

Chapter 26

The Work of Elijah

THE WORK of Elijah begins abruptly, like his own appearance in the narrative. It would not be so abrupt in fact, as it appears. There would be circumstances naturally and gradually leading up to his acquaintance with Ahab, as there would be circumstances gradually and naturally leading to Elijah's own development as a faithful man among "the inhabitants of Gilead." These, however, are unessential to the narrative. The narrative begins with Elijah's work. The curtain rises on Elijah standing before Ahab, and announcing to him the immediate commencement of a time of drought, and consequent famine: "There shall not be dew nor rain these years but according to my word." This was in accordance with the covenant of Sinai under which Israel occupied the land. Blessing was contingent on compliance with the divine will as expressed and embodied in the law of Moses. In the event of national obedience, the rain would be given in due season, and the land would yield its increase ([Lev. 26:4](#); [Deut. 28:12](#)). In the opposite case, the rain would be withheld, and the heaven over them would become as iron, and the earth under them as brass ([Lev. 26:19–20](#); [Deut. 28:23–24](#)). The ten tribes, over whom Ahab ruled, had gone entirely the wrong way. And after long patience, Yahweh was about to enforce the covenant by the hand of Elijah.

The words by which Elijah prefaced his intimation would have great significance in the court of Ahab: "*As the Lord God of Israel liveth*, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain," etc. This was not a mere ornamental adjuration. It struck at the logical essence of the controversy, and lays bare the need for miraculous interposition that characterised the ministry of Elijah throughout. Israel, under Ahab's leadership, were worshipping the gods of the neighbouring heathen, which were no gods at all, but fictions of the imagination associated with images of wood and stone. Elijah's mission was to draw them back to the living God of their fathers; the contrast between them is always exhibited in this light, that Yahweh was a living being, while the gods of the heathen were lifeless. "All the gods of the nations are idols, but Yahweh made the heavens", ([Psa. 96:5](#)). "Our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased: their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not" ([Psa. 95:3](#)). For Elijah to say: "*As the Lord God of Israel liveth*," was to bring under their notice the mightiest fact in the controversy between him and them, and, by implication, to set forth the national sin of departure from God in its strongest light: for what could be more infatuated than for a nation to turn away from the Mighty Being who had contrived and formed the universe, who had done them the ineffable honour of condescending to make Himself known to them, and to choose them for Himself, as a nation above all other nations? What could be more insane than to turn away from such an unspeakable honour, and espouse the inanities and stupidities of barbarous mankind around them, who were doing homage to bits of created substance, falsely idealised as living beings?

The apostasy of Israel from their own national religion—their preference for the idolatries of surrounding nations—is a more significant phenomenon than it is usual for people to realise. It is significative of nothing less than the divine origin of the Mosaic system, for it cannot be accounted for on any other hypothesis. There are many national faiths and superstitions in the

world: but whoever heard of a nation abandoning their own system, and gravitating to those of people around them? Israel constantly exhibited this spectacle. If their religious system had been the outgrowth of the national idiosyncrasy, such a spectacle would be unintelligible, for the idiosyncrasy developing it would have held to it. If even the system had been pleasing to them, it could not have occurred, for people hold to what is agreeable. The tendency of nations everywhere is to rejoice in their patriotic institutions and traditions, and to maintain them jealously against those of other nations, and these institutions of human derivation are everywhere in harmony with the national instincts and propensities. But here is a nation for ages in chronic revolt against their own institutions, and falling subserviently into those of other nations, which cannot be explained except on the principle furnished to us in the Scripture account: that the Mosaic institutions, being of divine origin, were too high, and holy, and spiritual for the human sympathies and tendencies of Israel, while the surrounding idolatry being of purely human origin, presented many features that appealed to the corrupt propensities of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh.

The assertion of a living God as the issue in debate with Ahab and the house of Israel, gave a logical place to the miraculous means employed in the hands of Elijah to maintain it. How otherwise was the existence of a living volitional Being to be demonstrated? Argument is powerful, but not with the rank and file of a nation. The wisdom displayed in the ordinances of the Universe is not decisive when the question is, to whom the wisdom is to be attributed. The question can only be set at rest by acts of living intelligent power which no man could perform. Such an act was this stopping of the rain and dew. Who can control the elements? Man never realises so much the weakness that truly belongs to him as when he is out in the open air under the measureless vault of heaven. The largest of his works are insignificant there, especially in the presence of God's great mountains, and his efforts and arrangements in any direction seem the puniest movements of an insect. Even his scientific apparatus is laughed to scorn by the surrounding and imperturbable majesty of heaven and earth. If there was an age when the rain would be controlled, if it could be, it is the present, when human arrogance and human knowledge combine to generate a heaven-soaring presumption unequalled in previous ages. But the scientists are powerless to check the downpour in the day of rain, or to evoke the smallest drop of moisture on the parching day, when the heavens refuse their showers. The miracles of the Bible are mostly of this order—feats of power entirely beyond any possible application of human effort. The pretended miracles of imposters, with which some, in defiance of all reason, would class the miracles of the Bible, are puny feats, lying within the compass of human contrivance and sleight of hand. Bible miracles soar into realms as much beyond man as the immeasurable heaven above his head.

