

Chapter 29

Elijah's Mantle on Elisha

ELISHA FIRST stayed at Jericho after Elijah's removal. The place was not very salubrious—perhaps owing to the curse pronounced against it in the days of Joshua ([Josh. 6:26](#)). At all events it was a fact, to which “the men of the city” called Elisha's attention: “The situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord seeth; but the water is naught and the ground barren.” This supplied occasion for the first exercise of the wonderful power that rested on Elisha. Elisha asked the men to bring him a new cruse filled with salt. They did so: and “he went forth unto the spring of waters and cast the salt in there and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters: there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land.” The narrative adds, “So the waters were healed *until this day*.” The import of this remark, as regards the question of time, depends upon when the narrative was written, which would probably be after the occurrence of Elisha's death. It would be a natural circumstance to allude to an illustration of Elisha's power—that Jericho, the first scene of the prophet's labours, originally desolate, was then fertile and flourishing. Josephus, about eight hundred years afterwards, bears the same testimony (and in all matters of which he was an eye-witness, he is reliable). He says:

“There is a fountain by Jericho that runs plentifully, and is very fit for watering the ground ... This fountain at the beginning, caused not only the blasting of the earth and of the tree, but of the children born of women; and ... it was entirely of a sickly and corruptive nature to all things whatsoever, but ... it was made gentle and very wholesome and fruitful by the prophet Elisha ... The power of it is so great in watering the ground that if it do but once touch a country, it affords a sweeter nourishment than other waters do ... There are (in the space of ground watered by it), many sorts of palm trees that are watered by it different from each other in taste and name: the better sort of them, when they are pressed, yield an excellent kind of honey ... He who should pronounce this place to be divine would not be mistaken, wherein is such plenty of trees produced as are very rare, and of the most excellent sort ... It will not be easy to light on any climate in the habitable earth that can well be compared to it.”

The healing of Jericho by Elisha's offices, is an illustration of what is in store for the world, when the whole earth is under the rule of a multitude of Elishas. The glorified brethren of Christ who will “live and reign with him upon the earth,” will have all the power and more, of even a double-endowed mortal Elisha, for they will be spirit in nature and substance, having the spring of its healing and creative power in themselves. When, therefore, “the men of the city,” in any barren region, to which a glorified saint may be assigned as ruler, call his attention to the condition of the place, it will be easy for him, in his wisdom, to give some simple direction that will cure its malady. Elisha prescribed a new cruse filled with salt. Possibly, this may have been all that was naturally needed to rectify the disordered condition of the water—a simple cure, but requiring spiritual discernment to prescribe it. There are many beneficent adaptabilities in nature which are hidden from the eyes of men, because of sin, or from inevitable natural ignorance: the knowledge of which would be a source of blessing. In the case of the bitter waters of Marah, the Lord “shewed Moses a tree, which, when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made

sweet” ([Ex. 15:25](#)). The tree had the power to sweeten the water, but Moses did not know it. It required a miracle (that is, a direct divine act) to enlighten him. In the age of blessing that is coming, every son of God will possess this divine insight into nature, that will enable them to prescribe measures that, without any miracle, will produce blessing. Of course, there are cases in which “the powers of the world to come” will be exercised specifically and supplementally to nature, as when the word of Christ opened the eyes of the blind, healed the paralytic, or raised the dead, and the apostles after him did the same thing. Possibly, the healing of the bad water at Jericho was done in this way, and not by the natural action of the salt put into it. In that case, the casting of the salt would be but a symbolic act, and the divinely-appointed signal for the doing of the wonder, after the manner of the lifting of Aaron’s rod. In either case, the marvel was great, and its occurrence suggestive of glorious days yet in store for the world under the covenants of blessing.

