topic of conversation between our Lord and his celestial visitors is told us. The bond of deepest interest uniting redeemed men in all ages, on earth and in glory, is the death of the Mediator. It is the burden of the song of heaven, “Thou wast slain and hast redeemed us unto God by thy blood.” So these representatives of their brethren “spoke of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.” We know not what they said; enough to know the topic. They knew the sorrow, and they did not disguise the shame of that decease; nor did they esteem it any incongruity to speak of his death in this hour of his glory, when we might be ready to judge that such an one as he could never die at all. They knew, rather, that the divine excellency of his person, some rays of which dazzled earthly eyes, was his fitting preparation for a death which without this dignity could be of no avail for man’s salvation. In their view were harmoniously united the necessity of this

atoning death and its unfailing efficacy. The end of many promises and hopes now drew on; the saints in bliss love to talk of the Redeemer's death, and the only theme suitable to the glory of the Transfiguration hour is the shame of the cross.

The DEATH OF CHRIST is the great theme of all the Bible. From the first altar of Genesis to the final benediction of the Apocalypse, to "him gave all the prophets witness." But the scene of Transfiguration is the turning-point between the obscurity of the Old and the plainness of the New Testament upon this great theme. Just before this he began (Matt. xvi. 21), and ever afterward he continued, to speak plainly of his coming decease; and the minds of his three disciples should have been anxious to hear these most important of all their lessons. Blessed are the ears, we are ready to say, that heard such a conversation concerning such a theme! What enlarged views of the plan of salvation did they gain that night! how amazed were they to hear that sorrow could lay its touch on the glorious Lord then present! how prepared would they soon be to sympathize with their suffering Master! Alas! we are negligent to improve our noblest opportunities, and it is difficult for earthly minds like ours to be deeply interested in spiritual things. We cannot say that our Lord's favoured disciples had no enjoyment of the Transfiguration. Peter exclaimed: "It is good for us to be here." But he spake thus, "not knowing what to say," so

amazed was he, and "not knowing what he said," for indeed it was talk at random to propose that celestial visitors should make their home on earth. But how strange the record which reveals that perhaps these favoured men heard little after all of this heavenly conversation: "Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep." It may be a partial apology that the interview on the mountain was long, and that the conversation continued perhaps the chief part of the night. The next day they came down from the mountain. Luke ix. 37. Yet the disciples give proof of a strange lack of interest that they could sleep when such themes engage such lips. Even the highest privileges may be lost through our apathy. These disciples saw the glory of Christ and the forms of redeemed men; they heard heavenly conversation upon the very topic which should possess most interest for sinners. But they could not watch, and their profiting was little.

It may be from the remembrance of this that the Apostle Peter, in speaking of the Transfiguration scene, makes the possession of God's written word a better method of instruction. It seems natural for men to desire and prefer the miraculous to ordinary and plain teachings. Yet let us not suppose that any teachings are readily received by a perverse and unwilling mind. Men have seen miracles, men have *wrought* miracles, without knowing in their own experience the power of true religion.

We need not undervalue exalted privileges, yet we are not to suppose that we would certainly improve them better than those we now possess. The sacred writers take great pains to warn us of a deceit too common upon this point. On the one hand, thousands that saw Christ and his apostles, and witnessed their miracles, found not the salvation of the gospel; and on the other hand, tens of thousands have drawn near to God, taught by the simple word of his truth. Indeed, our blessed Lord seems to declare for them a special and larger blessing, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." It is far more important that we should use well the privileges given to us than that we should consider how much better we would do under other circumstances; for, in the *first* place, such thoughts are usually delusive, and in the *next* and *main* place, there is great reason to question whether any age has ever possessed clearer teachings than those given to us, or had better advantages for obedience.

The Apostle Peter did not undervalue the privileges of the Mount of Transfiguration; rather, as an eye-witness of his Lord's majesty, he knew that the gospel was no "cunningly devised fable." Yet manifestly even a sight so glorious would exhibit less of doctrine to show us what the gospel teaches than of evidence to prove that its teachings must be true. But men want both of these, and we have both in the written word of God; and having in

the written word sufficient evidence that these teachings are true, we have opportunities superior to know what those teachings are. So the apostle, even in contrast with the Transfiguration, calls the sacred Scriptures "a more sure word of prophecy." It is with an unreasonable demand for new evidences that men say: "If one should come from the dead we would believe." And no principle of truth to warn, to instruct, to guide the inquiring soul could be given us by any marvellous sight that is not sufficiently given, perhaps better given, in the sacred pages already. Whatever of miraculous evidences was needed to establish the divine commission of the sacred writers was afforded to them, and the proof of this has been sufficiently confirmed to satisfy every candid mind; to these proofs innumerable testimonials add their strength; and witnesses of most remarkable character, beyond the possibility of imposture or collusion, join to establish our faith. What men need chiefly for all later ages is an actual knowledge of the principles and duties that are needed to restore fallen man to the image of his Maker, and to prepare him for the service of his God. We understand the apostle to affirm that God has given us the very best means of instruction in the volume of his written word.

