

Studies in the Life of Elijah

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Preface

This series of lessons is a devotional study on the life of the prophet Elijah. The objective is to provide practical insight into the doctrinal and spiritual significance and meaning of his life. As a man of like passions with us, his life sheds light on the greatness of the God of the Bible, His purposes, and His love and care for His people in a world in desperate need of the saving message of Jesus Christ. The story of Elijah also reflects the need of God's people to walk with Him by faith through the privilege of prayer and the knowledge of His Word.

The messages of these studies stem from the heart and from years of study and shepherding God's people as a pastor. They were originally a series of studies presented at the Sunday morning services. I do not intend this study as a "scholarly" work, though I have sought to base it on a careful exposition according to the cultural and historical background, the context (both near and more remote), the meaning of Hebrew words and grammar, and the analogy of Scripture. I do not claim originality, for the hearts of many other students of God's Word have guided and influenced my own.

These studies are not presented as a last word on the life of the prophet but it is my prayer that the Lord, by His matchless grace, will use them to His glory and honor and for the building up of the saints for a deeper walk by faith in our loving and sovereign God. So I commend this study to God and to the Word of His grace which is able to build us up.

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction,
that through perseverance and the encouragement
of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

Lesson 1: Introduction and Historical Setting

Introduction

The story of Elijah and the nation of Israel is heroic narrative built around the exploits of the main character, Elijah. It is the story of a man raised up by God in a time of conflict in his community, in a time of spiritual and moral degeneracy. He was there to bring the nation back to God, to turn them from their idolatry to a vital faith in the true God, the God of Israel and the Bible.

In heroic narrative, the story focuses on the protagonist, the central figure or hero and his conflicts and encounters as the story moves toward the goal of the narrative. The goal of the narrative and the high point of the story is found for us in 1 Kings 18, the challenge and contest with the prophets of Baal before the people on Mount Carmel.

The purpose of this high mark in the story is spelled out for us in two verses, 18:21 and 18:37. Chapter 17 is the preparation for this event. It is showing us God's preparation of Elijah and the nation for what will happen on Mount Carmel. Then chapter 19 is the aftermath--the effects of this event on the nation and on Elijah, the hero.

What we must not miss is the fact that the hero or heroine of heroic narrative is a representative person. In other words, the story and its hero capture the universal human situation. The historian tells us what happened, but literary narrative in the Bible tells us more. It shows us what happens in life.¹ The hero, then, becomes a model, an example for faith, for spiritual experience and life, and the conflict he is in becomes an illustration of what we face in life.

Values and virtues, failures and weaknesses, strengths and abilities of the hero and the conflicts he and his society faced show us this is the way life is. They reveal what we need to know, to appropriate, and to avoid as we live in our society.

Thinking about the impact the life of Elijah should have on us in the day in which we live, I am reminded of Psalm 11:3 which asks an important question. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The question was being asked of David by his friends and is another heroic narrative of Scripture. This question forms a fitting introduction for the study of Elijah. The NIV translates this: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Or "what is the righteous one doing?" David's friends had become fainthearted and depressed over national conditions. They were suggesting that David should flee to the mountain where he fled from Saul (Ps. 11:1). The question relates to a time when law and order were being destroyed. It may have been when Absalom, David's own son, was seeking to usurp his throne. Or as some suggest, it may have been when Saul was seeking to kill David. Regardless, the foundations refer to the law and order of society based on the Lord's protective rule through the absolutes of the Word.

This asks a question we are facing in our nation today because our country is under the countdown with its foundations being destroyed by godless humanism. David's answer is given in Psalm 11:4-7. In short, David's focus was on the Lord. He contrasted the problems on earth with the sovereign and exalted position of the Lord who sits in heaven, the place of authority and power.²

The sovereign Lord sits on His heavenly throne, not indifferently, but observantly. He is working out His purposes on earth. Though transcendent, God is also intimately and immanently involved with mankind, especially those who trust Him. David then reminds us that while the Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, He never forsakes the righteous who can, by faith, behold His face and thus experience His strength and courage. The righteous can experience His peace now in the midst of any situation and will one day experience His presence and blessings in God's eternal kingdom.

¹ For more on heroic narrative and the Bible as literature, see *How to Read the Bible as Literature* by Leland Ryken, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1984.

² *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament Edition*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, editors, Victor Books, electronic media.

Second Chronicles 7:13-14 reminds us of another privilege and responsibility:

If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

First Chronicles 12 also tells us of another serious time in David's history when the foundations of the nation were crumbling. As 1 Samuel 26:20 puts it, David was being chased by Saul like a partridge on a mountain. During this time some of God's people did something else. "Day by day {men} came to David to help him, until there was a great army like the army of God" (1 Chr. 12:22). These men joined together to form a band of men who would stand against the times they were facing. Included among these were the sons of Issachar of whom was said: "Men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do" (1 Chr. 12:32).

What does this mean to us in our day? The righteous need to know what to do and then do it because they know and believe that God sits in the heavens observantly. Withdrawing, becoming bitter, angry, depressed, diseased in our attitudes, or seeking sinful ways of escape is not what the righteous should do.

I am reminded of what Daniel said about those who truly know God. Daniel 11:32 refers to the godless, humanistic mind-set and activity of the last days, especially in the days of the Tribulation. Satan will promote and use this humanistic and demonic mind-set to advance his end-time system and the Man of Lawlessness (the Anti-christ). The objective will be to turn people away from God and His covenant promises in the Savior. But Daniel 11:32b tells us even then, as bad as that will be, God will have His remnant who know Him intimately. Regardless of the pressures, they will display strength and take action. We are getting a taste of this now, as Israel did in the time of Antiochus Epiphanies around 175-164 B.C.

You might ask, what does all this have to do with a study of Elijah? He too lived in dismal times. They were times of spiritual apostasy and moral decay. But we find in this colorful and powerful prophet a wonderful illustration of what the righteous should do when the foundations are destroyed. Elijah is one of the prominent figures in the Word of God. His significance is evidenced by over 20 direct references to him in the New Testament, and by his appearance in the transfiguration of the Lord with Moses, the great Law giver. However, to gain greater insight from the example of his life, we need to understand the historical setting in which this great man of God abruptly and suddenly appeared on the scene.

The Historical Setting

In the day in which Elijah lived and ministered, the foundations had crumbled far beyond what King David experienced in his day. As we study the Word, we must always remember that the Bible was written to and about living people in real life situations. It does not represent just a group of ethereal, religious, and proverbial sayings thought up by a group of religious hermits who were isolated from people and from life.

Rather, through the Bible as the Word of God, God has revealed Himself historically, setting forth His eternal truth to real people in real-life situations. Practically speaking, what does this mean? It means we dare not divorce our study from understanding the historical setting of every passage of Scripture if we are going to come to grips with the truth and message of the Bible. Much of its relevance and application to us personally in our need is derived from our understanding of the historical setting in which a passage is written. This is undoubtedly why many of the Psalms begin with a reference to some historical situation.

A Nation in Decay

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel record the **establishment, consolidation, and extension** of the Theocratic kingdom of God in the reigns of David and his son, Solomon. It was a glorious time--a time of great prosperity in the nation. This was the result of God's blessing for obedience to the holy absolutes of His Word, or His covenant with Israel according to God's purpose for the nation among the nations (cf. Ex. 19:4-6 with Deut. 4:6-11 and Deut. 28-30).

Though Solomon began well, about the middle of his reign he began to act foolishly. As is so often the case, in his spiritual decline, his country was gravely influenced as well. He brought upon himself the disfavor of

God by permitting the thinking and customs of other nations to influence his decisions and manner of life. This situation developed as a result of the following:

(1) He allowed idolatry to invade his kingdom through foreign marriages, a practice forbidden by the Word (Deut. 17:14-20; Neh. 13:23-27). Marriages were commonly seals of foreign alliances. He had Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Zidonian, and Egyptian wives and this suggests alliances with all these nations.³

(2) Furthermore, he levied excessive taxes and labor constrictions on the people, without pay, because of his own selfish extravagances. These included some of the very things Deuteronomy 17 warns against. In other words, rather than remaining distinct and separate from the nations, Solomon became like the nations.

Leon Wood calls our attention to a marked contrast between the kingships of Solomon and his father David, a contrast created by the diverse backgrounds of the two rulers. It speaks volumes to us in our day of prosperity, softness, and moral breakdown.⁴

DAVID	SOLOMON
David had been raised in the open, watching sheep, and later experienced the testings of a fugitive life.	Solomon, however, had known only the ease of the palace, with its attendant luxuries.
David became a king of action, aggressive and efficient, who could personally lead armies to victory.	Solomon became a king of peace, happy to stay home and content merely to retain the land his father had gained.
David's court never grew larger than the requirements of his government.	Solomon became lavish to suit his tastes and expensive appetites. As a result, he needed more revenue and raised taxes.
David was more a man of the people.	Solomon was a man of the court.
More significant, David maintained a vibrant faith in God as a "man after God's own heart."	Solomon, began well in spiritual devotion, but failed to maintain this basic relationship before God. He fell into sinful ways and finally came under God's censure.

When Rehoboam, Solomon's son took over the throne of his father, the ten tribes of Israel (all but Judah and Benjamin), sought a solution to this heavy taxation through the leadership of Jeroboam.

Rehoboam was a young man accustomed to extreme prosperity and luxury. Rather than cut back on the heavy taxation and labor constriction imposed by Solomon, he acted selfishly and foolishly. He refused the counsel of the older men to cut back, and threatened to increase taxes because he wanted to continue enjoying a lavish court. As a result, the ten tribes seceded immediately and there was a division of the kingdom.

Jeroboam then became king of the northern ten tribes of Israel. Rather than seeking the glory of God and the benefit of his people, he followed his own selfish agenda and committed gross sin in the sight of God. He established a substitute worship for his people, two new worship centers, one at Dan and another at Bethel. As symbols for the new places of worship, he made golden images of calves. His proposed aim was to worship Yahweh, but his real motive was political and selfish. He wanted to keep the people from going back to Jerusalem because of his fear they would eventually want to reunite into one kingdom. He put his own desires ahead of God's will and the good of the people. Of course, this was in direct violation of the Law of Moses. It set the people up for religious syncretism of the true worship of God with the fertility cult of Baal. Without doubt, this new worship of Jeroboam paved the way for the introduction of Baal worship under Ahab and Jezebel in the time of Elijah.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, there were occasionally kings who did good in the sight of the Lord, like Uzziah and Hezekiah. In the northern kingdom, there were no good kings of whom it could be said in the record of Scripture, "they did that which was right in the sight of the Lord." In fact, all eighteen of Jeroboam's suc-

³ Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1970, p. 293.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

cessors continued his substitute form of worship which God held against each as a serious sin. The descriptive sentence, "And he did evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his father and in his sin which he made Israel sin," is repeated with variations of most of Jeroboam's descendants (1 Kgs. 15:26). Not only were these kings evil, but there was a continuous decline. Scripture indicates that the next king was worse than his father. There was continual spiritual and moral erosion, much as we have seen in our nation.

With the rise of Ahab in the time of Elijah, things had reached an all time low. Fifty-eight years had passed since the division of the kingdom. Seven kings had reigned and all were evil. All were idolatrous, but with Ahab idolatry reached an all-time high even to the point of seeking to stamp out the worship of Yahweh altogether. How? Why? Ahab married Jezebel, the famed princess from Tyre, daughter of Ethbaal, King of Tyre. Again, following the poor examples that preceded him, his aim was to seal a pact with Phoenicia for profitable political reasons. His trust was in his own schemes rather than in the Lord. The weak Ahab allowed Jezebel to introduce the worship of the satanic and idolatrous cult of Baal-Melqart into Israel. The worship of Baal, a Canaanite deity, had been observed by Israelites in the days of the Judges and before the establishment of the kingdom. David rid the land of this dirge, but now it was resurrected on a new scale, larger than ever, and this was done by the government, the king.

Likewise today, we have seen every conceivable cult introduced into our society along with the New Age movement. In many ways this too is being promoted by our government, while at the same time Christianity is hindered under the ploy of separation of church and state.

Not only was Jezebel persistent, but she was highly dominant and held a great amount of influence over Ahab. Jezebel did not want Baalism to coexist with the worship of Yahweh. She wanted to completely stamp out the worship of God. This is precisely the way Satan and his world system works. People are often broad-minded with the varying religions and philosophical ideas of the world, but never with the truth. Thus Jezebel slaughtered every prophet she could get her hands on (1 Kgs. 18:4). Today, humanism and the New Age movement would like nothing better than to stamp out Christianity because it stands in the way of Satan's world wide purposes.

New Agers are not naive enough to believe that everyone will accept the dawn of this new day. Some will oppose the emerging New Order. For these, there is another solution: intimidation, starvation, and liquidation.

Make no mistake: if and when the New Order comes, it will not be because everyone will voluntarily fall in line. Those religions that will not accept the lie that man is God will be systematically eliminated by whatever means is necessary. In the New Age, disarmament will be the guise used to get the nations of the world to surrender their sovereignty to an authoritative global political machine, which will in turn use those weapons (if necessary) to force everyone, especially the religious objectors, to get on board with the new agenda.

Understand Satan's methodology: there is a vast difference between his advertising and the product that the purchaser receives. George Orwell called it *newspeak*. Talk about disarmament but plan to use weapons on those who refuse to accept your agenda. Campaign for individual freedom but plan to eliminate the freedom of those who don't toe the line. Affirm the value of humanity while at the time you favor the systematic killing of the unborn and eventual death of millions.⁵

An Explanation of Baalism

Baal, a Semitic word that means "lord, master, or owner," was the chief god worshipped by the Canaanites at the time of Israel's entrance into the land. The head of the Canaanite pantheon of gods was called El, who was regarded as the father of 70 elim or gods. The most popular of these gods was called Baal.

Baal was the most popular because he was considered the god of fertility in all aspects of life--human, animal, and vegetable. *Production* and *prosperity* were dependent on Baal. The Ras Shamrah text, an important archaeological find, praises Baal as the god who has power over rain, wind, clouds, and therefore over fertility. Baal was also worshipped as the weather god, the god of storm, of rain and good crops. As you can see, this is very important to the background of 1 Kings 17-19 with the story of the drought and the contest on Mount Carmel.

⁵ Erwin W. Lutzer and John F. DeVries, *Satan's Evangelistic Strategy for this New Age*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1989, p. 151.

Worship was localized so that each area worshipped its own Baal. A name from the city or place where Baal was being worshipped was frequently added. This resulted in a variety of names like Baal-Meon, Baal-Hermon, Baal-Hazor, Baal-Zebub, Baal-Marduk, and Baal-Peor. In Elijah's time, Israel worshipped Baal-Melqart because this was the form of Baalism worshipped at Tyre. Jezebel, a Tyrian princess, introduced the worship of Baal-Melqart into Israel.

Baal worship included the following: (a) The offering of incense and burnt sacrifices (Jer. 7:9); (b) Sometimes the offering of human sacrifices (Jer. 19:5); (c) It especially included licentious sexual activity--including sodomy (cf. 1 Kgs. 14:23-24; 15:12; with 22:46).

The slaughter of innocent children and sodomy are sure indications that the foundations of a society have crumbled. We can obviously see the clear parallel to our country today with the very political gay movement and the slaughter of millions of unborn children (called fetuses by those who call themselves pro-choice). These are two terms designed to hide the fact they are killing babies in the womb and are really anti-life. Remember, in the Old Testament Pentateuch (which was the Bible of Elijah), God had a special purpose for Israel. God had promised blessing for obedience, but cursing for disobedience. The curses included shutting up the heavens and no rain meant no production (Deut. 11:8-17; 28:1f, 23-24).

An interesting historical reference is found in 1 Kings.16:32-34. First there is the statement of how Ahab provoked the LORD with his idolatry more than all the kings of Israel, This is followed with a seemingly out-of-place reference to the death of the two sons of Hiel who fortified Jericho. All this forms a fitting introduction to 1 Kings 17 and the appearance of Elijah. It was a reminder that God's promises and warnings are true. They do come to pass. As Hiel had disregarded God's sure curse on anyone who fortified Jericho (Josh. 6:26), so Israel had disregarded the promised discipline of God for disobedience (Deut. 11:8-17). Here God gave Israel a reminder to demonstrate emphatically that not only is God's Word true, but God is involved in the life of the nations (including Israel), and Israel was ripe for judgment.