When Elisha had stayed for awhile at Jericho, he removed to Bethel. While in the act of removal, the young rebeldom of the place manifested itself in a very insulting manner towards Elisha. They had heard the old man was going, and possibly had seen his preparations, and were glad at the departure of a man who had, in all likelihood, acted with a restraining effect on their youthful turbulence while living among them. The children trooped out of the city as he was ascending the slope leading out of Jericho towards the direction of his journey, and saluted him with disrespectful cries, “Go up, thou baldhead! go up, thou baldhead!” (from which also we get a glimpse of Elisha’s personal appearance). “Elisha turned back and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord.” Had it been a merely transient ebullition, he would probably have taken no notice; but the little rascals evidently persevered with increasing emphasis and numbers, and so he cursed, and in response to the curse of a spirit-gifted man, two bears emerged swiftly from a neighbouring wood and made sad havoc among the children. It has distressed some to think of a prophet of God cursing instead of blessing. They note the commandment of Christ, to “bless them that curse us,” and they think it a strange discrepancy. Their difficulty will disappear if they but remember that there is a time for everything: that God the fount of blessing is “a consuming fire” ([Heb. 12:29](#)); that Christ, who “reviled not again,” is the appointed executioner of condemnation and vengeance ([2 Thess. 1:8, 9](#); [Rev. 19:15](#); [Is. 11:4](#)). The time of Elisha was the time of the law of Moses which (justly enough) exacted an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” The state of Israel at the time was one of almost universal disobedience. Elisha was the power of God in their midst. To insult him was to insult the representative of God. Cursing was, therefore, natural and just, and in accordance with what was threatened them in the law of God in such circumstances. Christ’s command not to curse, but to bless, belongs to another time, with other purposes in view. It is a test of obedience and a means of discipline and spiritual development for those who are called as the sons of God and the divine rulers of mankind in the age to come.

The incident may be regarded as an illustration of one feature that will characterise that age of divine authority. One of the many drawbacks of the present age, is the liberty of sinners to say and do many things that are for their own hurt, and the hurt of the community. This liberty is considered one of the attributes of glorious “freedom”: no doubt it is better than a tyranny that would crush the good as well as the evil; but it is a poor compromise. It is a compromise necessitated by the absence of authority equal to the wise coercion of opposition: but it is a compromise that secures a vigorous growth of all manner of evil while checking and choking the development of righteousness. What is wanted is the application of the hand of authority in a way that would foster the opposite result—that would check the rank weeds of civilised

barbarism, and nourish and preserve the fruits and flowers of a true and godly culture. This cannot be done in the human age. But it will be done in the age of Christ's authority upon earth. He and his people are to rule the nations "with a *rod of iron*." This is a rough simile, but of blessed import. The rod of iron will only be laid on the back of wickedness: and if the blows are heavy enough to break it, none but the sons of wickedness will be sorry. The world will be all the better when the wicked mourn and the righteous rejoice. When every manifestation of diabolism is repressed by men of Elisha-power, at whose curse calamity, dire and immediate, springs upon the rebellious, diabolism will soon hide its head, and take refuge in the dark corners of the earth.