The word of Elijah came to pass. Rain ceased in all the land, and the dew refused its morning refreshment to the thirsty soil. We should not have been aware, if James had not informed us, that this result was due to prayer on Elijah's part. "He prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months" ([Jas. 5:17](#)). At a first view of the case, this may seem strange. We naturally suppose that miracle—especially miracle with a national object—is independent of prayer on any one's part; that it is the sovereign volition of Almighty Power with divine objects that are independent of the will of man. But a higher view will show us that as in affairs of natural well-being, so in divine operations of higher moment, God is pleased to put forth His power in connection with an acceptable attitude on the part of those nearly related to the matter. There are several illustrations of this in the course of Scriptural history. They are all condensed into the single allegorical instances of Moses on the top of the

hill, while Israel, under Joshua, fought the Amalekites: “When Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” ([Ex. 17:11](#)). Yahweh is the great and dreadful Majesty of the universe, though its beneficent, patient, and gracious Creator. He is not to be approached familiarly, but with reverence and fear, though with love. He finds pleasure in the rational and appreciative recognition of His greatness on the part of men of a humble mind; and if He predicates paternal regard now and hereafter on this recognition, it need not surprise us that the special acts of His power should have, as their accessory, the bended knee and earnest intercession of those who are acceptable to Him. Thus it was throughout the Egyptian plagues with Moses: thus it is with the great salvation to be manifested at the appearing of Christ which is preceded by a prolonged season of intercession on the part of the great High Priest whom God hath set over His house.

Elijah prayed earnestly, and the rain was suspended at his request. It does not follow that such a result can follow such a prayer at the present time. All depends upon what God wills to be done. What He wills to be done, He wills to be enquired for first, and what He wills to be done He makes known ([Amos 3:7](#)). If He willed the miraculous exhibition of His power in the nineteenth century, He would will that His servants should entreat Him for its occurrence. He willed the chastisement of Israel in the days of Elijah by the withholding of rain; and it was His beautiful and interesting way of bringing that will into force that an earnest servant like Elijah should earnestly pray for it—to whom doubtless it had been revealed that such a dispensation of judgment would be vouchsafed at the right season. The principle applies to us in those elements of the divine work to which we stand related. It is His revealed will in this the end of the times of the Gentiles, to put an end to the desolations of His land and people: and for this we are to “pray earnestly.” It is His will to send Christ again to the earth on the arrival of the “times of restitution of all things which He hath spoken by the mouths of all His prophets since the world began,” and we are to “pray earnestly” for the consummation of this purpose, saying also, “Come Lord Jesus, come quickly.” It is His will to put an end to the power of the Gentiles, and to establish His Son as the lord of all the earth: and for this we are to “pray earnestly.”

There are things of a smaller compass in which His will has been signified, and for which we are to pray earnestly. He has revealed that He wills to supply our temporal needs in these days of our pilgrimage, for, as Jesus says, “Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things ... and all these things shall be added unto you”; but for these things we must “pray earnestly.” He wills to forgive the sins of “the broken and contrite in heart that tremble at His word,” and for this we must “pray earnestly,” and the prayer of faith will have its answer when thus “according to His will.” But if we ask things not according to His will, we ask amiss and will ask in vain. If we ask for miracle in an age when it is revealed there will be none, we may pray earnestly like Elijah, but no miracle will follow.

John lays plainly down the rule that governs the whole subject of our petitions. He does so in words that appear to turn in upon themselves, and lose all point, but which in reality convey a precise and large meaning. He says: “*This is the confidence* that we have in Him, that if we ask anything *according to His will* He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him.” It is the second part of this saying that may appear a little enigmatical, but the enigma dissolves when it is pondered. Why should our knowledge whether we have our petitions granted depend upon our knowledge in the abstract that He hears us? In this way: whatever an enlightened man may ask, it is governed by the desire that the thing asked for should subserve God’s great purpose with him, namely, to bring him at last into His glorious fellowship and life of the ages. But the petitioner may be unable to judge whether the

getting of what he desires would have this effect or not, or whether, in fact, it might not have the opposite effect. God knows the bearing and working out of things in all directions. He, therefore, knows whether the best way of granting our desire is to withhold or give what we ask. He may grant what we desire (our guidance and preservation to His kingdom) in the very opposite form to our expressed wishes. He may answer our prayer by withholding what we ask on the ground that what we ask would, in reality, work out the frustration of our desire, and not its realisation. His will is our salvation, and if we ask according to His will, He heareth us: and, knowing this, we know that in the true spirit of our petitions, we have our petitions granted, though the specific things at any time asked may be withheld.