That's not all. With Elijah's sudden, dramatic, brave, bold entrance and declaration to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word," we have a direct confrontation between Yahweh, the living and true God of Scripture, and Baal-Melqart, one of the heathen deities of ancient Babylon. This confrontation comes about through God's prophet, Elijah, an obscure prophet who suddenly, like lightning out of the blue, confronted a godless Ahab.

God was dramatically challenging Baalism, or the belief of the people in Baal, on the very thing they worshipped Baal for--RAIN! On the one side there was Ahab the King, the ruthless and notorious Jezebel, the impotent and false god Baal, and the Baal priests and priestesses. On the other side was Yahweh and a single servant, the prophet Elijah, a man of faith, deeply committed to God. It was a question of authenticity and power.

Conclusion

As we dig into this story, please note that Elijah's prayer for the cessation of rain in the land was according to the warnings of the Word. Elijah was not going out on a limb. He was acting on the promises, or in this case, the warnings and principles of the eternal Word of God. He knew God's Word was true and he was standing firmly on the propositions of Scripture. Furthermore, this prayer for the cessation of rain was designed to bring Israel to repentance, to bring the nation back to Yahweh, the true God. Elijah burned with concern for God's glory and for his nation. He was also available to the Lord to be used as part of God's solution. Certainly, as Elijah faced the rigors and crumbling foundations of his day, he had his ups and downs as you and I do. It is through God's work in Elijah, a man of like passions with us, that we can learn how to handle our ups and downs, fears, and times of discouragement in our day of fallen foundations. We can grasp something of what God is calling us to do.

Questions:

(1) Do we really know God in such a way that, as Daniel declared, we will display strength and take action?

(2) Are we willing to pray like Elijah and follow God's direction? Or are we more concerned for our pleasure and business as usual than we are for God's glory and revival in our nation?

(3) Are we willing to take a stand against the forces stacked against us because we are standing on the promises of God and resting in the assurance of His presence and provision regardless of how overwhelming the situation looks from our viewpoint?

(4) Are we like the men of Issachar, who joined with David to form an army of God in a time of national need to serve the Lord and their nation, because we understand the time and know what we should do?

Lesson 2: The Man Elijah (1 Kings 17:1)

Introduction

In our first lesson on Elijah, we looked at the historical setting that formed the spiritual and moral environment into which Elijah was called of God to minister. It was a time when the foundations of law and order were being systematically dismantled. It was a time when the righteous might well ask as in Psalm 11:3, “When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” From this Psalm, we saw our response of faith is not to run and hide. Rather, we need desperately to follow examples like David, Elijah and Elisha. We need to learn from their lives and be encouraged so that, as David answered this question in Psalm 11:4, we can live in light of the fact; “The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD’S throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.” This challenges us to remember the fact that God is not indifferent to people and nations. As the Almighty, He deals with us accordingly. We need to know and rest in the truth of Psalm 33. Note particularly verses 12-22.

We obviously deplore what we are seeing in our nation and in the world. Indeed, conditions are becoming more grotesque every day. It seems that each day brings some tragedy or disaster: murder, serial killings, mass killings, nation-wide corporate fraud--evidence of moral breakdown and rejection of our Christian heritage. But this is the day in which we live. As it was with Elijah, so God has called us to serve Him and minister to others in times like these.

In this lesson we see Elijah’s appearance and dramatic declaration to King Ahab. Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning out of the dark clouds of Israel’s spiritual decline, Elijah appears on the scene. Standing before Ahab, probably in the palace itself, he bravely proclaimed God’s message of judgment to the spineless king. And this was undoubtedly done in the presence of the murderous Jezebel and the prophets of Baal.

The Man Elijah

Elijah’s Obscure Beginning

“Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead . . .” (vs. 1a). Notice how Elijah just suddenly appears on the scene. We are told little about him. Much like Melchizedek, he simply emerges out of obscurity from the standpoint of the record of Scripture. Nothing is mentioned about his parents, his ancestry, training, or early life. He is simply called “the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead.” In other words, he was not on Israel’s “Who’s Who” list. He was known as a prophet, as the account that follows suggests. However, Scripture places very little emphasis on his background.

This reminds us that, other than being godly people of faith who are available to be used of God, it is never really who and what we are that count. Here was a man who was close to God, a man to whom God was very real and God used Him. In the final analysis, what really matters is who and what God is. Knowing who God is should strengthen our faith in Him so that it affects what we are, what we say, and what we do.

By contrast, it seems people always want to know, “Who are you?” “Who is he or she?” People can look at their accomplishments, as Nebuchadnezzar did (Dan. 4:30), and proudly credit them to their own brilliance. On the other hand, as Moses did at the call of God (Ex. 3:11), we often tend to think despairingly, “Who am I?” In each case, this kind of thinking puts the focus on us, rather than on the sovereign LORD upon whom we are totally dependent and who is always able to do super abundantly above all that we are able to ask or even think.

Remember John the Baptist, Elijah’s New Testament counterpart? He was asked, “Who are you?” His answer was, “I am just a voice!” He was emphasizing he was merely an instrument of the living God who was there to help them recognize and believe in the living and true God. We need to also remember what the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians who were so focused on human personalities (1 Cor. 3:4-9; and 4:1-5).

How we need the attitudes of John the Baptist and Paul. We tend to be so people-oriented and go to one of two extremes. Either we run and hide from ministry and witness because we have our eyes on our limitations and on

the problems we are facing. Or we do the opposite and glory in personalities rather than in the power and presence of the Almighty.

Elijah's Name

Elijah is the Hebrew *Eliyahu* that means "My God is Yahweh." Note several things: In Elijah's name, given to him perhaps by a godly parent, we can see how the sovereign providence of God is often at work in the historical circumstances of our lives. God picked out, raised up, and used a man whose very name was significant to the religious climate of his day and the contest that would follow. The nation was following after Baal who was, of course, no god at all. Elijah boldly appeared and proclaimed the true God of Israel, Yahweh, who was *His God*. This proclamation was the point of Elijah's prayer in 1 Kings 18:36-37. As the months rolled by after Elijah's declaration of no rain, whenever people saw or thought of *Eliyahu*, they were faced with the message of his name, "My God is Yahweh." In other words, my God is Yahweh, not Baal. The prophet's name, therefore, declared something of who he was. It was a standing declaration of his faith in that it demonstrated his *protest* against Baalism, his *allegiance* to God, and the *key issue* of the day as it is today--who or what is our God?

This challenges me to ask some questions such as:

(1) Who and what is my God? Do we claim faith in the God of the Bible, but live like practical atheists? Is God really our God from the standpoint of our treasures, attitudes, priorities, pursuits and behavior? Or are we guilty of worshipping other gods like the gods of materialism and the details of life? Is there a way we can tell? Of course! What's really important to me? How committed am I to getting alone with God so I really get to know Him? Do I allow Him to completely rearrange, redirect, channel, and use me in the issues and needs of our day, and in the lives of others around me?

(2) What is my name? In other words, who am I? Like Elijah, God has created each of us for a purpose. We are each unique with unique potential and opportunities limited only by our attitude, our faith, our awareness of God, and our availability to Him. Let us dream big because we have a big God! Let's ask the Lord to show us the potential of ministry around us, and to cause us to see the opportunities through the potential of His life and power. We need eyes to see the fields that are white unto harvest (cf. John 4:35) while I pray focused on the Lord of the harvest (Luke 10:2).

Elijah's Description and Locality

Elijah is called "the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead." He is so called because he was likely from a town called Tishbe in upper Galilee known to us from the Apocryphal book of Tobit 1:2. One source says that "*Tishbe*" means "captivity." It certainly is a derivative of *shabah*, meaning "to take captive." In view of God's warnings in Deuteronomy 28:15-37, this could have stood as a warning of eventual captivity if Israel refused to repent and turn to the Lord. He is called "Elijah, the Tishbite" six times and was well known by this title (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:1; 21:17, 28; 2 Kgs. 1:3, 8; 9:36).

This suggests the title was significant. Scholars debate the exact location of Tishbe. If Tishbe is a town, then he was born in Tishbe, but became an inhabitant of Gilead, perhaps by choice. We are not told why, but since "the settlers of Gilead" really means "the sojourners of Gilead," it may declare something about Elijah's character and relationship to God. The name Gilead means "a rocky region" and refers to a mountainous area east of the Jordan that was comparatively uninhabited. It was an area well adapted for spending time alone with God. The phrase is certainly suggestive of his lifestyle as a sojourner, as one whose focus was on the things of God.

Why is Gilead mentioned? Gilead demonstrates the historical reality of Elijah and throws additional light on Elijah's background. This gives us more insight into the forces forming the character of the prophet. How should we understand and apply this? It shows us Elijah was not out of the seminary of Samaria. The people of the rocky hill country of Gilead were rough, tough, rugged, and perhaps somewhat solemn and stern. They dwelt close to God's creation in crude villages as shepherds rather than in the lavish surroundings of the palace. Such surroundings tend to spoil people's character and make them soft rather than tough and rugged. The people of Gilead were hardened and disciplined by the weather and walking over the mountainous terrain. They possessed great physical strength, and such a life also gave them character. Remember the contrasts between David and Solomon? Elijah was what we could call a mountain man. But he was a mountain man who walked with God.

Just as David's character was developed as a shepherd, so this tells us something about the character God had developed in Elijah. He had developed the character of a sojourner, one who was separated from the lifestyle of his day. He was a man with a light grip on the details of life; a man willing and able to pick up and go if God said to go. He was not bogged down, chained by his comfort zones or by a desire for the material details of life.

Like John the Baptist, he was a man of the desert. Being a desert man he was free from those things in society that so often dominate our hearts and keep us from being free to follow the Lord. This suggests he had denied himself the right to control his own life and, by faith, had submitted to God's control. The result was a man totally dedicated to God and His service. He was a man of character and strength both physically and spiritually.

Shouldn't we ask ourselves some tough questions like: (a) How much have I been softened and negatively affected by the comforts of our society? (b) How available am I to serve the Lord if it's going to cause some kind of hardship or inconvenience? (c) Do I have the heart of a sojourner? Or do I have the heart of an earth dweller? (d) Am I more committed to my comfort and pleasure than I am to the Lord? (cf. 1 Pet. 1:13-2:12)

Elijah's Attire and Appearance

Elijah stands in striking contrast to the Baal priests and the populace of the city in every way. His dress and appearance, though not mentioned here, are mentioned in 2 Kings 1:7-8. The way they are mentioned suggests the people were a little awed by the prophet's distinctive looks and manner. He wore a garment of black camel's hair girded with a leather belt about his waist to hold in his garment for freer movement. This was to become the official dress of a prophet (Zech. 13:4) and stood in striking contrast to the affluent inhabitants of Samaria, and especially the Baal priests.

His dress was symbolic and stood for: (a) His chosen poverty and priorities--material things were not on his priority list. (b) His separation and denouncement of the world--he was not controlled by the lifestyle of the world. He was separated to the Lord as God's servant. (c) His official office and purpose in life--he was a proclaimer of the Word of Yahweh. He knew who he was (God's representative), where he was (in a sinful world that stood opposed to the purposes of God) and why he was there (to give out God's message of light to people in darkness). What a contrast Elijah must have been to the people in the rich luxurious city of Samaria, especially the effeminate, perverted Baal priests. Edersheim tells us they wore white linen gowns, high pointed bonnets, and lived on the delicacies of the palace.⁶

This rugged mountain man, dressed in his camel's hair garment, was the sight that people saw striding down the streets of Samaria, up the steps of the palace right into the throne room and presence of Ahab and Jezebel. Can't you picture him as a kind of Grizzly Adams or a rugged Abraham Lincoln? I am sure no soldier, priest, citizen, or member of Israel's secret police dared stand in his way.

Elijah's dress and lifestyle demonstrated his separation and devotion to the Lord. It teaches us that spiritual priorities and values controlled his life. He was a man who was truly free because he was free to follow the Lord. When, in our attempt to be free or do as we please, we rebel against the Lord's authority and control of our lives, we experience a sad irony. We become slaves of our own desires and become what Peter describes as "slaves of corruption" (2 Pet. 2:19).

Elijah's Interview With the King

Elijah's appearance was dramatic and sudden. His message was short, direct, and somewhat curt. Elijah did not follow the political protocol of the day. He did not come bowing and scraping. He was not full of pious platitudes in order to get the king in the mood for what he had to say. He leveled with Ahab. He laid it on the line and then left just as suddenly as he had come. He said there would be neither dew nor rain for years except by his word. Surely this was added to stress the impotence of the Baal prophets against the Lord whom Elijah represented. An appearance and message like this fit the circumstance that demanded judgment on an apostate king and his people. It was really the proclamation of God's judgment as warned in the Old Testament (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 11:16-17; 28:23-24; Amos 4:7).

⁶ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Vol V, 1890, p. 188.

Elijah was not a man of many words; but he was a man of much faith. He was a man of action because he was also a man of prayer and the Word. His words were few and always to the point, but with them there was always implicit faith in the Lord his God. Proverbs 10:19 says, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise.”

What effect did Elijah’s pronouncement have upon the King? What was King Ahab’s answer? I believe it is significant that Scripture is silent here. Why? Perhaps because it demonstrates how the promises and warnings of God’s Word always take precedence over man’s response or opinions. God’s Word is true regardless of how people respond or react. Mankind or our self-made gods are absolutely powerless to negate God’s purposes.

Elijah’s Spiritual Aptitude or Bent

In Elijah we see a man of courage and faith, a man available to the Lord and one willing to count for God when the foundations were crumbling all around him. Where did his faith, courage, and commitment come from? Was it because of his particular aptitude for spiritual things? Did he have a corner on spirituality? In other words, was he innately different from you and me?

When we read about someone like Elijah, we want so very much to believe such people are inherently different because it soothes our consciences and gives us an excuse for being mediocre or run-of-the-mill. We think it excuses us from tackling tough things for God. However, James 5:16b-17 blows that theory wide open. First, James calls our attention to the fact that the faithful prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much and be used dramatically for God (vs. 16b). Then he reminds us that Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours!

Elijah’s dynamic living, his courageous ministry and effectiveness against all odds was not the result of certain innate super-duper qualities, nor was it in the absence of personal weaknesses, temptation, failure, nor even fear. While Elijah was spiritually head and shoulders above most of his contemporaries, he was at the same time normal and average from the standpoint of innate or natural qualities and abilities. Elijah possessed a sinful nature just like ours with weaknesses, fears and doubts. He faced the “I can’t,” the “I don’t feel like it” syndrome just like everyone else. In fact, his humanness will clearly emerge later in the record of his life and ministry (chapter 19). But, by the strength of God through faith, Elijah rose above his weaknesses through the divine resources at his disposal. The *same resources* are available to us in the Lord in even more abundant ways in New Testament times through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

It’s never seeing the difficulties that prevent faithful action, but failing to see our resources in the Lord. It’s the failure to live by faith and to stay focused on the Lord.

Application and Conclusion

We are living in a time when the foundations are being systematically destroyed. We see the decadent results of a nation that has turned away from the moral absolutes of the Word and our Christian heritage. In its place we have turned to the relativism of secular humanism with its evolutionary foundation. Many have opted for a New Age philosophy. As a result, we live in a time that is growing in hostility to the true God and to those who want to follow the God of the Bible.

The results are everywhere evident in the decline we see in government, education, the work place, the state of our economy, in the home, in entertainment, and in the church. We find that many churches are apathetic to the Word and the ministry to which God has called us. I recently heard of a church that specializes in making people laugh. They actually have a comedian for a pastor. Their attitude is “why bore people to death with the Bible?”

The divorce rate, drugs, crime in the streets, in corporate America and in our government, the violence we see in our society even among small children, the rise of a militant gay movement, and the rise of the occult and the cults give us a frightful and grisly picture. It’s scary and depressing.

How do we react or respond to these conditions in our society? We hear and say things like, “Isn’t it just awful. I think it’s just terrible. What are things coming to? But what can I do about it? I am just one voice. I am nobody important. I can’t preach or teach. I am just a little old lady, a carpenter, plumber, accountant, school teacher, or a ... (you fill in the blank).

Sometimes we think if we only had so and so's brains, money, IQ, memory, personality, or if we had his position or were as articulate as he is, then maybe we could do something. Excuses like these stem partly from the hero mentality we too often use as an escape from responsibility. This mentality says we must have money, reputation or position, etc. to really count for God. But Elijah had none of that, did he?