Here, in a form sufficiently brief, yet permanent and accessible, men have all the teachings needful for a godly life. Now that the great scheme of man's redemption is fully revealed, the volume of

divine truth is complete, and may be handed down from generation to generation while time shall last. As man everywhere is the same, as each age possesses the same general character, labours under the same necessities, and needs a like relief, the same teachings are suitable, and we may have greater confidence in principles that have instructed and supported thousands in trials like our own. And the written form of these great teachings makes them not only more permanent and accessible, but also more intelligible. Let a man see the most remarkable sights, and the impression fades; let him hear the most instructive words, and the memory forgets; we cannot tenaciously hold anything that includes many objects and many thoughts. Some of us have heard the Bible publicly read in our churches times without number in all our lives, and yet if our knowledge of the sacred volume depended solely upon this source of information, how meagre would be our acquaintance with it! To have the book in our own hands; to read the very words which holy men have written at the Spirit's promptings; to have familiar access to it,—how superior is this method of teaching us to all that our thoughts can devise!

Besides we know from experience that the profiting of any pupil depends only partially upon the skill and wisdom of the teacher, but very much also upon the attention and seriousness of the scholar himself. What wisdom can benefit

him who has ears but will not hear, or what profit-  
ing was there, even upon the mount of the Saviour's  
glory, while Peter and the disciples were heavy  
with sleep? But herein have we a great advantage  
in the written word of God, that it may be our  
teacher in our most favourable hours; we may study  
it in the quiet of our closets, the distracting world  
shut out; with these pages alone before our eyes,  
and the eye of its Author alone upon us, we may  
choose our most favorable seasons, may seek out  
the passages best suited to our own necessities, may  
reproduce and deepen impressions that would other-  
wise fade, and may learn more thoroughly the  
lessons that our souls most need. And whatever  
we may think of the awe and solemnity that might  
be produced upon our minds if we were allowed to  
witness some supernatural event, it may very well  
be questioned whether any such event would be  
better adapted to make a favourable impression upon  
us than the serious, prayerful perusal of God's  
holy word. There is a calm and impressive  
solemnity in these sacred pages which gives them  
inexplicable power over the hearts of men; the  
motives from every quarter that are here urged  
upon us are as weighty as ever address us, and the  
man who seriously and carefully reads the Bible, and  
is not, by this serious reading, led to repentance and  
a better life, is ready to resist any other influences,  
and "would not be persuaded though one rose from  
the dead."

Yet indeed let us not forget that, for the full understanding of God's word, God's own Spirit must enlighten our minds. This it is that should make us not only serious but prayerful in our efforts to learn the most important truths that have ever addressed the mind of man. It is a serious responsibility that belongs to any man when he owns a Bible. Let not the truth that this is a blessing so common to us prevent us from recognizing how serious a thing this is. What would we all be today if we had never seen a Bible? Ask the myriads of benighted Africa or the millions of conceited China. Barbarian and philosopher are alike in this, that they know not God. In the great day, when we shall stand before the Judge of all the earth, no charge will be more serious to lay at any man's door than that he owned a neglected Bible—that he kept but used not the key that opens the door of Paradise. In that great day many will bless God for this same word of prophecy, from which they have learned their sin and ruin, and the mercy of God through Christ for their salvation. Happy are they who prize these teachings at their real value, who not only read but pray humbly that the holy Spirit may guide them into all truth, and make known to them the one Name which chiefly this blessed book reveals.

For as it was upon the Mount of Transfiguration, so is it our studying the life of any personage of the Bible: so should it be in our chief impression of