Elijah's earnest prayer for a suspension of the rain coincided with the intention expressed in Yahweh's covenant with Israel, to withhold the rain in the event of their disobedience, and therefore the rain was withheld, with distressing results to man and beast. Yahweh delights not in thus dispensing affliction. On the contrary, He taketh not pleasure even in the death of a sinner; but there is a time for chastisement; and chastisement in its season is good and beneficent, as we behold in the beautiful results of its infliction, and the ugly and offensive results of its absence. The child or man who escapes it is far from blessed. The chastisement was not for Elijah, but for the rebellious Israel. Therefore Elijah was directed to a place where he could be free from its inconvenient effects. He was directed to hide himself by the brook Cherith—a tributary of the Jordan—where he would have the advantage of a free and pure water supply; there also his food requirements were provided. "The ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening." This was certainly a peculiar mode of supply. Some say it was not literal ravens, but those ravens of the desert, the Arabs, whose name in the Hebrew is identical with the name of the literal raven. It may have been so. There is no certainty, for the word is the same as Noah's raven sent forth at the flood. It is the modern habit to minimise the wonderfulness of Yahweh's works, and if they have a natural alternative in any case, to select that. There is no need for it in this case. It would be quite as great a miracle to employ marauding Arabs as Elijah's providers, as to employ literal ravens. And if there was a miracle, we may as well understand that form of it which was most signal and most in harmony with the fitness of the case, which the raven form undoubtedly would be. A neutral creature would be more obviously and appropriately a divine instrument in such a case than evil men.

By and by, the drought that impoverished the land in general, dries up the brook which supplied Elijah, and Elijah is obliged to shift his quarters. He departs by instruction from Israelitish territory, and seeks in Zarephath, a city of Sidon, an asylum in the land of the alien; "there," says Yahweh, "I have commanded a widow woman to sustain thee." Here the visible hand of God accompanies him, as the state of the country required. The widow woman to whom he was directed was not a rich lady, who, out of her abundance would maintain the prophet, but a poor woman who was at the last pinch, and who could not sustain Elijah without a miracle. This miracle could have been performed at the brook Cherith. The hand that provided bread and flesh could have given him water out of the rock, as it gave Israel in the wilderness. But there were other purposes besides sustenance to be served in his transference beyond Israel's frontiers. He was secreted from Ahab; the guilty land was left to simmer by itself in the heat of the divine vengeance; and Elijah was conveniently located for the next active scene of his work.

When he came to Zarephath, he found the widow, but not at all in a state prepared to receive him, or even knowing of his coming. The command she had received was not a command she had heard or was aware of. It was a command imprinted on her surroundings—a bias of her affairs imparted by the divine will, which would as assuredly work itself out as if the message

had been audible and had enlisted the woman as a willing and able worker. Thus does God both use unlikely instrumentalities, and employ them in a way not obvious to themselves in the working out of His will—a fact useful to note in the interpretation of our own affairs. When Elijah arrived, the woman was gathering sticks to make a fire to cook her last meal; for she had arrived at the end of her supplies, and saw nothing but death before her and her son, to which she was preparing to resign herself. With the knowledge that Elijah had of Yahweh's purpose in the case, he was able to take the situation cheerily. He was thirsty with his journey on a hot day through the dry country, and he asked her to let him have a drink of water. She started to bring him one, but before she went he asked her to bring him a morsel of bread as well. This led her to explain the pass to which her affairs had come. Elijah's answer would do her good: "Fear not ... for thus saith Yahweh Elohim of Israel, the barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail until the day that Yahweh sendeth rain upon the earth." And so it came to pass, and the widow had cause to be thankful that she had received a command, unwittingly to herself, to sustain the prophet Elijah. It was her own sustenance as well. It was a great miracle, but no greater than any other miracle, or than many things that are not considered miracles. God produces new meal and oil every year in the fields, by the slow chemistry of nature. It was easier to replace daily the small quantity of daily consumption in the barrel and oil vessel, than to produce the numberless tons yearly generated in the ordinary way—not easier for man: nothing is easy for man; in the essential sense, he can but manipulate the stuff that God has made in various shapes and forms. But to God, who does the great, it was easy to do the small. It is because men have ceased to recognise the great as His doing, that they find any difficulty in discerning the small as His work. God made heaven and earth, and, because He made them on such a wise principle that one part affects and regulates another, with the effect of constituting the whole a self-working machine, they have jumped at the absurd conclusion that because it is self-working, it is self-made! Such cases as Elijah's reveal to us the Artificer at work. He can produce a little meal direct when only a little is wanted, as well as a mighty harvest, by the slow methods of agriculture.