Like the 7,000 of Elijah's day who were hiding in caves to escape persecution, we tend to crawl off into the cave of our "business as usual" routine, or into our particular strategy by which we seek to become narcotized to the problems. Then, out of our minds and mouths flow a river of typical human excuses--enough excuses to lose our nation.

Elijah is God's commentary against the excuses and fears that so often paralyze us. As we have seen, He had none of the so-called advantages of the world. So, what made him tick? What made him such a powerful tool for the Lord? What gave him his courage, and how can we tap in on what he had so God can use us in the way and to the degree He desires?

Our next lesson will not only show us what Elijah proclaimed, but it will give us insight into what made him the kind of man God could use.

Lesson 3: The Message of Elijah (1 Kings 17:1)

Introduction

Elijah is best known as a man of prayer. James, whom tradition tells us was known as “camel knees” because of his own prayer life, uses Elijah as an example of the power of the prayer of a righteous man. James tells us: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months” (James 5:16b-17).

In 1 Kings 17:1b, Elijah boldly declares to King Ahab, “Surely, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” Putting these two passages together we know this was the result of Elijah’s prayers. Elijah forms a fitting example of the power of prayer, but effective and meaningful prayer is never an isolated religious exercise, something unrelated to the rest of a person’s spiritual life and walk with God. The prayer that accomplishes things and gets God’s ear, is the outflow of a vital relationship with God. It is born of one’s burden, concern, and the reality of God in one’s life. It flows from a sense of need, a heart full of faith, and from the desire to see God’s purposes accomplished and His glory manifested.

As we have seen, Elijah lived in a time when the foundations were being destroyed. It was a time of spiritual apostasy and moral decay. The nation had abandoned God’s law and turned to the worship of Baal-Melqart. We saw that Elijah was a common man--a man of like passions as you and me. He was also a man of uncommon courage--a man willing to risk his life for the glory and cause of God. We saw that out of the blue, Ahab was confronted by this rugged prophet dressed in his camel’s hair coat, who stood in striking contrast to the effeminate, perverted Baal priests. I imagine him looking like an Abe Lincoln in contrast to a Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips.

What gave Elijah this uncommon courage? Did the Lord appear to him in a dream, or speak to him from a bush as with Moses? Possibly, but the text doesn’t say that. Rather, I believe his courage came about in a less sensational but even more miraculous way. I believe it came about as the result of a common man being absorbed with the reality of his God. His courage was the product of intimately knowing God and living in close fellowship with the Lord through the Word and prayer. In the process, God’s purposes, burdens, values, and desires became engraved on his heart. Being moved by faith, he prayed for the cessation of rain in accord with the warnings and principles of Deuteronomy (Deut. 11:16-17; 28:23-24). Then, convinced of God’s answer, the prophet went forth to declare his message to King Ahab.

In lesson two we looked at the man Elijah. Now we turn to his short, but powerful message. Elijah’s message also sheds light on his theology and his faith that became the root of his courage and actions. Elijah’s message to Ahab in 1 Kings 17:1b divides into three sections, each of which forms a key that gives us insights into this man’s courage and faith. These words reveal the prophet’s heart. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. So, if we want to understand this man and learn from his example, we need to examine these powerful, revealing words.

(1) The words, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives,” teach us he was *convinced* and *confident in God’s person*.

(2) The words, “Before whom I stand,” teach us he was *cognizant of God’s presence* and *committed as God’s representative*.

(3) The words, “Surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word,” reveal the fact he was *confident in God’s promises*.

Keys to Elijah's Courage and Faith

The First Key

"As the Lord, the God of Israel lives," show us Elijah was *convinced and confident in God's person*. "Living" is the first word in the statement of Elijah in the Hebrew text. It is emphatic by its position and stresses his faith in the fact of the reality of God. God was not just a theological idea to him, but a living, and personal God. He did not just know about God, but he knew God in such a personal way that it transformed his life. As Daniel said, "but the people who know God will display strength and take action" (Dan. 11:32).

Actually, in the Hebrew text, the words "living" and "LORD" (*Yahweh*) are bound together rather than separated as in the English Bible. They are joined by what grammarians call the binding *maqeph* and means they are to be pronounced together as one. This combination was a technical device for introducing an oath or a solemn statement of fact. We are to translate it like the NASB with the word "as." Literally, it is "As living is Yahweh . . . so surely there shall be neither dew nor rain . . ." The idea is: "Just as sure as Yahweh, the God of Israel is alive and well, so surely there shall be neither dew nor rain . . ."

To grasp the significance of this, let's focus in on the name, *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* means "I Am that I Am." It is derived from the Hebrew verb *hayah*, meaning "to be, exist." This name itself stresses God's aliveness, His dynamic and active self-existence, but it also brings into view His eternal existence, sovereignty, and independence. Further, it is the name by which God revealed Himself to Israel as their redeemer as seen in Exodus 3. It strongly reminds us that He is the God of special revelation and redemptive love. In summary, this name stands for God's being, His revelation to Israel, and His redemption of the nation.

Elijah's appearance, his message, and this oath were all based on the vivid reality of all that God was to him. It was based on the fact that the God who had revealed Himself to the nation, was alive and actively involved in the affairs of the nation and His people. As Psalm 33 reminds us:

12 Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, The people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance. 13 The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; . . . 18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness, . . .

Ahab, Jezebel, and the Baal prophets thought they had successfully killed, embalmed, and buried the God of Israel along with His worship, His Word, and His representatives. I am reminded of Psalm 50:21, "These things you have done, and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you, I will reprove you, and state (the case) in order before your eyes."

Likewise today, the modern world, the humanists, evolutionists, liberal theologians, cults, and New Agers as a whole, think Christianity, the Bible, marriage, and a morality with absolutes are all but dead. Certainly they think moral absolutes have no place having any impact on the political and moral decisions of our society. They say it's old fashioned, out-dated, obsolete. People living in immorality are often heard saying, "we're living in the '90s," as though society has outgrown such foolish ideas. It is as though God has been proven to no longer be an issue in life and people can ignore God without serious ramifications to themselves and society. But individuals, as well as nations, cannot ignore God's Holy Word without serious consequences, which, like water breaking through a dam, spill over into every aspect of society. Knowing and believing this was the secret of Elijah's *boldness*, his *presence* before King, Ahab, and the *reason* for the drought that was to follow. It was a judgment from the living God.

Elijah had not been infected by the mood of his day nor by God's silence--what people so often mistake as His indifference or unreality. Rather, Elijah was convinced God was not only alive, but immanent--personally and actively involved in the affairs of both Israel and the nations. Being infused with this reality of God and His person, Elijah acted on God's promises. He prayed and proclaimed his message to King Ahab. God was not only alive and well, but very much operative in human history. This fact transformed Elijah's life. By the words, "as living is Yahweh, . . ." Elijah was not only declaring the reality of Israel's God as the only true God, but declaring the fact God was superior over the false ideas of mankind and the pagan idols of the nations. Elijah was declaring it was not just any man's ideas about God that counted, but the revelation of the God of the Bible--*he alone is the true God*. Likewise, our responsibility is to know God intimately, and then to proclaim the Christ of the Bible as the true Savior and God.

King after king in the northern kingdom of Israel had openly defied Yahweh and ignored Him with no apparent consequences. The idea so prevalent in the thinking of the people (just as it is today) was either Yahweh God had no real existence, or He was not concerned or involved with Israel. This was a subtle form of deism that had crept in since the people had been infiltrated by the idolatrous thinking of the nations. This is evident in a number of passages like Zephaniah 1:12; Ezekiel 8:12; 9:9; Malachi 3:14. Through Elijah's life and message, the idea of deism was being challenged and judgment declared and experienced. Ecclesiastes 8:11-12 brings home an important lesson for us:

Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. Although a sinner does evil a hundred [times] and may lengthen his [life] still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.

Likewise, we need to be able to openly demonstrate from the facts how this nation is experiencing the futility of its beliefs. We are experiencing a moral and spiritual drought as a judgment from God because this nation has put its trust in almost anything but the Lord of the Bible. By the facts I am talking about our past history and heritage as a Christian nation. These are not the figments of someone's imagination, these are facts of history. But we have jettisoned that foundation and with that change has come the present moral decline and the failure of our society to deal with its problems. Programs developed by secular humanists and big government to improve society simply have not worked and can't work apart from faith in the living God. The founding fathers of our Constitution knew this and spoke accordingly. On October 11, 1798, President John Adams stated in his address to the military:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.⁷

God's Word reminds us of this in Psalm 127. "Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain" (Ps. 127:1b). Societies need what is equivalent to a watchman--the police and the military. However, when that is not first founded on a deep faith in the Lord, as it was when our country began, then, its confidence will be in vain. The first words of Psalm 127, "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it," remind us the same principle applies to the home. By mentioning the home first, we are shown its priority. The character of a nation's leaders is formed in the home. As goes the home, so goes the society. This means, we need to be living the kind of Christian lives that clearly declare the reality of God, lives that demonstrate the impotence and futility of the false belief systems of the World. Elijah was declaring that their objects of worship were lifeless and had no capacity to save or to meet their needs (provide for rain and good crops, etc.).

The Second Key

The words, "Before whom I stand," reveal two things about Elijah: He was *cognizant* of God's presence and *committed* as God's representative. Elijah was not only convinced of the aliveness of his God, but he was aware of God's personal presence. He knew God was with him and that he was a personal representative of the Lord--one sent by the living and sovereign God of the universe. "Before whom I stand" showed Elijah's awareness that God was with him, God had sent him. He was under God's watchful eye, protection, supply, enablement, and orders. This statement also highlights Elijah's loyalty to the God of Israel in contrast with the disloyalty of the majority in Israel under the false and idolatrous system of Baal. Can people tell we are different because of our relationship with the Lord? Finally, this statement showed that Elijah's faith was anchored in at least three biblical concepts that were on his mind and in his consciousness, and that motivated and controlled his life. They gave him the courage and motivation to stand before King Ahab. These were:

(1) God's Person: Elijah had God's omniscience and omnipresence in mind as he spoke these words. He knew that there was no place where he would be absent from the caring and watchful eye of God (Ps. 139; Josh. 1:8).

⁷ William J. Federer, *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations*, Fame Publishing Co., Coppell, TX, 1994, pp. 10-11.

(2) God's Plan: As a believing Israelite under God's covenant and as a man with the gift of a prophet, Elijah knew he was a personal representative of the living God who had the responsibility to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

(3) God's Power and Provision: With God's presence and orders, also came God's power, protection and provision to do what he was called to do. I am reminded of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 who will go forth in the spirit and power of Moses and Elijah, and who will be protected until their ministry is over (cf. Matt. 28:18-19).

Let's focus on Elijah's statement as it pertains to God's omnipresence. As the transcendent God, He transcends all. He is far above and outside of the universe, totally independent of it. He is totally separate from and outside of time and creation, enthroned on high, and exalted above the heavens. He is the sovereign King, the independent and all powerful God of the universe (Ps. 103:19; 113:4-5; 115:3; 123:1). As such, He is the source of all authority, power, and deliverance. While God is that, He is also the immanent God who operated in time and creation. He created it and He sustains it--every atom and molecule is held together by Him (Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:3). God is also intimately concerned with His creatures--particularly with mankind. Though distinct from His creation, God is immanently present everywhere in creation and in our lives. Proverbs 5:21 says, "For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths." And Psalm 33:13-14 teaches us, "The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth."

There is nothing we can do, no thought we can think, no place we can go without God being there and knowing it completely. This means four things: (a) The whole of God is wholly present everywhere at all times, yet, He is separate and independent from the world and the things and creatures in the world. (b) There is no limit to God's presence and no place is closer to God than another. (c) He does not need to travel and He can act in all parts of the universe at once with all His authority and power. (d) God is above us, below us, at both sides of everything and within all at the same time in some inexplicable way. Elijah was consciously fortified by this truth as he stood before Ahab. He knew he was not alone. He knew it was Ahab, Jezebel, and over 400 Baal prophets against him--**plus one**. This meant Elijah was in the majority with God who was above, below and everywhere with him.

Elijah was living in the light of God's omnipresence and was practicing the presence of God. He was counting on God's person and promises according to God's Word. The person who knows the Lord can never be alone. We often may feel like Elijah's servant, utterly alone, but we are never alone. Our need is to flee to the Lord, to draw near to Him and know His presence, rather than to flee to our strategies for handling life. But God is not only present as the omniscient one, He is present to manifest Himself on our behalf because He loves us, has done the most for us in Christ, and has chosen to use us as his vessels to manifest His love (Josh. 1:9; Deut. 31:6-8; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5-6).

Consider Elijah's statement as it pertains to his ministry as a personal representative of the Lord. Here is one of the miracles of the universe, that the infinite, almighty God who is transcendent and completely independent and who can use any means He desires, has nevertheless, created us in His own image that we might be a visible representative of the invisible God. Even after the Fall, He has still chosen to use believers to represent Him to a world fallen in sin (Psalm 8).

Elijah understood as a believer and a prophet, he was not on earth merely to have a good time or seek his own satisfaction and comfort. He knew he was there to represent the Lord boldly and courageously in the battle with Satanic forces for the souls of men and for the glory of God. Further, Elijah lived in a time when many believers were hiding in caves, afraid to speak. They were acting as though God was either dead or had taken a vacation. He could have said, "Well, no one else is taking a stand, so I guess I won't either."

Today, we live in a time when the world is challenging Christian beliefs and people are crying for answers. It is a time when the fields are white unto harvest. Many Christians, however, are hiding in their caves of materialism and comfort, afraid to risk their lives or reputations for the Lord. Or, rather than representing the Lord, we are representing ourselves in games of spiritual king of the mountain, defending our own turf, or simply carrying on business as usual without a sense of God's mission for us in this world. We stutter in fright when confronted with a cultist because we haven't learned our Bible well enough and aren't secure enough in our faith. Or, perhaps we are being choked and bound from growth and service by the thorns, thistles, and vines of the details of life--what the Lord called "the deceitfulness of riches." But God is still looking for men and women who will count on His pres-

ence by faith, represent Him and face the challenges and risks of our day with all its various “isms” (cf. Ezek. 22:29-31).

The Third Key

The words, “Surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word,” show he was *confident in God’s promises*. Elijah stood before King Ahab and made this statement because he was confident in the principles, promises and warnings of God’s Word, and confident of answered prayer when it is based on God’s Word and concerned for God’s glory.

Elijah’s prayer for no rain was not just something he cooked up out of his own imagination or because he was angry at Jezebel. Rather, he was acting on the truth of the Word. He was standing firmly on the promises. His prayer and statement to King Ahab were the result of knowing and believing the promises of Scripture (cf. Deut. 11:8-32; 28:23-24 with 1 Kgs. 18:18. This shows that Elijah was relying on the principles of Deut. 11). Remember, the prophets of Baal claimed Baal-Melqart was the god of thunder, rain, and good crops. Elijah’s declaration in 1 Kings 17:1 strongly challenged the reality of their god and their faith. It showed Baal was false and impotent and that the prophets of Baal were liars. It also showed truth and salvation could only be found in the prophets of Yahweh who alone spoke for God.

Likewise today, we have the responsibility to demonstrate by the way we live (our priorities and values), and by our personal testimony, the truth of John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. “If you know these things you are blessed if you do them” (John 13:17), and “blessed are those who hear the Word of God and observe it” (Luke 11:28). It is equivalent to telling people that true happiness and meaning in life come only from the Lord and then demonstrating it by our priorities, faithfulness, integrity, and by biblical pursuits that control and direct our lives.

Conclusion

Earl Nightingale, a motivational expert, has said, “wherever there is danger, there lurks opportunity; wherever there is opportunity, there lurks danger.” Serving and doing what God has called us to do whether it involves seeking and saving souls, taking a stand against the immoral tide of a society, or challenging a brother or sister in Christ, has always been a risky business.