Elisha stayed a while at Carmel, and then removed to Samaria, where Jehoram, Ahab's successor (no better than his predecessors) reigned over Israel. Shortly after his removal thither, a great stir arose in consequence of the revolt of Mesha, King of Moab, who had been a vassal of Israel's during Ahab's life, but who, since Ahab's death, had gradually drifted from his allegiance, and now fairly threw off the yoke. (This is the Mesha who figures in the inscription, made during his reign, and discovered a few years back on the celebrated "Moabite stone"). Jehoram got ready a military expedition to bring back Mesha to his allegiance. Before starting, he secured the alliance of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and the king of Edom; and agreed upon a plan of campaign, which required the three kings to effect a junction in the wilderness of Edom. Arrangements being complete, the expedition started—Elisha accompanying. The three armies duly met at the appointed rendezvous, but shortly found they had selected a waterless region, in which they were soon in great straits; for what can men do without water? Jehoram saw that a catastrophe threatened. He lamented to Jehoshaphat that things should have come to such a pass with them: "Alas, that the Lord hath called these three kings together to deliver them into the hand of Moab!" Jehoshaphat, who ought not to have been in league with godless Jehoram (as a prophet told him on his return to Jerusalem), enquired whether there were no prophet of Yahweh in the camp. The answer discovered Elisha's presence. To Elisha forthwith the three kings went (there is nothing like calamity for unbending the human neck). When Elisha saw Jehoram, he refused to have to do with him. "What have I to do with thee?" said he; "Get thee to the prophets of thy father ... As the Lord God of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, surely were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. I would not look toward thee or see thee" ([2 Kings 3:14](#)). Out of respect for Jehoshaphat, who was faithful to God, Elisha consented to entertain the matter of their request for guidance in their difficulty. "Bring me a minstrel," said he. Why did he want a minstrel? We discover from the effect that followed the minstrel's playing. "It came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him." But what connection, it may be asked, could there be between the music of a minstrel and the stirring of the divine gift that was upon Elisha? It would be difficult to suggest a connection, if the popular conception which puts God outside of nature were correct. But this conception is neither Scriptural nor philosophical. The Scriptures declare all things to be "in God" ([Acts 17:28](#); [1 Cor. 8:6](#)), and God declares of Himself that, though dwelling in heaven, in a personal sense, He "fills" heaven and earth by the presence of His Spirit ([Jer. 23:24](#); [Psa. 139:7](#)). What the Scriptures thus declare, reason tells us must be the case, for how is it possible to conceive of a system of nature which God has created, and upholds, without the pervading presence of His power through it all? In view of this, the influence of the minstrel's notes is not inscrutable. The laws of music are of God, as much as the working of inspiration: for "all things are of God." Now, we know it is one law of music to stimulate and open the higher faculties, where there are higher faculties to open (all men are not liberally endowed in this matter). Music awakens the higher susceptibilities, when, without music, they would lie dormant. Even Saul felt its soothing

effect. If the higher faculties are thus acted on in their normal state, how much more when the Spirit of God dwells with them, as in the case of Elisha? His quiescent light and power awoke under the minstrel's strains, and prepared him as the sensitive instrument to receive the impressions of the divine communication. "And he said, Thus saith the Lord, Make this valley full of ditches. For thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet that valley shall be filled with water, that ye may drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts." The ditches were dug, and in the morning "there came water by the way of Edom, and the country was filled with water." Where did the water come from? Answer: It was made for the occasion: nothing easier. Even man, by the electric combination of oxygen, hydrogen, etc., can produce water in small quantities with appliances: what difficulty then, to the Possessor of all power, in producing any quantity the occasion might call for?

The water put an end to Israel's distress. It also had the effect of urging the Moabites to their destruction; for seeing an immense sheet of water in an unaccustomed place under the ruddy glare of an Oriental sun, they came to the conclusion that the three kings had fallen out among themselves, and had reddened the valley with the blood of mutual slaughter. Under this impression, they came on without caution, and were easily overthrown by their foes. Judah and Israel were the Lord's people, not as yet cast from His presence. This is the fact to be held distinctly in view as a key to all the events, so peculiarly divine as those which have marked their history, and the history of no other nation.

Israel returned from their successful expedition, and Elisha settled in the land in quietness. One of the young men in attendance upon him (one of the "sons of the prophets") soon after died in debt. The person to whom he owed the money applied to the widow for the payment of the debt. The widow could not pay, and the creditor insisted upon taking her two sons as forced servants in satisfaction. The widow in her distress applied to Elisha. Elisha asked her what she had. "Nothing but a pot of oil." Then, said Elisha, go and borrow as many vessels as you can, and pour out of the one pot of oil till all the vessels are full. In ordinary cases, such a command would have been a mockery: but the case was not ordinary. Elisha was there, with "a double portion of the spirit of Elijah" resting upon him. The direction of such a man meant the operation of a power not higher than men knew in nature, but than men can ordinarily control, for men see in nature any year the operation of a law that can increase a small quantity of oil to a great quantity; but they have no power to "differentiate" this law. Here was a man who could do what ordinary men cannot. The Spirit of God, abiding with him and working with him, could combine the elements on the spot to any required extent. The one pot of oil was the laboratory in which the work was done. Consequently, her pot of oil went on pouring without emptying not because there was anything magical in the pot (there is no such thing, in reality, as magic), but because the oil was manufactured in the pot as fast as it escaped into the other vessels. Here, also, is one of "the powers of the world to come," at the command of the saints who will reign with Christ. The supply of what is needful will be an easy matter with those upon whom even more than a double portion of the spirit will rest. Not that this will be the common mode of supply, but it will be an available mode, when requisite. The employment of it will simply be a question of propriety and fitness.