But this was far from being the only illustration. The widow had a son, who, during Elijah's stay, fell sick and died. This was a sore aggravation of the lonely widow's woes. She bewailed the event to Elijah, and seemed to regard it as a punishment of her sins from God. Elijah asked the woman for the dead lad, and carried him to his own room upstairs, and laid him on his own bed. Elijah had no power to do any of the marvels that characterised his life; but he knew the reality and the power of the living God of Israel, from whom Israel had deeply revolted. And he knew that if it were according to His will, earnest prayer might bring that power into action. He was there closeted with a helpless corpse, which was no more able than he to restore life. But Yahweh could restore life. And Elijah could and did ask. And having asked, he stretched himself three times on the dead lad. The spirit of Yahweh rested on Elijah, by which only, was he a prophet; and it might be Elijah's view that the spirit of Yahweh in him, thus brought into physical contact with the lifeless mechanism of the once living lad, might help the result desired if it should prove in harmony with Yahweh's will in the case. It is the universal lesson of the word of truth—(as exhibited in *The Ways of Providence*)—that the children of God must work with God in the attainment of the objects of their desire. Doubtless in this spirit, Elijah stretched himself three times on the dead body; Elijah's endeavours would have been in vain had Yahweh's pleasure not concurred with his prayer. "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." If the Lord be against them, their best efforts may succeed, but only to fail. If the Lord work with them—if His pleasure and consent be with their efforts, they will succeed,

but not without their efforts. “Yahweh heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul (or life) of the child came into him again, and he revived.” With peculiar satisfaction must Elijah have taken the boy downstairs, and presented him before his mother, saying, “See, thy son liveth.” It was a case of resurrection, in which, truly considered, there is no more marvel than in a case of resurrection illustrated every day. Men stand in life year after year, and think it nothing wonderful, but, when invited to believe that those who have died will be made to stand again, they profess to find it difficult. Why should they? Life is a question of conditions: interfere with the conditions, life stops. Restore the conditions, would not life resume? Ah, but who can restore the conditions? Granted that man cannot do it. Cannot God do it? The man would be a fool who should say, God could not. He might be a little more consistent if he were to say, “I do not believe there is a God to do it,” but, even then, his folly would only be put a little further back from view. We should only have to follow him to the beginnings of things—whether the beginning of ‘Christianity,’ the beginning of the ‘Jewish nation,’ the beginning of the world, or the beginning of the universe, to find him in a strange embarrassment in trying to maintain that works requiring power and wisdom were performed without one or the other. No: resurrection is no more wonderful than life: only it is a farther and higher and more interesting manifestation of the wonderful Father’s power in whose hand even our present breath is, and whose are all our ways. The widow’s son recovered under the action of the spirit of God: the stagnant blood re-liquefied: the congested vessels delivered themselves by a throb of new life; the lungs were set at liberty; the heart resumed its action, and the lad found himself coming out of a swoon. So it will be with countless dead men whose lives are all past and forgotten to man—who belong to ages past, and who have apparently disappeared from the universe as entirely as the leaves that choked the forest of their days. There will be this difference: their perished forms will have to be re-fashioned from the dust of the earth—ready to receive the vitalising inrush of the breath of life. In this, there will be no difficulty to Him by whose quickening word the heavens were made. What if their substance has been absorbed and circulated many times over in the wonderful chemistry of nature: any substance will do to build upon the nucleus of their identity; and on the new substance will easily be written by Almighty power those impressions which, hidden away in the recesses of our brains, form our recollections and go to make ourselves. Standing forth from the grave, the resurrected dead of all ages will seem to have resumed their life at the very point where death ended their former existence. They will, in fact, then become aware for the first time of their death and burial. Not by the prophet Elijah, but by Him to whom “all the law and the prophets give witness”—the Son of God—the Resurrection and the Life, will this wonderful work of divine power be done; for he it is to whom God hath given power over all flesh that he should give eternal life to as many as the Father hath given him.