In *Kindred Spirit*, Larry Dinkins writes:

Sooner or later obedience to the Great Commission will involve risk. The buzz word today is not ‘risk’ but ‘security.’ Risk may be popular as a parlor game but not as a lifestyle. People are interested in social security, home security, secure savings and loans, and especially secure relationships. The problem is that our security-oriented culture tends to insulate us from the real needs around us while at the same time maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

Recently I heard Chuck Swindoll make this convicting observation. ‘In the process of growing older we lose the desire to risk. It is a tragic loss. We become sophisticated, cautious, careful. We call it wisdom--it is cowardice, that’s all. We are afraid to take giant steps of faith. We’d much rather stay near the shoreline than cast off into the deep. We want to know that our security will be down at the end of the road.’⁸

Dinkins also writes:

While on furlough I heard Dr. Keith Phillips, head of World Impact, give his testimony of commitment to the urban poor. For a while Dr. Phillips tried to minister in the Watts area of Los Angeles by commuting. But his slum ministry by long distance was not meeting needs. Finally he moved his family into public housing where he was still residing. During the first three months their apartment was robbed so often that they erected a sign: GO RIGHT IN, TAKE WHAT YOU WANT, PLEASE DO NOT BREAK THE LOCK.

⁸ Larry Dinkins, “At The End of The Road . . . Taking Risks to Achieve the Greater Reward,” *Kindred Spirit*, Autumn 1991.

Having been robbed repeatedly myself, I immediately identified with the Phillips family and risks they encountered. You may be thinking, 'That's fine for missionaries, but I don't plan to live in a slum, pick up a hitchhiker, or plant a church in hostile soil. How does all of this relate to me?' Good question. The first thing is to realize that risks are not confined to slum areas, interstates, or foreign fields. A difficult neighbor or recalcitrant relative can be just as threatening as a gang member from Watts or hitchhiker along the road. Building a bridge of friendship to someone of a different race or background in your community may be as big a hurdle as translation is for missionaries in Colombia.⁹

Again I am reminded of Daniel's words, "but the people who know their God will display strength and take action." Obviously, the big question is--how well do we really know our God?

⁹ Ibid.

Lesson 4: Testings By the Brook (Part 1) (1 Kings 17:2-7)

Introduction

One of the new terms of our day is “virtual reality.” We live in a day and time filled with imaginary stories, characters and scenes. These transport us into unreality, a world of make believe, even a world of science fiction that catapults us into a another world. Now with modern science, we can experience virtual reality, that which truly seems real, but isn’t. However, when we turn to the Word of God, we are brought face-to-face with reality. Contrary to what the skeptics say, Scripture is not myth or cleverly devised tales. Nor is it some kind of virtual reality, but true reality--realities that teach us about the living God and about fallen mankind living in a fallen world.

Nowhere is reality more clear than in the book of the preacher of wisdom, Ecclesiastes. You will find no imaginary character in the book of Ecclesiastes--not one. Instead, Solomon gives us inspired truth about what life is like on planet earth. He shows us what life is like under the sun: it is like chasing after wind, a phrase found eight times in this book. What is life under the sun? It is life without the dimension of God; life that fails to go beyond the sun into the heavenlies, into the realities of God’s revelation.

Chuck Swindoll writes:

In this ragged-edged reality called earthly existence, life is somewhere between sad and bad. All it takes is a quick look around to discover why we line up to watch fantasies that take us to galaxies far, far away. Who wouldn’t want to escape from an existence as boring and painful as ours? For many, it’s downright horrid. It’s drug abuse. It’s sleepless nights. It’s headaches. It’s heartaches. It’s hate, rape, assault, jail sentences. It’s sickness and sorrow. It’s broken lives. It’s distorted minds. Mainly, as Solomon discovered long ago, it’s empty. There’s nothing down here under the sun that will give you and me a sense of lasting satisfaction. It is planned that way! How else would we realize our need for the living God?

I don’t care how good your professional practice is, much of it is boring. I don’t care how big your house is or how exciting your future is. I don’t care how hard you work or how large your paycheck or how sincere your efforts, when you boil life down to the nubbies . . . when the lights are turned off at night, you’re back to reality--its boring and horribly empty. To quote Solomon the realist, it is like chasing the wind.

You work so that you can make money, so that you can spend it, so that you can work and make more money, so that you can spend it, so that you can get more, which will mean you spend more, and you work harder to make more. So goes this endless cycle called ‘striving after wind.’

That explains why people will line up by the millions to view a fantasy on film and sit in silent amazement at someone’s imaginary world of imaginary characters who do imaginary things--because life under the sun is so dreadfully, unchangingly boring.

To put it bluntly, life on planet Earth without God is the pits. And if I may repeat my point (Solomon does numerous times), that’s the way God designed it. He made it like that. He placed within us that God-shaped vacuum that only He can fill. Until He is there, nothing satisfies.¹⁰

We dare not forget that Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, was a man who had everything. Indeed, he had everything in luxurious abundance. The issue is not more, a great society, or the removal of all the problems of society. When you add the conditions of a society like Elijah faced, or like we face today, then the feelings of futility, pain, frustration, troubled hearts, dashed expectations, the sense of chasing the wind is magnified many times over.

¹⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, Word Books, Waco, TX, 1985, p. 85.

Are you sufficiently depressed now? I truly hope so, because this is one of the key themes of Scripture. God has designed it this way in a world that has fallen into sin, particularly, the sin of seeking to live life and find meaning in life without God. Truly, our hope in Christ, like a brilliant diamond, needs the stark, black backdrop of the utter futility of life under the sun to show us our need and drive us to our knees. Surely, the word of the Lord that came to Elijah, “go hide yourself,” desperately needs to be heard by every one of us.

The Communication

“And the word of the LORD came to him saying” (vs. 2). To be more accurate with the Hebrew text, the word “and,” is better rendered as the NIV with “then” or by “thereupon” to show the idea of temporal or logical sequence. The communication from the Lord came after Elijah’s faithfulness and obedience (vs. 1). This illustrates that, having ears to hear, obedience and application of the truth we know lead to greater capacity for more *insight* into God’s truth and *sensitivity* to God’s direction in one’s life. Obeying the revelation he had and being a man who spent time alone with God, he was prepared for more. In other words, he had ears to hear and to obey the commands of God even though he might not understand the nature of those commands. He was not conducting little debates with God.

By contrast, disobedience to the truth has the opposite effect. It hardens our hearts and closes our ears, killing our capacity to hear and respond to the work and ministry God wants to call us to (cf. Mark 6:52; Heb. 3:7-15; 5:11; Ps. 40:6-7). People often complain about how hard it is to know God’s leading. The problem is not God’s leading--He is always ready to lead us. The problem is our listening, and too often, our listening is colored by false expectations and selfish motives. We want the Lord to answer in our way. We want God’s blessing on our will rather than seeking His will. We tend to make up our list of what we would like to do with our lives, even as it pertains to serving the Lord. We then present that to the Lord for His approval.

What the Lord would now tell Elijah was most likely contrary to what he was expecting. After all was he not a prophet, and had he not come to proclaim the Word to Israel? He was there to serve, preach, perform miracles, and to be active for the Lord--right? But please note that the Lord didn’t tell Elijah to do any of these things. In view of this, the command that follows is very interesting and illuminating. It reveals one of the great insights and priorities of the Word, one that busy, self-sufficient, workaholic people who have been bitten by the bug of activism and/or materialism have a hard time grasping.

The Command: Retreat, Conceal Yourself

1 Kings 17:3 Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan..

The “brook Cherith” (NASB), or the “ravine Kerith” (NIV), was one of the many waddies or ravines that emptied its waters into the Jordan from the mountains to the east. Elijah was commanded to depart from Samaria, to turn eastward across the Jordan, and to hide there. Remember, names in Scripture are significant and often shed additional light on a passage. “Cherith” is the Hebrew *kerith* that means “a cutting,” a place cut by some type of catastrophe like an earthquake, or more likely, by years of water flowing down from the hills to the Jordan. There were many brooks in this area to which Elijah could have been sent, but only one that was called by this name. We might note that the Hebrew *kerithuth* means “a cutting” and was used of divorce, of the cutting of matrimonial bonds.

Why is Elijah sent to the place of cutting? Some think for protection from Ahab. Perhaps that was part of it but it was not the primary reason because later God sent Elijah to face the king and the king made no attempt to slay him (1 Kgs. 18:17-20). More likely the reason was seclusion, concealment. (a) The Hebrew word for “hide” is *satar* that means “to hide, conceal, cover” In the Hebrew text it is a reflexive stem and refers to what one does to and for himself. So it means “to hide, conceal yourself.” It refers to a deliberate and decisive choice in obedience to God’s command. (b) A main idea of the verb is “to be absent, out of sight.” Literally it means “absent yourself.” The noun form, *seter*, is used of the womb as a secret place, a place of shelter (Ps. 139:15). (c) Finally, the verb form is used in relation to God’s presence as the omniscient One who becomes a hiding place, a shelter for the believer.

Psalms 17:8 Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide (*satar*) me in the shadow of Thy wings.

Psalm 31:20 Thou dost hide (*satar*) them in the secret (*seter*) place of Thy presence from the conspiracies of man; Thou dost keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues.

The Challenges or Tests (17:2-3)

There are at least four tests in 1 Kings 17:2-7. The first test comes out of the command to go and hide himself, and in the reasons for this command. It is the test of God's guidance.

The Test of God's Guidance (vss. 2-3)

The testing concerned with God's guidance is seen in the command for Elijah to leave and hide by the brook east of Jordan. As the Lord works providentially and sovereignly in our lives, we are nearly always faced with a number of tests that challenge our faith, obedience, love for God, our values and priorities, and demonstrate just how real God is to us.

What are some of these tests? We can divide them into three aspects: (a) the test related to our need of guidance, (b) the mystery of God's guidance, and (c) the perplexity of His guidance.

Our Need of God's Guidance

We all must recognize how desperately we need the revelation and direction of the living God. After Elijah gave his message, he needed God's guidance to know what to do next. What is God's plan? What is my need at the moment? Man's tendency is to direct his own way, but Scripture firmly warns us against that.

Jeremiah 10:23 I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

James addresses this in his epistle,

James 4:13-16 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

For us to strike out on any venture or task without seeking God's direction is arrogant independence. It is acting as though we can direct our own way. The test is simply this: Do we recognize our need and prayerfully and studiously seek God's guidance? Do we wait on the Lord?

This first test of God's guidance is a test of our basic orientation and attitude toward life. Will we follow the command of Proverbs 3:5-6? "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." Or will we turn to our own strategies? (cf. Isa. 50:10-11; Jer. 2:12-13) Do we hunger for God's Word because we understand our need? Or are we proudly confident in our own resources? (Isa. 66:2b)

One of the questions Elijah faced as the Lord revealed His will to him was "why does God want me to go and hide?" In answer to that question, the prophet faced two issues--one relating to the nation and one for himself. For the nation it was a judgment. God was removing His instrument of the Word from their midst, at least for the time being, until their hearts could be prepared by the suffering that would follow (cf. Ps. 74:1-11, especially vs. 9, also cf. Luke 4:21-29). When there is no response to His Word, God eventually removes his human messengers, turns people over to their own devices, and replaces the messengers of the Word with His instruments of discipline (cf. Amos. 8:11-14).

For Elijah, however, this time by the brook was surely designed to maintain his inner life with God and to further prepare him for the testings and the ministry that would follow. It would become a place of testing but also of spiritual growth.

There are at least two reasons why God's people need this time alone. First, we need, as Elijah did, *seclusion*. We need time alone, away from the hustle and bustle and the comings and goings of the rest of the society, even from our own ministries to family, church, and friends. Swindoll writes:

To be used of God. Is there anything more encouraging, more fulfilling? Perhaps not, but there is something more basic: to meet with God. To linger in His presence, to shut out the noise of the city and, in quietness, give Him the praise He deserves. Before we engage ourselves in His work, let's meet Him in His Word . . . in prayer. . . in worship.¹¹

One of the great commands of Scripture is "Cease striving (be still, KJV) and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). How many of us truly hear the inaudible or see the invisible realities of God? What does it mean to have ears to hear? Chuck Swindoll shares a story which illustrates the point:

An Indian was walking in downtown New York City alongside a friend who was a resident of the city. Right in the center of Manhattan, the Indian seized his friend's arm and whispered, "Wait. I hear a cricket."

His friend said, "Come on! Cricket? Man, this is downtown New York."

He persisted, "No, seriously, I really do."

"It's impossible!" was the response. "You can't hear a cricket! Taxis going by. Horns honking. People screaming at each other. Brakes screeching. Both sides of the street filled with people. Cash registers clanging away. Subways roaring beneath us. You can't possibly hear a cricket!"

The Indian insisted, "Wait a minute!" He led his friend along, slowly. They stopped, and the Indian walked down to the end of the block, went across the street, looked around, cocked his head to one side, but couldn't find it. He went across another street, and there in a large cement planter where a tree was growing, he dug into the mulch and found the cricket. "See!" he yelled, as he held the insect high above his head.

His friend walked across the street, marveling, "How in the world could it be that you heard a cricket in the middle of downtown, busy Manhattan?"

The Indian said, "Well, my ears are different from yours. It simply depends on what you're listening for. Here let me show you." And he reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change--a couple of quarters, three or four nickels, and some dimes and pennies. Then he said, "Now watch." He held the coins waist high and dropped them to the sidewalk. Every head within a block turned around and looked in the direction of the Indian.

It all depends on what we're listening to and for. We don't have enough crickets in our heads--we don't listen for them. Perhaps, like that crowded street full of people, you have spent all your life searching for a handful of change and you've missed the real sound of life?¹²

You see, there is no life in any one of those coins, nor can they buy happiness even if you have millions. The only way we find true satisfaction or meaning in life is to hear the invisible, inaudible voice of the living God, the Lord Jesus, through developing our capacity to hear and see Him by spending time alone with Him.

Spiritually speaking, God has designed our time alone with Him (a place where we can feed on His Word and think on the Lord) to be a *kerith* to us, a place of cutting, a place where God can chisel away on our character and cut the world out of our hearts. It enables us to divorce ourselves from the world and its pulls. Without it we become married to the world. We need this time alone that we might draw upon our supernatural resources in the Lord, His Word and prayer for a life of faith.

¹¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Quest for Character*, Multnomah, Portland, OR, 1987, p. 38.

¹² Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 37.

We are to get alone with God, first to just know and love Him, to develop our dependence on Him, and then to bring order and strength to our inner life. We are to do this to bring God's control over every area of our lives: *our motivations*, what moves us, the things that pull us to conform or to compete, *our perspective of life*, why we are here and what are we seeking, *our priorities and values*, the use of our time, talents, treasures, and truth, and *our thought processes* (2 Cor. 10:4-5). Getting alone with God is not optional. If we want true spiritual success it is fundamental. It's a key part of God's plan by which our lives are first strengthened by the underground spiritual streams of life in Christ and then changed and cut into the ravine that God wants to use to make us a channel for pouring out the blessings of the Savior on others.

Here is the key to power or weakness. While this has varied from age to age, one of the battle grounds of life (especially of this age and of this country) is the inner, private world of the individual and his need to slow down and hide himself alone with his God. It is here that we either experience the power of God or the defeat of Satan and his world system. Our Lord Himself was the perfect illustration of this and He sought to impress this upon His disciples early in their education. Compare two passages. First, note the priority the Savior put on having time alone with His heavenly Father in the midst of a very busy schedule and how this directed his actions and objectives (Mark 1:29-38). Second, in Mark 3:13-14 when the Lord called the disciples, His call or appointment consisted of three objectives: that they might be with Him (fellowship), that He might send them out to preach (service or ministry), and that they might have authority to cast out demons (victory over the enemy). The first, time alone and in the presence of the Savior, was certainly primary and fundamental to the others.

Another reason for Elijah's time alone was *protection*. Protection from what? Ahab? No! It was protection from himself, from things like a disordered inner life, spiritual defeat, being fat-headed over accomplishments, selfish living, a spirit of demandingness, from operating by his wisdom, from fear, from insensitivity to people and to the Lord. Hiding ourselves becomes a protection against burn-out, against lives of futility, against living to please people rather than God, and from becoming preoccupied with this world rather than with our God and what we have in the Lord.

This is not a call to monasticism. Hiding ourselves does not mean that we will not be available for Christian service and ministry. If we are truly spending quality time in getting to know our Lord, it will mean special sensitivity to the very things God wants us to do, but it will be accompanied by a growing willingness to serve with the power of God in the ministry God gives. Furthermore, we will certainly be more apt to serve from biblical motives rather than the neurotic motivations of self-centered living or from a misplaced sense of responsibility. Again, compare the Mark 1 passage. Peter sought to put a guilt trip on the Lord because of the demands of the people, but from His time spent alone with the Father, He knew what He was to do and he moved out in faith, trusting in the guidance of His Heavenly Father.