When all the vessels were full, the supply ceased, and the woman, by Elisha's direction, sold the oil, paid her husband's debt, and had a sufficient balance to have a living for herself and children. There will, doubtless, be many such cases of helping the poor in the age to come, by the saints, in the exercise of the power that will reside in them for the blessing of all the families of the earth.

Next, Elisha has to visit Shunem, where a certain “great woman”—a woman of some social standing and power of discernment—becomes interested in Elisha, and presses her hospitality upon him. He accepts it, and goes his way, but returns frequently, and on each occasion, “turns in thither to eat bread.” She declares her impression at last to her husband that this wayside visitor is “an holy man of God,” and she proposes (and her husband evidently consents), that they should offer him an apartment in the house, for use every time he came that way. Elisha accepted, and becomes a regular occupant of the “little chamber,” with its “bed, table, stool, and candlestick,” which the lady of the house had so generously provided. Elisha, by and by, proposes to recompense “all this care” with which she and her husband had been careful for him. He asks what he shall do—speak to the king for her, or the commander-in-chief, or what? Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, calls attention to the fact that the woman is childless. This suggests the most acceptable form of reward: “about this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son.” The word duly came to pass. “The word of God is quick and powerful.” The removing of the cause of sterility is easy to the Power that made man at the beginning, and so the woman “bare a son at that season that Elisha had said unto her.” But this was not the end of the marvel. The child, when grown, appears to have died of sunstroke ([2 Kings 4:19](#)). Elisha was on Carmel at the time: the woman made straight for him, to tell him the heavy tidings (perhaps with the hope that he could help). When she arrived, she threw herself at Elisha’s feet in speechless grief, and held him by his feet. “Gehazi (the prophet’s servant) came near to thrust her away.” But Elisha said, “Let her alone, her soul is vexed within her, and *the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me.*” This is one of the many casual evidences of veracity in the narrative. In a fictitious narrative, written with the aim of extolling the greatness of Elisha, there would have been no such feature as this—Elisha ignorant of the woman’s grief. Elisha in such a narrative, would have known all and anticipated all, and arranged for all. But here is Elisha, pitying the poor brokenhearted woman, and wondering at the cause of her grief. After a pause, the question (no doubt wildly) escapes her lips, “Did I desire a son of my lord?” This shows Elisha what has happened. He instantly tells Gehazi to take his (Elisha’s) staff, and run to Shunem, and lay it on the face of the dead child. Elisha evidently expected that this would restore the child: why should he think so? Because the staff constantly handled by Elisha, would be impregnated, through his hands, with the intense spirit power that rested upon his own person: and Elisha’s thought was that the contact of this spirit-charged staff would be sufficient to re-ignite departed vitality, as the contact of his own spirit-charged dead bones proved, in the subsequent case of a dead body hurriedly thrown into his grave ([2 Kings 13:21](#)). But his thought proved mistaken. “Gehazi laid the staff upon the face of the child, and there was neither voice nor hearing.” Here again is proof of the artless truth of the narrative. A fictitious account would have represented the staff as all-sufficient. Into such a narrative the intimation of failure would never have crept. Gehazi, reporting the failure to Elisha, Elisha went to the child himself, and closing the door, knelt in prayer to God for the restoration of the child’s life. Following upon this, he took the means likely (in his case) to accomplish his desire. He stretched himself upon the dead child until the flesh of the child “waxed warm.” Then he walked backwards and forwards, and repeated the process, on which he had the gratification to see the child sneeze and open its eyes. The spirit of God in Elisha raised the dead in harmony with the laws of its own working.