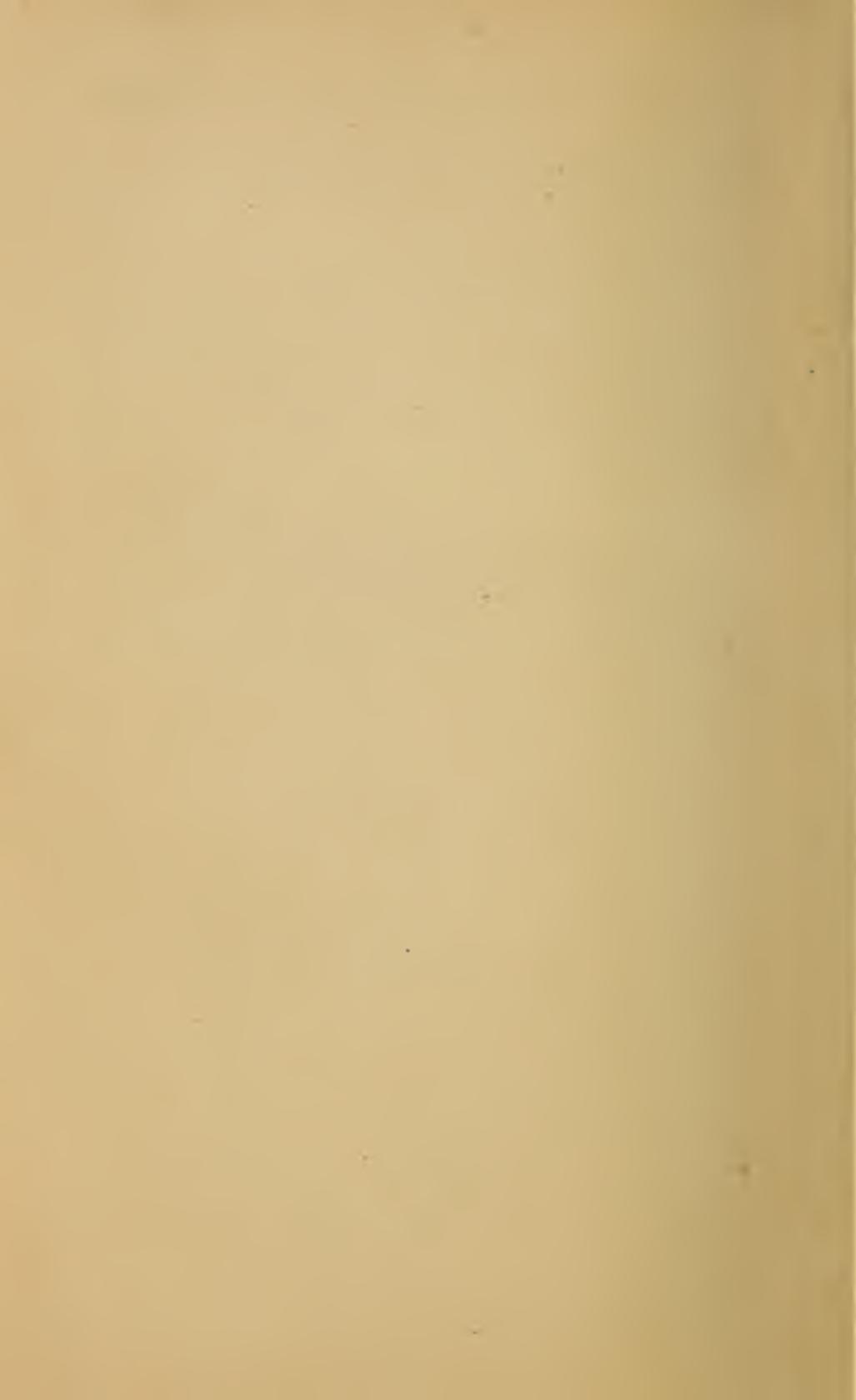
the whole book: one chief figure occupies our thoughts. Though the disciples saw Moses and Elias, they came as attendants upon Jesus; the voice from heaven spake of him alone; and when the others disappeared the disciples saw no man save JESUS ONLY, JESUS ONLY! So let us read the sacred volume, so let all its teachings speak to our hearts, so let us feel that we find nothing truly in all these divine revelations unless we find HIM. We find not indeed the same directness of relation to Christ and his great salvation in those scenes of the Old Testament history that belongs to the narratives, the doctrines and the commands of the New, for the plan of salvation was not fully revealed in advance of his work upon Calvary, and the ancient prophets searched in vain to know the full meaning of their words, whose fulfilment was reserved for more favoured times. But indeed as the sprouting stalk owes its chief value to the ripening grain it shall one day bear, as we think of these all as one plant, disregarding the changing times between the sowing and the maturity, so the Old Testament without the New, so the old prophets without the Great Prophet, are riddles one knows not how to solve. Appropriately Elijah returns to the earth, that, as the darkness of his own dispensation disperses, he may, in the dawning light of our dispensation, point us to his Lord and our own, may speak of the death accomplished at Jerusalem as the great topic of common interest for

all God's people, and then, as he disappears from our view, leaves before us this great sight, Jesus only.

Knowing Jesus, we need not be ignorant of any other prophet of all that God has ever sent ; they all are his servants, they take nothing away from him, but stand ready to teach us of him. And because they would gladly have known what we are permitted to know, we should the more prize our privileges. Unhappy if we could learn all else that the world can teach us without - knowing Christ, we shall be truly happy, whatever other ignorance may be ours, if as our Lord and Redeemer our souls savingly know JESUS ONLY !

THE END.









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