Let's look at some verses where *satar* is used. Remember, this word means "to hide." I found this not only interesting, but a challenge to my own spiritual life. In Deuteronomy 29:29 it is used of "the secret things (lit. the things hidden) which belong to the Lord." Some things God simply has not revealed about Himself and His plan. Much has been revealed, however, and we need time from the hustle and bustle of life to focus our lives on the Lord. In Psalm 119:18-19 the Psalmist prays for illumination that the Word might not be hidden but clearly understood. Through time alone with God, the Psalmist prays concerning the manifestation of God's presence (143:7-8). It is a request for the manifestation of God's guidance, provision, and protection that he might know the sustaining power of God within and without.

What causes God to hide His presence from our spiritual sight? Why do we lose sight of God's presence when He has so forcefully promised never to leave nor to forsake us? Why do we sometimes fail to experience the sustaining grace of His presence, strength and support so that we do not burn out, blow up, fall away, or deviate from a productive walk of faith with the Lord?

We fail to experience God's presence and sustaining strength and support because we fail to hide ourselves in His presence to draw upon His life. We fail to evaluate and reorder our inner life according to the principles and promises of the Word (cf. Ps. 119:30, 105, 130, 147-148; 4:4; 5:3 with Ps. 119:23, 49-52; and 143:4-6 with vss. 7-8). Another reason is because of unconfessed sin. We act as though God does not know nor care about what we do and we ignore our sins (Isa. 29:15; 40:27; Jer. 16:17; 23:24; cf. Isa. 59:1 with vss. 2 and 9; and Ps. 32:1-6 with vs. 7). In addition, we seek refuge in the strategies or resources of our own making rather than in the Lord. Isaiah 28:15 reads,

Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, And with Sheol we have made a pact. The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by; for we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception.”

When people fail to hide themselves *with* Him, they fail to hide themselves *in* Him. So the Lord turns them over to their own resources and to their own pitiful ways. They fall apart, burn out, become vexed, frustrated, and they fail--with their children, in their marriages, in their witness, in their ministry, or in their relationships with others.

Scripture commands, “go hide, conceal, or absent yourself.” And this is God’s desire for all of us today. We need time alone with our God to hide ourselves in Him and His presence that we might reorder and strengthen our inner lives for a walk of faith. We live in an extremely busy world, a world where many are compulsive and neurotic activists or workaholics. All around us voices are clamoring for our attention, time, and service. Have you noticed that you can’t even be put on hold when using the phone without some form of noise intruding on your silence.

One of the voices asking for our attention is the Lord’s and in essence He is saying, “come apart, hide yourself, get alone with Me, be still, cease striving and know that I am the Lord.” He is saying, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear because I am there and I have spoken.”

For the Church of Jesus Christ, the Scripture directs us two basic ways by which we hide ourselves in the Lord to hear his voice. First, there is what we might call *the dailies*--This is scheduled time for reading, study, meditation, and prayer; but the dailies include moment-by-moment trust wherein we pray without ceasing and seek to relate to and rest our lives on the Lord (Heb. 3:7, but also remember Ps. 5:3; 1 Thess. 5:17, 2 Cor. 5:8). Then there are *the weeklies*--The times when we stop our regular routines and come together as members of the body of Christ (Heb. 10:23-25).

In the final analysis it is not what you hear from the pulpit, a tape, or read in a book. It’s what you hear from the Lord; it’s what really gets through to you and to me as a word from God. So the Psalmist prayed, “Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law.” Seeking God’s guidance is not only a test of our basic orientation in life, but it tests our faith in other ways.

The Mystery of God’s Guidance

What God told Elijah to do was no mystery. God’s directions to Elijah were clear, just as the basic principles of God’s moral will in Scripture are for us. But what God is doing in our lives from the standpoint of why certain things are happening is generally very mysterious.

God’s guidance usually comes to us one step at a time, which goes contrary to human nature. We want AAA service with an itinerary complete with a marked road map and confirmed reservations at the beginning. We want to know where, when, how long, and why. “God, give me all the details, NOW!” But to follow the Lord we must learn to simply rest the details of the present and the future to Him. For the most part, God’s plan is one day at a time, i.e., “give us this day our daily bread.” But someone may ask, “shouldn’t we make plans and set goals?” Yes, but it is helpful to remember two important passages in Proverbs as we do: (a) “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue (their execution) is from the Lord” (Prov. 16:1). (b) “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs (the Hebrew word *kun*, “establishes, orders aright, provides for, furnishes [cf. vs. 12]) his steps” (Pr. 16:9). “Steps” is figurative of the course of one’s life. This means the Lord not only has the last word, but He always has the wisest word or plan. It also means He is working to enable, build, transform, and furnish what is needed to fulfill his purposes in and through us (cf. Jer. 10:23 and Ps. 119:133 which also use the Hebrew word, *kun*).

Proverbs 16:3-4 and 3:5-6 give us further instruction. We are to trust, commit, rest in God’s perfect wisdom, loving care, sovereign activity and power, purposes, and plan for each of us regardless of the mysteries of God’s will or how things look to us. Of course, crucial to this is knowing the Scripture that reveals the basics of God’s will. But even then there will be much that will be mysterious. Along this line, and closely connected, comes the third test that we face in God’s guidance.

The Perplexity of God's Plan

Sometimes, God's plan simply doesn't seem to make sense to us. Think about this in terms of God's command to Elijah. Elijah was a prophet with the Word, living in times of national decay when people desperately needed to hear the Word. As today, there was so much to be done and so few to do the work. But God did not tell him to go and preach. He told him to go hide by an insignificant brook located east of the Jordan, outside the land of promise, the place of blessing for Israelites. And, as if that were not enough, God would later send Elijah to a poor Gentile widow to provide for his needs.

When God's will is perplexing, the test comes in how we respond. Will we respond in a childlike trust and obedience that rests in what the Lord is doing, or will we become demanding and question the Lord's goodness? (Prov. 3:5-6) While God does not speak to us as He did with Elijah, who as a prophet received direct revelation from the Lord, He does speak to us through the Scripture and, in a certain sense, through the events and circumstances of life. Knowing that, we need to remember that nothing happens in our lives apart from His sovereign and providential activity that always include the promise of His presence, supply, and purpose.

The following story is told of the unusual circumstances under which William Cowper wrote the hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His Wonders to Perform."

Cowper was a Christian, but he had sunk to the depths of despair. One foggy night he called for a carriage and asked to be taken to the London Bridge on the Thames River. He was so overcome by depression that he intended to commit suicide. But after two hours of driving through the mist, Cowper's coachman reluctantly confessed that he was lost. Disgusted by the delay, Cowper left the carriage and decided to find the London Bridge on foot. After walking only a short distance, though, he discovered that he was at his own doorstep! The carriage had been going in circles. Immediately he recognized the restraining hand of God in it all. Convicted by the Spirit, he realized that the way out of his troubles was to look to God, not to jump into the river. As he cast his burden on the Savior, his heart was comforted. With gratitude he sat down and penned these reassuring words: "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform, He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. O fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head. (source unknown.)

Difficult, trying, or unusual circumstances are a part of God's will, incorporated and orchestrated into the plan of God to accomplish His work *in us, with us, or through us* even when it is a product of our own rebellion and foolishness. There are a couple of key Scriptures that stress God's work in the affairs of our lives. This is part and parcel of God's leading and includes the tests of God's will.

Ephesians 1:11 says, "... also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." Who works? God does. What does He work? All things. How does He work? After the counsel of His own will. "Working" stresses the fact of God's activity in the world; it points to His immanence. "Counsel" stresses God's omniscience and wisdom; it points to the deliberations and decisions of God based on His wisdom and understanding. "Will" stresses God's sovereign disposition and purpose; it points to His desire and sovereign choice based on His holy purposes and perfect knowledge and wisdom. "All things" points us to the extent of God's involvement and sovereign control. He is involved in everything, in every detail!

God is not in a state of indifference concerning our affairs. Rather, He is intimately involved and actively at work. Oh how we need to place this truth alongside all our affairs and learn to recognize them as tools and instruments of God in His gracious work in leading, pruning, and training us.

Romans 8:28-29 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.

He works together "all things." Again God's Word drives home the extent of His activity, even in our suffering. God is totally involved with the good and the bad, with what hurts and with what is pleasing, with what we understand and with what is often perplexing. What does God work? "He works all things together." The events of our lives, all of them, do not just happen at random; they are synchronized and utilized by God for a good purpose.

None of the events of our lives are isolated from God's plan, they are orchestrated and integrated. They have a purpose, a divine design. Then, to what *goal* does God work? He works things together for good. Some of the individual events may not in themselves be good, but in the end, to the believer who loves God and is sensitive to God's working, a good purpose is achieved, or can be if we will respond biblically--in faith (James 1:2-4).

Was it good that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers? No, of course not, but let's not forget the words of Joseph in Genesis 50:19-21: "But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.'"

For whom is God at work? Romans 8:28 adds "to those who love God." This does not mean that God only works things together in the life of a believer who loves God. God is at work regardless of our spiritual condition even if He has to discipline a believer with the sin unto death (1 Cor. 11:30-32). Rather, loving God is our subjective response that, knowing and believing that God is at work, enables us to respond to God's purpose in our affairs in childlike trust. What is God's final goal? "According to His purpose" refers to God's overall goal or plan in conforming us to the image of His Son--Christlikeness (vs. 29). Remember Joseph's words in Genesis 50:19-21? This is the perspective of devotion and trust.

For nearly thirty years, I was a pastor, teaching the Word in Bible churches in various parts of the country. A couple of years ago, God led us back to the Northwest where I began teaching part-time in a Bible college while pastoring a small Bible church. Due to God's leading in a number of ways, about a year ago my wife and I became convinced that I should begin teaching full-time at the school, which I began to do. Just before the semester ended, I began to experience pain in my throat. The second week of the new semester I was diagnosed with a vocal cord ulcer, with the result that I was only able to continue teaching one of my three classes. We had been so confident of God's leading, as were other close friends. My classes were going great with excellent responses from the students. Obviously we wondered, "Lord, what's going on?" But we trusted the God and now, as we look back, we can see the loving hand of our heavenly Father guiding and providing for us. There were other things He wanted me to do that I could not have done had I been carrying a full class load.

Lesson 5: Testings By the Brook (Part 2) (1 Kings 17:4-7)

Introduction

When you think of Elijah, what comes to your mind? Probably the Prophet standing on Mount Carmel challenging the Baal prophets and trusting the Lord for fire from heaven. Or do you think of a man of prayer as spelled out for us in James 5:17-18? Have you ever thought, “I sure wish I had that kind of faith?” Did you pray, “Father, would you give me the kind of faith Elijah had?” Then sometime thereafter, did things seem to take a turn for the worse? You began to come under all kinds of pressure and suffering. The pressures built up, problems developed, and many of them without any seeming solutions--at least not in the near future. Did you wonder why and think, “What’s going on here? Why is my world falling apart?” It may be God was answering your prayer. More importantly, He was simply carrying out His purpose and plan for your life--the purpose of refining you and transforming you into the image of Christ.

Before Elijah could stand on Mount Carmel, he needed to sit by the brook. Before the more mature faith and ability to handle the Mount Carmels of life, there must be the maturing experiences of the Cherith brooks of life and the widow of Zarephath. These are the testings of life that purify and build as they teach us to trust in the Lord and stay occupied with Him. Of course, we don’t like these experiences because they hurt. As the author of Hebrews says, “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

Because of our fallenness, even as those who have trusted in the person and work of the Lord Jesus and have experienced the regenerating work of the Spirit of God, the trials of life are necessary. The Apostle Peter wrote:

1 Peter 1:6-7 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Similarly James 1:2-4 says:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

What’s the problem we face in suffering? We are often more interested in our comfort and pleasure than with genuine, spiritual growth and maturity. We want a carefree life rather than a life with character. We may think we are okay and mature enough just as we are, but the Lord knows better. We want maturity without the pain, but real growth requires pain.

For instance, we may need to lose weight, but we want to do so without the pain of hunger, without the burning of tired muscles caused by exercise, and without the discomfort of changing our lifestyle or eating habits. As a result, people are often suckers for those advertisements that offer painless weight loss, like pills that burn away the fat while we sit on the sofa eating a bag of potato chips.

In this lesson, we turn to three more tests Elijah experienced by the brook. The test of God’s promise and supply, the test of obedience, and the test of the dried up brook.

The Test of God’s Promise and Supply (vs. 4)

In verse 4 God promised to supply Elijah’s needs while by the brook. How gracious of the Lord! It is a wonderful truth to know He never sends us anywhere to do anything without His presence and provision. The promise of Scripture is always “my God shall supply all your need . . .” (Phil. 4:19), but especially note Hebrews 13:5-6. “Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I

will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,' so that we confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?'"

As we think about God's provision, it is helpful to that the supply God gives may be simple as here in Elijah's life, or lavish as experienced by Solomon. There may also be in that provision a test of one's faith--a test of devotion to the Lord and of confidence in who He is and in what He is doing. Is God the object of our devotion or is it in what He supplies? If simple, will we be content or will we complain or be envious of others? If lavish, will we remain loyal, or will we become devoted to the gifts rather than the Giver? Will we keep our values and priorities in line with loving the Lord and putting Him first?

There were two elements to the promise to Elijah:

"You shall drink of the brook . . ."

God chose to supply Elijah's needs through a brook, not a river, or a lake, or an artesian well. It was a brook that would dry up very soon and Elijah knew that. Why is God's provision sometimes just barely enough? And why does God's supply sometimes dry up? The Lord sent Elijah to a brook He knew would dry up, just as He sent me to teach knowing my throat problems would drastically reduce my ability to teach. God does this to remind us of a number of spiritual lessons like: (a) True joy, meaning and significance in life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15); (b) "better is the little of the righteous than the abundance of many wicked" (Ps. 37:16); (c) "better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it" (Pro. 15:17); (d) "better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice (Pro. 16:8); and (e) "godliness with contentment is great (i.e., the greatest) gain" (1 Tim. 6:6). History is filled with stories that illustrate this.

Recently the headlines have been full of the tragic story of the O.J. Simpson affair. Here is a man who had everything that the world sees as important--fame and fortune. As I was thinking about this issue, I remembered a quote that O.J. made several years ago:

I sit in my house in Buffalo and sometimes I get so lonely it's unbelievable. Life has been so good to me. I've got a great wife, good kids, money, my own wealth--and I'm lonely and bored . . . I often wondered why so many rich people commit suicide. Money sure isn't a cure-all.¹³

Whatever our lot, God wants us to learn to be content in whatever state we are in by first learning to rest in Him by faith. Why? That we might experience God's sufficiency and learn that our greatest need is God (Phil. 4:11-13; John 14:27). I think it is interesting that in the above verses this "better is" concept, is declared around a variety of the details of life people think they need for their happiness. Not only does Scripture warn against seeking our happiness, security, and significance in things like position, praise, applause, prestige, possessions, or pleasure, but God works providentially as here with Elijah to teach us that He alone is our security and true source of joy and peace (John 14:27). I am reminded of the words of the Psalmist writing from exile, "as the deer pants (deeply longs) for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1). He recognized that his greatest need was not things, not a changed environment, and not people. It was God.

"I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there"

First, again we see the principle of Philippians 4:19, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Since God has already done the most for when we were enemies and alienated from God, how much more will He not do for us now that we are His children and have become the special objects of His love and grace (Rom. 5:6-9; 8:32).

The following illustrates the point:

A consecrated Jewish believer, Dr. Max Reich, gave this testimony: "When my wife and I were first married, we felt called to full-time Christian service, God blessed our ministry and many people accepted the Lord. Although our income was small and we had few worldly possessions, our hearts were full of joy. One day, however, my wife said, 'Max, there's nothing to eat for dinner!' I didn't reply at first but stood listening to the bird singing in the trees. Suddenly these words from

¹³ O. J. Simpson, "People Magazine," 1978.

a well-known Gospel song flashed through my mind: 'His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.' Immediately I said, 'If our Heavenly Father feeds the birds, surely He'll take care of us!' Just then a lady knocked at the door. After introducing herself she said, 'My husband was a hopeless alcoholic. Every time he got his check he'd spend most of it to get drunk, so the children and I were often hungry. Recently he heard you preach the Gospel, and the Lord worked a miracle in his heart. Now he's a changed man! For the first time in years he brought home a full week's pay, and I was able to get a good supply of groceries. I thought as I was cooking, part of this food really belongs to Brother Reich. I was going to bring you some later, but I felt compelled to do it immediately. Here's half of the chicken I fried and some biscuits fresh from the oven!' We were so happy," said Dr. Reich, "that we sang, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow!' To this moment the Lord has never failed to give us our daily bread."¹⁴

Second, notice the two ways the Lord supplied Elijah's need. He provided through natural means, the brook, and supernatural means, the ravens. While the Lord does not generally work through the supernatural today (even in Old Testament times it was the exception), there is an important lesson here. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think to meet our needs. He has promised to supply according to His riches in glory--that's an infinite supply (Eph. 3:20). But if He wants to use supernatural means, He can and occasionally does.

Third, the ravens would bring bread and meat to Elijah. Bread is the Hebrew *lechem* that can refer to food in general and may well have included berries, fruits, nuts, and even eggs. Isn't this interesting? God could have rained bread from heaven or brought up quails as he did for the Israelites in the wilderness. Instead, He chose to feed Elijah through the ravens. Why ravens for goodness sake? What did this mean to Elijah? Elijah was a Jew and according to the Law the raven was an unclean bird, one of the species the Jew was not allowed to eat. Though he is not told to eat the ravens, still, God chose an unclean bird to feed Elijah. Why? Perhaps to remind him (and us of course) the Lord is sovereign and supreme and we need to learn to submit to the tools He chooses to use to mold us and to the methods He uses to supply our needs. Here God was nourishing Elijah's faith, building his confidence, and reminding him of who was in charge.

There are no limits to what the Lord can do and His tools are limitless.

Are we willing to trust God's promises and provision no matter how contrary to our ideas His provision seems? He uses all kinds of instruments, all kinds of people, and all kinds of situations. Think about your problems--people, finances, health, family, job conditions, whatever. These are tools, agents of the Lord, like ravens sent to supply certain needs in our lives. So what is our need? Of course, our need is to trust the Lord, but how is that trust to manifest itself? Our need is to follow Solomon's council in Ecclesiastes.

In Ecclesiastes 7:11-12 we have an emphasis on the value of biblical wisdom and how God works. Then, in verses 13 and 14 Solomon gives us insight into how God works as the *synchronizer* and *orchestrator* of our lives.

We are told to "consider the work of God." Does the phrase "work of God" ring a bell? It refers to the concept of Ephesians 1:11 and Romans 8:28-29, and we are told to "consider" it. "Consider" is the Hebrew verb *ra'ah* that means "to see, look at, inspect, observe," and then, based on what is seen, "to think on, consider with the mind, understand." Knowing and believing that God is involved in the affairs of our lives, we are to observe, inspect and consider these affairs, and then to respond in faith and seek to understand what God is teaching us.

The question is then asked, "For who is able to straighten what He has bent." Note the connective "for." This links the question to the command to consider and points us to the reason or cause. It shows us what God can do and does. *He bends the path of our lives.*

(1) This means the path of life, like a mountainous road, is sometimes bent; it has curves, ups and downs, rough places and smooth places. It isn't always an interstate highway and along the way it has its brooks that dry up.

(2) This means God has not deserted us in those ups and downs or turns in the road. He is *involved* in our lives. Life is not just a matter of blind chance, or the flip of a coin.

¹⁴ *Parsons Technology Bible Illustrator*, electronic format.

(3) This text also teaches us what *we cannot do!* We cannot straighten what God has bent. When God puts a curve in our road, He is calling us to follow the curve. If, in the providence of God, He allows you to fall and break your arm, you cannot reverse the film and cut out that part of the film. You must live with the fall and the broken bone. Isn't this an intriguing way to teach us how God is intimately and lovingly involved in our circumstances? He bends the paths of our lives, but Scripture shows He does so out of love and wisdom.

This is followed by instruction that tells us how we are to act and respond to the varied circumstances of life (vs. 14). (a) When things are going well, when the road is straight, be happy, rejoice, enjoy the life God gives--though other Scripture warns us to never seek our security in such conditions. (b) In the day of adversity, when God puts a bend in the road, consider, observe, inspect your circumstances, stop, think and learn. Think about what is God telling you? Apply the truth of the fact that a sovereign, all wise, all knowing, and all powerful God is involved; our circumstances are not chance happenings. When things don't go well, when the car breaks down, when you have a sinus headache, when the package is late, when you hear about the criticism, whatever it is, how do we respond? Do we blow up or stay calm? Do we trust the Lord or become depressed? What do we do? Well, our instructions are to think (cf. James 1:2-5). This means we are to think in terms of the principles and promises of the Word. We are to remember that God is at work. He makes both the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. He synchronizes both into our lives--often the same day--but He is working it all together for good, the ultimate good of making us like His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

See Appendix A for a summary on why believers suffer.

The Test of Obedience (vss. 5-6)

“So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and lived . . .” “He went and did.” How absolutely beautiful. He went and did not according to how he felt or what he thought, or what others might think or want, but according to the directions of the Lord. Immediate obedience--no arguments, no questions. Once he knew for sure what God wanted, in simple trust, he simply obeyed.

Was this simply pharisaic obedience? No! Elijah obeyed because he knew and trusted in his God--omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, loving, faithful, merciful, true, and good. He believed that the Lord's will is always perfect and designed for the highest good with ramifications extending into eternity. He knew the Lord was building his faith, his character, and preparing him for things to come. His obedience was a work of faith.

What would you or I have been doing? Would we have been conducting a little argument with the Lord out of our great data bank of information? It might go something like this. “Now wait just a minute Lord. Across the Jordan is out of the land of promise. And ravens? My goodness, they are unclean birds according to your own Word. Furthermore, I'm a prophet and you called me to preach. If you send me over there, you will be wasting my gifts. The nation needs me. This just doesn't make sense.”

Once when a woman said to Christ, “Blessed is the womb that bore you,” the Lord responded with these words, “On the contrary (contrary to our arguments, our ideas of security and blessing, contrary to what we think), blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it.” Not legalistic obedience as with the Pharisees, but the obedience of faith that acts on the principles and promises of God.

Not only does God speak to us in the Word, there is a certain sense in which He also speaks to us in the circumstances of life and this is the point of Ecclesiastes 7:13.

Are you perplexed about certain things in your life? Then ask, what is the Lord seeking to teach me? Ask “How is the Lord wanting to use this in my life or in some else's life?” Ask “Is God trying to change some of my values and priorities, or reveal some of my false sources of trust?” Pray and think!

Some years back, in a small men's Bible class, one of the men shared a problem for prayer. It seems his boss was a real bear to work for and it was becoming more and more unbearable. I asked him what he thought the Lord was seeking to teach him and do through this situation. His reply was, “Try my patience, I suppose.” I suggested there could be more. Maybe his boss was hurting and needed help; and perhaps after praying about it, he might approach him something like this: “John, it seems to me that you are really hurting, is there anything I can do to help?” His boss not only responded positively, but began to unload his problems and this young man was able to begin to minister to this man's needs. This experience not only changed the environment of his work place, but it

taught him and the rest of us an important lesson--when God puts a bend in the path of our lives, we need to stop and think about what He is doing.

The Test of the Dried Up Brook (vs. 7)

Let's look at each of the clauses here, because each is significant.

The Happenings In Life--“and it happened”

“And it happened after a while.” This translation could give you the impression that Elijah was simply the victim of some unfortunate circumstance that just happened. But literally the text says, “and it came to pass,” or “it came to be.” The verb is the Hebrew *hayah* that means “to come to pass, become, or be.” This was not a matter of unfortunate chance, but as seen previously, it was the sovereign will and plan of God at work.

Whether by the *natural occurrences* of life or the *supernatural interventions* of God, things do not just happen to us. They are the outworking of a sovereign God who works all things according to the counsel of His own will. Again, this means God works and orchestrates all things in accordance with His deliberations and decisions based on His wisdom, power and purposes.

Remember how the Lord Jesus showed us God's involvement, control, and concern for every detail of our lives? He taught us that *God numbers even the hairs of our head*, and that *not a single sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and control* (Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 12:7).

Another time, to show God's involvement and care for us He called attention to God's care for the birds of the air and then said, “Are you not worth more than they?” He then turned to the glorious beauty of the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin, and then added, “Will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?” (Matt. 6:26-30)

To further impress upon our hearts the reality of God's involvement in the happenings of life, let's remember these words of the Psalmist: “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). What does the word “sovereignty” mean? It's the Hebrew word *malkuth* that means sovereign power and authority. It comes from *malak* “to reign, rule, or be king.” It emphatically speaks of God's authority and control as King over every sphere of life. The Psalmist declares that God is in control regardless of how it may appear to us. In the context of this passage, the Psalmist is calling us to trust the Lord because He is also just (vss. 6-9), gracious (vss. 10-12), like a loving father (vs. 13), and our creator/architect who knows us completely (vs. 14).

“But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3). That God sits in the heavens stresses that God is above all and in charge. That He does whatever He pleases stresses not only is He in control, but He is actively involved in the affairs of mankind according to His all wise purposes. Note the context and reason for the statement of this verse. Three things:

First, this statement is made against the attitude of the nations who are blind to the presence and activity of God, at least as He is revealed in Scripture (vs. 2). How easy it is for us to fall in with the dominate viewpoint of the world and question the presence and concern of the Lord and fail to see the hand of God at work in the happenings of life through various personalities, events, and needs.

Second, this statement about God's sovereignty is made to contrast the sovereign God of the Bible with the impotent idols of the world (vss. 4-8). Idolatry can take many forms some of which are material, like money or possessions, and some are ideological, like our ideas or the strategies we use to try to meet our needs. The Apostle Paul defined a covetous person as an idolater in Ephesians 5:5, and greed as idolatry in Colossians 3:5. God has given us all things to enjoy, but anytime we depend on something other than God for our security, significance, or happiness, we have made that something into an idol. We are worshipping it as God and giving it the power to do what only God can do.

Third, this statement of God's sovereign control and activity is made as an incentive for God's people to trust the Lord as their help and shield, as their source of life, security, significance and joy (vss. 9-11).

Again, we need to remember the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14. It is God who bends the path and when He does so, we need to reflect on what He is doing. Though much of the difficulty of life and all of the

evil are caused by man's sinfulness, his foolishness, and Satan's activity, still God is in control, is aware of every detail, and allows and uses it all for His own wise purposes.

So, we have a principle: Based on these statements and promises of Scripture, we can know that even the apparently normal happenings of life, like the drying of the brook, are not without God's control and concern. Regardless of how it may look or seem to us, God is at work, concerned for us, and in control.

The Passing Days In Life--"after a while"

"After a while" is literally "at the end of days." The NIV has "some time later." But the literal Hebrew brings out an important point that our English translations miss. God deals with us not simply "after a while," or "sometime later," but at the end of specific days, in *His* time which is the *best* time. Here we see God's involvement is a day-by-day involvement.

Let's note several things:

(1) God's timing is usually not our timing. This is one of the reasons we are told numerous times in Scripture *to wait on the Lord*. Rather than turn to our own devices and run ahead of the Lord, we are to take it to Him and wait by faith on His timing and directions.

(2) God had a specific plan that included divine provision by the brook for a specific number of days. This plan was unknown to Elijah (and unknown to us), but it was known to God from all eternity and calculated by Him to be a *test*, a *learning place*, and a *blessing* for Elijah.

(3) I think this also emphasizes the temporary nature and shortness of this life and our experiences in it. It reinforces the principle that we should be prepared for sudden changes in life. Concerning our days and particularly our days in testing, I have found it helpful to remember a number of concepts:

- This world is temporary. It is passing away and a new and glorious day is coming (1 Cor. 7:31; 1 John 2:17; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).
- We have no abiding city or place in this world. Our citizenship and our lasting treasures are in heaven and we are to think of life in this way. This is what distinguishes believers (or should) from the unbelieving world which Scripture calls "earth dwellers" (Heb. 13:14; Phil. 3:20-21; Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 13:6; Isa. 24:17).
- We are, therefore, to live as sojourners and ambassadors who have a light hold on the details of this life and who are willing to pull up stakes for the Lord (1 Pet. 1:17-18; 2:11).
- Life is full of sudden changes, some of them very painful, but we should never be surprised (1 Pet. 4:12). This is an evil day, a day of darkness, and we should not expect from this life what it cannot give.
- Therefore, we are to redeem the time God gives us and wisely use our days, even our days of pain and suffering or trial (Ps. 90:12; Eph. 5:16). Don't waste your sorrows!

(4) The Lord has promised to supply our needs according to His riches in glory. There can never be an end of His supply for our real needs (Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:33). This means our real needs, not our greed, i.e., nor our needs according to our false beliefs about what we think we need.

Larry Crabb writes:

Each of us has been programmed in his or her unconscious mind to believe that happiness, worth, joy--all the good things of life--depend upon something other than God. Our flesh (that innate disposition to oppose God) has responded happily to the world's false teaching that we are sufficient to ourselves, that we can figure out a way to achieve true personal worth and social harmony without kneeling first at the cross of Christ. Satan has encouraged the development of a belief that we can meet our needs if only we had . . . The blank is filled in differently, depending on one's particular temperament and family and cultural background. An unbelieving world system, energized

by Satan and appealing to our fleshly natures, has squeezed us into the mold of assuming that something other than God offers personal reality and fulfillment.¹⁵

(5) The Lord is never confined to any one method in supplying our needs, but uses a variety of ways, people, things, places, and conditions, generally natural, sometimes supernatural, to supply them. When the brook dried up, God could have caused water to come out of a rock as with Moses, or from a hollow place, as with Samson (Judges 15:18-19). Instead, He moved Elijah to another place, a very unlikely place I might add, because He had other things in mind for Elijah. He always chooses a way or a tool that is most beneficial to His purposes for us and those around us.

(6) We should never get caught up with the method, or means He uses, or the things He supplies. Our need is to ever keep our eyes on the Supplier who is in control and working all things together for His own purposes. Our only real need is to know and trust Him. I am reminded of Martha's words to the Lord in Luke 10:40. She said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." It seems we always want to help the Lord out and tell Him how He should meet the problem. We always have this data bank of wisdom we are ready to share with the Lord to instruct Him on how He might take care of our needs--like winning the sweepstakes, or changing our conditions the way we want them. We need to remember that in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

The Dry Places In Life--"that the brook dried up . . ."

Our text tells us "that the brook dried up." What brook? The very one God promised as a source of water. Remember the saying, "Cheer up, things could be worse. So I cheered up, and sure enough, things got worse." This situation with Elijah reminds me of a radio program I used to listen to as a kid. In the series, the main character was always getting himself into a jam, and one of his lines in such circumstances was, "What a revolting development this turned out to be." I guess today, we would say what happened to Elijah was according to Murphy's law! This is the natural way to respond, but as those who know the Lord we need to see beyond the natural to the reality of our God.

Note also, that the words "dried up" refers to a process. Elijah did not just wake up one morning and suddenly find everything gone. Day after day he saw the little brook dwindling in its water supply and he knew what was coming. What must he have thought? What do you suppose he did? Was he measuring the depth of the brook each day? "Oh no, it's down another inch." Did he have his eyes on the problem? Was he remembering the way things used to be when he was back in the land? Was he telling God what He needed to do? Or was he focused on the Lord and His promises? I believe he was trusting in the Lord.

Our tendency is to carry a ruler by which we constantly measure what God is doing as though we can't really trust Him. We measure others. We compare how God is supplying other's needs. Then we measure our own blessings--our gifts, talents, opportunities, and on the list goes. In John 21:19, the Lord told Peter by what kind of death he would glorify God and then gave Peter that all important command, "Follow Me!" But Peter, seeing one of the other disciples, probably John, said, "Lord, and what about this man?" How quickly we are prone to focus on others to measure what God is doing in and with us. We are so quick to seek our comfort and well being in such measurements, rather than in the who and what of the Lord.

Well, what would you have done as the brook dried up? Sit there quietly claiming promises like "the battle is the Lord's," or "stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, for the Lord this day will fight for you," or "they that wait upon the Lord . . ."? Howard Hendricks humorously writes, "I have the highest respect for Elijah. I wouldn't have been able to sit there and watch the brook diminish. I would have gotten out my road map and been looking for every water hole in the area. My motto would be: 'Don't sit there. Do something.'"¹⁶ Isn't this the tendency for all of us?

Do you remember the reason for the dried up brook. It was because "there was no rain in the land." But why was there no rain in the land? Because Elijah had prayed for no rain. God was simply answering Elijah's prayer, a prayer, however, designed to bring the people to their knees so they would turn back to the Lord.

¹⁵ Larry J. Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1977, pp. 91-92.

¹⁶ Howard G. Hendricks, *Elijah, Confrontation, Conflict & Crisis*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 26.

When we pray for revival in our nation or for the restoration of others, it means God may have to bring about suffering to get their attention to turn them away from their independence, rebellion, and self-sufficiency. This also means we may have to suffer in the process. Are we willing? Are our values and our concern for the glory of God, for justice in society, and for the salvation of people such that we are willing to suffer in the aftermath of God's dealings with the nation or others to see them turn to the Lord? This really challenges our faith and the level of our commitment.

Finally, note 1 Kings 17:8. "Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying." God was not unconcerned about Elijah. He had a plan. He came to Elijah's rescue. Granted, sometimes He cuts it a little close in our thinking, but He is always there. The Lord sits in the heavens, He does that which He pleases. And He pleases to test us in order to build our character and transform us into the character of the Savior. Note this illustration:

In the vast plains of the Serengeti in southeast Africa, about the only thing that grows are gnarly old acacia bushes. These don't provide very straight arrow shafts for the little bushmen that inhabit the plains, so they've formulated an ingenious process to keep their quivers full. First they go out and find a suitable branch; it doesn't matter if it's got a 30-degree angle in it, just so it's the proper thickness and length. Next they'll build a fire, and right beside the fire they'll drive two rows of pegs into the ground, about six to eight inches apart. Then they'll put the branch into the fire to get its juices flowing making it pliable. When it's hot enough, they'll fish it out of the fire and jam it between the two rows of pegs and let it cool. It's a little straighter, but still looks more like a boomerang than an arrow. So it's back to the fire, move the pegs a little closer together, back to the fire, jam the shaft between the rows and let it cool again. It's getting straighter. Back to the fire, back to the pegs, back to the fire, back to the pegs . . . until finally the pegs are right next to each other, with only an arrow's width between them. When the bushman pulls it out this last time, he's got a perfectly straight arrow that's useful to its maker.

We like the part about "useful to the maker," but it's the fire and that bending we'd just as soon avoid. If you want to be made useful, though, you've got to take the tough with the easy. We learn from the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3 that God doesn't always take His children around the fire--sometimes He meets them in the middle of the furnace.¹⁷

Likewise, God left the prophet by the brook until it was dry as a bone. Then, having worked in the heart of the prophet, He came to him in his need and sent him to his next place of provision. Again, it was a place for growth, but also ministry. That's life. God is developing our faith in Him that He might use us in the lives of others and them in our lives as well.

For more information on the topic of suffering, please see Appendix A.

¹⁷ Christopher B. Adsit, *Personal Disciple Making*, Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, CA, 1988, p. 96.

Lesson 6: Testings and Ministry at Zaraphath (1 Kings 17:8-16)

Introduction

First Kings 17:8-16 continues God's testing of the Prophet at a place called Zarephath--which actually means "a smelting place." But here, another important element is added to the scenario of Elijah's life as it is recorded for us in Scripture. It's the element of personal ministry or outreach to others. The testing and needs of the Prophet became a means of ministry to a poor widow and her son. As I have tried to stress throughout this series, the events of our lives, even our everyday and seemingly mundane affairs, are not without importance. They are certainly not without God's providential care as the One who works all things after the counsel of His own will. But important to this truth of Scripture is the need of God's people to consider this fact against the varied events of their lives. We must think, trust, and act accordingly. The events of life are tools and agents of the Almighty. He uses these to get our attention, to change our values, character, priorities, pursuits, and above all, to change our sources of trust for security and happiness.

But let's never lose sight of the fact that the same events that test us often become the means by which God is able to use us in ministry to others. In other words, our trials often become vehicles for ministry, opportunities to manifest the life of Jesus Christ and the reality and power of God (2 Cor. 4:8-15). This is precisely what we see in this next episode in the life of Elijah. His need became a means of meeting needs in the lives of the widow and her son.

Does this not serve to remind us again that we are not here for ourselves, even in our pain and need? God cares for us, but we are not alone. He cares for others too, and often seeks to minister to the people around us through the character changes He is seeking to bring about through our own suffering or need.

Christlikeness means that even in our pain we are to think of others and how God may want to use us. This goes totally against the grain of human nature and especially against our self-centered society. Ours is a society that is focused on what is best for me regardless of what it could mean to others. What's best for my career, my happiness, my security, my significance, my . . . (you fill in the blank).

The Revelation to Elijah (17:8-9)

A Word From the LORD--COMMUNICATION

The first word we see is the little connective, "then." It continues the story and points us to what happened next in the sequence of events--Elijah received a word from the Lord with instruction. But the sequence here is resultant; it points to a consequence. In the context, this revelation to the prophet is undoubtedly the result of two spiritual facts. First, there is the faithfulness of God. The brook had dried up but God had promised to supply Elijah's need. So the Lord comes to Elijah's rescue. Second, Elijah had met the tests of the brook in faith. He waited on the Lord. He had not run ahead, nor run away to do his own thing, nor complained in discontent. So now, God comes to his rescue and gives new instruction. We see in this the principle of Luke 16:10, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much."

Elijah had been faithful in the matter of dwelling by the brook. Now God was moving him out of this place of solitude and testing into a small, but important ministry because all ministries are important. From his faithfulness at Zarephath greater things would come. God was building Elijah's faith, capacity for ministry, and using him to comfort the widow and her son at the same time.

What a person does with a small task is an indication of how he will handle a large one. We may think that the small things are not so important--that they do not really matter. However, faithfulness in the small things pre-

prepares us to handle the larger things when they come. Even the small things of life are tests of one's faith and of who is really in control of one's life.

The next words of verse 8 are "the word of the Lord came to him, saying." Let's note a couple of things: First, Elijah did not move until there was communion with God. He waited until he had direction from the Lord--He moved at the Word of the Lord. For Elijah, this was direct revelation, but the principle is God leads and directs us through His Word (which for us is the Bible), and through our communion with Him in Scripture. Of course, the Lord uses other things to give us direction such as open and closed doors, and our own abilities, talents, burdens and interests. He never leads us, however, contrary to the principles and directives of Scripture. Second, this reminds us just how important it is for us to commune with God in His Word so we can know the Word and use it for every decision we face. We can be sure somewhere in Scripture there will be principles that apply. This is not a series on divine guidance, but let me illustrate:

(1) Scripture does not tell us where we should cross the street. But it does tell us to obey the laws of the land and that we are not to tempt the Lord. This means that we should not jay walk in a big city, nor any city where it is against the law and where we are endangering our lives. God does not care where we cross unless we are breaking these two concepts.

(2) The Bible does not tell us what kind of automobile to drive. Frankly, I don't think God cares unless we ignore biblical principles of the wise use of our income, or we want to own a certain automobile because it would make us feel important and is an attempt at finding personal significance.

Simply stated, we all need to do what is necessary to know and apply the Word. This means spending time in the Word daily, and gathering with other Christians for Bible study and worship. We need to learn new truth, review the old, and then apply it all.

Direction From the LORD--INSTRUCTION

1 Kings 17:9 Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you

This verse has three commands, "arise," "go," and "stay." There is also a promise of provision. In each of these there are tests for the prophet. There are tests of faith or trust, of obedience, of availability and commitment, a test of vision for what God was doing in his life, and a test of contentment.

(1) The First Command--"Arise." Of course, before we can move on in the will of God, we must arise, not just physically but spiritually. Following the Lord in obedience is the outcome of spiritual life and spiritual awakening. (Cf. Ephesians 5:8f.)

(2) The Second Command--(the natural outcome): "go to Zarephath." "Go" is a Hebrew word *halak* which means "to go, walk." In this case, it carries the idea of traveling or journeying, which included hardships and danger. I don't want to make too much of this, but spiritually speaking, to arise is to go. It means to wake up from our apathy and sluggishness and get involved in God's will for our lives. Too often Christians simply sit and soak. Because they are not using what they know in faith, they also eventually begin to sulk, and sour. Rather, God wants us to sit and soak up the Word, but then, by faith to strive for Him in the power of Christ (cf. Col. 1:29). This means our availability to go wherever He wants us. It means our involvement and commitment and all of these are included here. Remember, God's will usually test us in our faith, our vision for what He is doing, our love, availability, values, commitment, and involvement, etc.

I am sure when Elijah heard these commands his heart leaped, and perhaps he thought, "Whew, just in time Lord, but that's sure cutting it close!" As this was going through his mind, he then heard, "to Zarephath." Zarephath comes from *tsaraph*, "to smelt, refine, test." The verb is used metaphorically with the sense of "to refine by means of suffering." Zarephath means "a smelting place, a place of testing." God uses various testings to refine us and purge out the dross as in the refining of silver and gold. When Elijah heard this name, he probably thought, "Oh oh, here we go again, but the battle is the Lord's and He is in control." Then he heard, "which belongs to Sidon." "Sidon"? He probably thought, "Lord, Sidon belongs to the land of Jezebel, that old prostitute of Baal worship. Lord, this is the center of Baal worship that is now being promoted in Israel. Yes, I know Lord, it's still your battle and you know what you are doing. But this sure seems like strange directions."

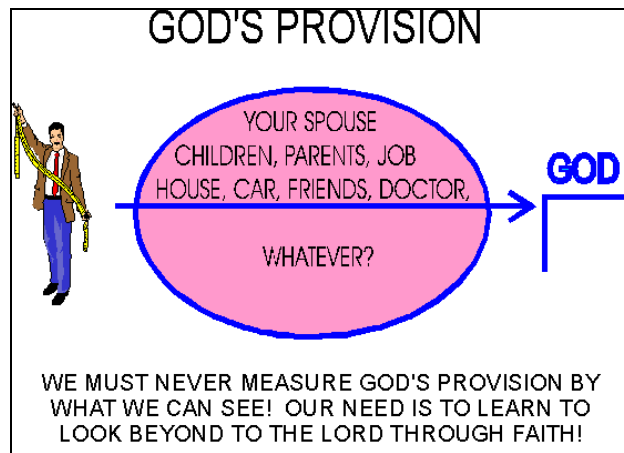
(3) **The Third Command**--“and stay there.” Next, he heard “and stay (*yashab*, “live, dwell”) there.” He might have thought, “This really takes the cake.” And, as if these were not enough, he then heard something even more strange that had to be a tremendous challenge to his *commitment, trust* and *vision* as a man of God who was seeking to serve the Lord.

(4) **The Promise**--“behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” Note the very next word, “behold.” This is the Hebrew *hinneh*, a demonstrative particle used to arrest the attention or to focus the reader’s (or hearer’s) attention on something important. The Lord was dramatically pointing out the reason for going to Zarephath. “I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” Elijah’s provision would come by human hands, but they were the most unlikely hands he could have imagined. Everything about this was a test for Elijah. Please note the following:

“I have commanded a widow” is an interesting statement. Had the Lord spoken to this Gentile widow? Was she waiting for Elijah to come? I think the content of the text suggests this was not the case. I don’t think she was aware at all of her role in God’s plan. Rather, I believe this expresses the divine will of God. It shows that God commands or wills things to take place and they do. He uses the conditions and dispositions of men and women and brings things to pass.

Let’s say you need a job. When you find a job, it will be because God commanded it. Your new employer may not be aware of it unless he or she is a believer, but it will be because God willed it so. “He sits in the heavens, He does what He pleases” (cf. Isa. 10:5-6 with vs. 7, and Gen. 50:19-21).

“Provide” is the Hebrew word, *kul*. In Aramaic and Arabic this word means “measure, measure out.” The basic meaning is “calculate,” or “contain” as does a vessel. For instance in Isaiah 40:12 the prophet writes, “who hath **calculated** or **contained** the dust of the earth by a measure?” Mainly this verb is used in a causative stem and means “to cause to contain, supply.” It came to be used in the sense of “support, sustain, provide for” (cf. Ps. 55:22; Gen. 50:21; Neh. 9:21). While the Hebrew word used is different, I am reminded of one of the Names of the Lord, “Jehovah Jireh” or “Yahweh Yireh,” meaning “the Lord will provide” (Gen. 22:8 and 14). It comes from the Hebrew *ra`ah*, “to see” as the Lord foresees and thus provides.



The Lord’s Supply--PROVISION

First, God would provide for Elijah through a woman. While women in Israel had a higher position and status than among their Gentile neighbors, this was highly irregular, for it was the man’s place to provide for women. Second, this was a Gentile woman, a woman outside the circle of God’s own people. In fact, she was from the pagan nation of the Sidonians (or Phoenicians) who, at that time, represented the forces arrayed against God’s kingdom. Third, she was a poor, destitute, depressed widow facing starvation. She wasn’t exactly the kind of person you would go to for support, but she was the person whom God had chosen to be Elijah’s support and the instrument of God’s glory. He didn’t know her plight as yet, but he would soon find out and his response is remarkable.

Note several principles of application:

(1) Remember what God said through Isaiah (Isa. 55:8f, God's ways are not ours)? We might also remember 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God." God uses sources and instruments we would never choose, but in His wisdom He chooses them to accomplish His own purposes and to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we could ask or think (Eph. 3:20). We should not be surprised then with the tools God sometimes uses. What would we choose? We would choose a hero kind of figure, a well-known athlete, a rich man or a king, but the Lord chose a destitute widow. We would choose someone brilliant, powerful, perhaps someone in the king's palace. But God chose a woman from Zarephath of the land of Jezebel. Sure, sometimes God uses the powerful and wealthy as he did with Nehemiah (Neh. 2), or Joseph in the latter chapters of Genesis. The question is, what is our response when He chooses to use the poor and the weak in our lives? Do we despise them? Are we disappointed? Or do we thank Him for what He is doing?

(2) The sources God chooses to use often test our submission and faith. How could God possibly supply through this destitute woman? The how is not important. God would show that in time. God only wants us to trust Him regardless of how things look to us. I remember a story my grandfather used to tell about a dear old lady who truly believed God. One day he said to her, "Mary, I believe if God told you to jump through the wall, you would jump." She replied, "Yes sir, I would. If God told me to jump, it would be my job to jump and His to make a hole." How can we rest in God's supply in situations like this? We need to remember a simple but profound concept. Who would supply Elijah's need, the woman or the Lord? The Lord, of course! The woman was only an instrument.

Never get your eyes on the instrument or the conditions. Look beyond the instrument to the real source of supply--the Lord. Read again the story of Abraham in Genesis 22. He saw beyond the immediate problem to the Lord's supply.

Often God either chooses the despised and the small, or He reduces our resources to teach us He is really the One who supplies. See Judges 7 for the illustration of Gideon and God's instruction to him. Lest Israel boast and trust in their own power, the number of men to go up against the Midianites was reduced from 32,000 to 10,000 and finally to 300.

(3) The Lord uses His sources of supply to humble us. Doesn't He really know how to take the starch of self-dependence and pride totally out of our spiritual shirts in order to bring us to a place where we will really trust Him? Here Elijah was receiving aid at the hands of a destitute widow of the enemies of Israel. How humbling! But also, what an opportunity for the manifestation of God's grace, love, and power.

(4) Finally, this teaches us God can use any of us. He can take whatever we have and multiply it many times over just as He did with the meager resources of the widow or as the Savior did when feeding the five thousand.

What was Elijah's response in verse 10? We read, "So he arose and went . . ." No questions, no arguments, no complaints--just obedience. Undoubtedly, it was in the joy and expectation of not only what the Lord would do for him, but through him. Elijah realized he would be there not simply to be ministered to, but to minister.

By way of application:

- Are you in a spiritual condition where you can hear God's instructions? (Mark 6:30f.)
- What are you facing in your life right now that needs God's supply? Are you resting in Him for your needs?
- Where is your focus? Are you focused on the problem rather than the Lord? Are you seeing the agents of supply in your life as totally inadequate with the result you are questioning what God can do?
- Does your present condition look impossible? Does it look like there is no way God can meet your needs through what He has brought about into your life?
- Have you considered that before God meets your need, or that in meeting your need, He wants to use you to meet the need of someone else?

Now we turn to another scene in the life of Elijah. Again, God is preparing him for what is to come. But the story also involves what God is doing in the life of His people, the nation of Israel. Let's not lose sight of the

nationalistic interest here. The story deals with more than simply Elijah or his destiny. It also deals with what God was seeking to do in the northern kingdom. It deals with what the northern kingdom was experiencing because of its idolatry. The nation had turned away from the Lord and His Word to the substitutes of the world.

Elijah forms a model for us. We can learn from Elijah about God and about ourselves--our needs, responsibilities in society, and our tendencies under the pressure of the conflict. On the other hand, Israel forms an example of what happens in a society when it ignores God--it goes down hill fast and becomes morally corrupt.

With this in mind, let's ask a question. Why did God send the Prophet into the land of the Sidonians and to this widow as His source of supply when there were many widows in Israel with just as great a need? Apart from God's mercy, His use of this in the life of Elijah and the lessons it has for us in that way, there is another very important lesson here that I would like to address. The answer is found for us in the remarks made by the Lord in Luke 4:23-27. Not only was the nation facing drought and famine in the land, but they were also facing a famine of the Word of God. Because of their indifference, idolatry, and unbelief, God sent Elijah out of the land and to a Gentile widow. This was a form of judgment and has a two-fold significance for us:

This was somewhat prophetic of the church age when, because of Israel's unbelief, God would turn from Israel as a nation and offer the gospel to the Gentile world. Remnants of Israel would still come to Christ, but from the standpoint of the nation and her promised blessings, she would be temporarily set aside (cf. Rom. 11:6-32). Sending Elijah to the widow reminds us of our responsibility to carry the gospel to all men.

This also teaches us we should never take our blessings for granted. Privilege never guarantees success (1 Cor. 10:1-13). It provides the basis for success, but we need to take heed how we use those blessings. When a nation or individuals ignore the Word and turn to the substitutes of the world, they eventually experience the judgment of God. God may finally turn them over to the futility of their own solutions or strategies for life (Rom. 1:18f; Amos 8:11; 2 Tim. 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:10-11).

The Response of Elijah (17:10a)

Both in 1 Kings 17:5 and 17:10, we see how the prophet moved only when he had a word from the Lord. Even though the brook was drying up, he remained by the brook until word came from God. Isaiah 28:16 says, "he that believeth will not make haste" (KJV). The RSV has, "he who believes will not make haste," and the NASB has "he who believes in it (the cornerstone) will not be disturbed."

Interestingly, this statement of Isaiah 28:16 is made following a reference to Israel's deceptive trusts--her dependence on her own human solutions. Rather than waiting on the Lord, Israel was running ahead to solve her problems and fears through her own strategies. But Elijah waited on the Lord and help arrived. But in what manner? He was commanded to go on a long and toilsome journey through wild and barren country. Further, with so many widows in the land, how was he to find the right one? Isn't this a natural question? It appears he didn't know who the widow was, *but he knew the Lord who did* and that was more than ample.

Elijah was operating by the principle of Proverbs 4:18, "But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn that shines brighter and brighter until the full day." While this verse refers primarily to the moral rectitude of those who walk with the Lord, it may also illustrate how the Lord directs our paths making His will plain as we walk in His righteousness by faith. The righteous live by faith. Day-by-day, step-by-step as we walk in fellowship with the Lord, He leads and directs the path of the righteous (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17).

Again, being consistent in faith, Elijah did not argue with the Lord, whine, complain, nor run away. Instead, we read, "So he arose and went." No questions, no arguments, no complaints, just obedience and undoubtedly, in the joy and expectation of what the Lord would do not only in him and for him, but through him. Why? Because, like the Lord Jesus, he would be there not simply to be ministered to, but to minister. I expect also he understood why he was not being sent to the widows of Israel. Also, it was God's way of removing Elijah from Jezebel's reach.

The Relief to the Widow (17:10b-16)

When you and I measure what God is doing, we tend to measure it by what we see and think according to the natural man. We tend to measure God's supply, or our confidence and hope in God's supply, by what we see. When we do this, we are walking by sight rather than by faith. The question we need to ask ourselves is: "Do I tend to look at human conditions as a basis for my confidence or do I see through them to the Savior?"

Obviously, we need to know human conditions. We need to know the facts. For this reason, God allowed the spies to go into the land, but what they saw was not to become the basis of their confidence in what God could do nor for what they should do. That was to be found in God's person, promises, and commands to go in.

Let's note Elijah's response: Our text tells us, "and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks." Again, we have the word "behold," that little demonstrative particle, *hinneh*, which is designed to arrest attention. We find Elijah at the gate of the city of Zarephath, but the Lord, who was there before him, had arranged it all. The widow was by the gate gathering sticks by the providence of God. Remember, He leads us step-by-step. He never leaves us, indeed, He goes before us.

If Elijah was looking for something to encourage him from the human standpoint of the widow, like a well-dressed woman living in a luxurious house with a well-stocked pantry, his hopes were soon dispelled. "Gathering sticks," was a sign of poverty. This woman was so poor she had no fuel, and in order to cook even a meager meal, she had to get out and round up a few sticks. Until now Elijah knew only that his source of supply was a widow. Now he knew she was a poor widow.

By human measurement, how reasonable was it that the man of God could expect sustenance under her roof? It was no more reasonable than Noah should build an ark before he had ever seen rain, much less a flood, or for Joshua to command the people to walk around Jericho and expect the walls to fall down. But the path of obedience is the path of faith that looks to God and not to circumstances both before and after the will of God is clear.

Elijah's response is the issue. Remember that the brook was a preparation for him. The God who commanded the ravens and supplied through them, was the same God who had commanded the widow and would supply through her. The principle is the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Circumstances change, but the Lord never changes. Our circumstances do not diminish the character and power of God. They can in no way change His faithfulness or omnipotence.

Elijah responded in faith. But how did faith manifest itself? Like Abraham on Mount Moriah who looked to God for the supply of a lamb, so Elijah saw beyond the woman's condition to Yahweh Yireh--Lord who provides. He did not judge according to sight, but according to God's character and divine essence. Elijah trusted in the promises of God. He didn't throw up his hands and say, "I don't believe this! You mean this poor soul is my supply for food? How in thunder can she help me?" He responded to God rather than reacting. Elijah acted in faith with his eyes on the Lord. In verses 10 and 11, he asked the widow for a jar of water and a piece of bread. Was he believing the promise of God and acting on it, or was he looking for confirmation by her response that she had been expecting him and had plenty to eat? I think he was believing the promise of God because Elijah knew she was poor by the fact she was gathering sticks.

In verse 12 we see the widow's response. Elijah's request opened afresh the wounds and pain of her heart. She could conceal her pain no longer. Her words showed she was not only poor but severely depressed. She had given up and was ready to die. This was their last meal and after that they would simply starve. It also appears she was without any real knowledge of the Lord and without faith. Still her heart was ready and had been prepared for God's Word and the ministry of Elijah.

Note her words in verse 12, "as the Lord *your* God lives." This suggests she must have recognized Elijah as a prophet of Israel, perhaps by his dress (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). But Yahweh was not *her* God and she wasn't all that sure about the honesty of Elijah or the reality of his God (cf. vs. 17:24). She needed to see the testimony of Elijah's life as well as the power of God.

What was Elijah to do now? Was he mistaken? What gave Elijah the courage to act like he did instead of throwing in the towel? Remember, as a man thinketh, so is he! Elijah's response in verses 13 and 14 were words of faith, compassion, and vision.

As a man of God, he undoubtedly felt compassion for this poor woman but he knew his solutions or strategies for meeting his or her needs were not sufficient. He knew she was poor, yet God's source of supply was no accident or mistake. Elijah knew God was faithful, powerful, and purposeful and that his needs were God's concern and that they were met in the Lord. He also knew God was aware of his longings to preach in Israel and this would need to be tabled for now and turned over to the Lord and His timing. This meant he must be available to serve others and trust the Lord for his needs.

For us today, Elijah's words to the woman in verses 13 and 14 are equivalent to two things: (a) Giving others the promises of God's love, concern, and care such as the promises of Philippians 4:19; 1 Peter 5:7; Psalm 55:22; and John 10:10. Please note the first half of John 10:10. We often fail to connect the two. (b) Acting as the Good Samaritan; sharing our blessings with others, knowing that our giving will not be our lack (Phil 4:19).

The woman listened to Elijah's instruction and it was just as he had promised according to the Word of the Lord. She saw the power of God--the widow, her son, and Elijah were all sustained.

What lessons can we learn from this passage?

- (1) Look beyond the circumstances to the Lord as Yahweh Yireh--the Lord who supplies.
- (2) Never judge or measure God's supply by what you can see. He is the One who does exceeding abundantly beyond all we can ask or think.
- (3) Ask God for the vision needed to see the opportunity for ministry lying, perhaps, right under your nose.
- (4) Ask God for the compassion and love needed to reach out to others with His power and love.
- (5) Know that the Lord is aware of your longings and turn them over to Him.
- (6) Know also that your basic needs have been met in Christ. Knowing that, commit yourself to fulfilling God's purposes in your life.

God sent Elijah out of the land because the people were indifferent--indeed, rebellious to the Word of God. No man or nation can neglect God's truth without dire consequences. It can mean a famine, not just for bread and water, but for hearing the Word. This is not just a matter of what God does to us, but what we do to ourselves, of what happens within mankind that hardens us and causes us to ignore and turn away from God.

Far too often today when people look for a church they choose one like they would a country club or a shopping mall, on the basis of consumerism rather than on the teaching of the Word of God and the ministry of its people to one another. Many times the basis of their choice is not the solid teaching of the Word, but programs, music, the number of youth, the activities, and other similar consumer-like issues. Our nation is filled with steeples, but there is a famine in our land. Not a famine of food and water but of the proclamation of the Word of the Lord.

Lesson 7: The Death and Resurrection of the Widow's Son (1 Kings 17:17-24)

Introduction

After the day the Prophet made his proclamation before King Ahab, Elijah's work and ministry was dramatically changed. He had been removed from what he thought was his primary calling as a prophet of the Lord and was sent to minister to a poor widow and her son outside the land of Israel. This woman was a widow, not just poor, but destitute, and probably without a real knowledge of the Lord. She was ready to eat her last meal with her son and then die of starvation.

Instead, into this woman's life comes the prophet Elijah and her life takes on a sudden and dramatic change. Instead of physical starvation and death there is now food and life provided daily by a miracle of God. How exciting it must have been to live with such a daily miraculous supply, just as the prophet had promised, until rain according to the Word of the Lord God of Israel (1 Kgs. 17:14, 16). In place of having no testimony of the living God, there was in her home a man of God with the knowledge of God who surely taught her and her son about Yahweh, the God of Israel. Rather than spiritual starvation and death, there was the opportunity to feed on the truth of God. Some see this symbolized in the flour and oil mixed together and baked in an oven picturing the person and work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We have the privilege of feeding on the miracle of God's daily provision as we likewise feed on the living Word (Christ) in the written Word (the Bible) which is our Bread of Life. With the universal indwelling of the Spirit of God in believers during the church age, we may also experience daily His work and ministry. Furthermore, we can also experience God's daily supply of our physical needs. Just as Elijah promised the bowl of flour would not be exhausted, so we have the promise, "my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

How well are we handling God's daily supply? Are we presuming on the Lord or taking Him for granted? Are we growing in our walk with Him? Is He our source of trust and joy or is it in the supply--in what we get from Him? I don't mean just in the food on the table, but even in our spiritual experiences with God? It seems some people must have incredible experiences, little daily miracles, for God to be real or for them to see God working in their lives. That's not spiritually healthy. Let's look at what happens next to see what we can learn!

Removal of Life From the Son (17:17)

"Now it came about . . ." (Cf. 1 Kgs. 17:17 with 18, 20 and Heb. 11:35)

First, with these words the text introduces us to a tragic turn of events in the life of the widow--the very one *to whom Elijah was sent to minister*. It's an event that affected both the widow and the Prophet. That's the way life is. Suffering affects all of us--or should. Your suffering may not be directly mine, but God has called us to be ready to minister and be there for one another.

Second, this sudden turn of events, the death of the son, was not by accident. While we have accidents, we stumble, we fall, we can drive out in front of an on-coming automobile because we are preoccupied, etc., still, from God's perspective there are no accidents in the life of a believer or with anyone for that matter. What happened here was the result of the sovereign will and purpose of God who works all things together for good. It is so comforting to know that with God, the One who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, infinite, and faithful, there are no surprises. God knows all the situations and trials of life and has from all eternity. In fact, He has decreed to bring them to pass or to allow them.

How, then, should this knowledge affect us? Well, that's precisely the point of this passage. Compare Psalm 138:8 with 139:1-12. Psalm 138:8 concerns God's purpose for one's life. The NIV has, "The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me." What a wonderful truth to undergird our hearts and strengthen our faith as we go through the ups and downs of life.

"Now it came about after these things." After what things? Let's not miss this! The death of the widow's son occurred after the blessings and miraculous daily provisions mentioned in the above verses. His death occurred after the appearance of the prophet to help the widow. After the faith and response of the woman. And after the continuous miraculous supply of the flour and the oil by which they were all sustained and which were symbolic of God's spiritual provision. In other words, after everything seemed to be okay, God placed a bend, a turn in the road.

How was the woman to deal with this? Indeed, how would we deal with this? Here God had miraculously supplied her needs and kept both her and her son alive. Now, suddenly, her son dies. Can you imagine what her thoughts were? Probably something like, "I don't understand this, God! You provided all of these blessings, and now you take away my son?" In itself, this doesn't seem to make sense. It doesn't seem fair. Have you ever felt like this? Of course, and you will feel like this again.

Quite unexpectedly, in the midst of a period of God's supply and relative ease and quiet, disaster strikes. The widow's son is taken sick and actually dies--with the prophet of the living God living right in her home! Elijah had most likely been teaching this lady and her son the truth of God. She, however, like so many people today, may have been more interested in the physical blessings, in the interesting elements of the spiritual nourishment and in the daily miracle than in really getting to know God. The Lord, however, was more concerned that she get to know Him because He was her real need (cf. John 6:23-27; Matt. 12:38-39; 16:1-4).

As we experience God's blessing and provision, especially after some kind of test or trial, there is always a subtle temptation for us to think we have passed the test and everything is going to be easier from now on. The worst is past. The storm is over. From here on it's going to be *s m o o t h* sailing. But such an attitude ignores some basic truth:

(1) This world is not Eden nor the millennium. We should never expect from life in a fallen world what it simply cannot give and is not designed to give. We live in a fallen world where sin and Satan are ever active and where even nature, God's own creation, groans under the curse of the fall. An earthquake, for instance, is but one of the groanings of a world that has been cursed because of sin (Rom. 8:18-22). God wants us to long for the joys of eternity. In fact, it is this focus and hope of eternity which is to lighten the burdens of this life (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

(2) We tend to forget the necessity of suffering with the many reasons for suffering that we find set forth in the Scripture. The Lord knows that it is simply not good for us to float along without times of testing because so often we can't seem to stand prosperity. We so easily become independent and self-centered. With prosperity comes the temptation to forget the Lord. We live to see the miracle or to be comfortable, rather than to know God and grow in His character. Note the warnings of Deuteronomy 6:10-13 and the repeated warnings against forgetting or the call to remember (Against forgetting: Deut. 4:9, 23, 31; 6:12; 8:11, 14, 19; 9:7; 25:19; To remember: 4:10; 5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7, 27; 15:15).

(3) We treat the tests of life as something foreign and strange. Either we forget or we ignore both the Lord's warning and Peter's that we should never be surprised by trials nor think them strange (John 15:18; 16:33; 1 Pet. 4:12). Peter reminds us that trials are sometimes *necessary*.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, *if necessary*, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; (1 Peter 1:6-7)

One evening I received a call from an old friend. I had previously counseled him regarding his marriage to which he responded and things really turned around for them. But just as this dear couple began to experience some wonderful improvement in their marriage, he was fired and it was apparently not his fault at all. Life is filled with similar stories. Though life is full of pain we often live our lives oblivious to it, but we are always only separated from it by a thin membrane which can break in on us suddenly and without warning.

The Reaction of the Widow (17:18)

It is interesting to note the definite change in attitude between 1 Kings 17:18 (bitterness) and verse 24 (faith and confidence). What brought about this change? It came through experiencing God in her life in her suffering. Her reaction and words in verse 18 show her focus and the way she was thinking. It suggests three problems with her thinking and her faith or her relationship with God that needed to be transformed.

The First Problem With Her Thinking

It appears she thought that with the prophet in her home she was immune to problems. A lot of people think like this and they are helped in their thinking by the prosperity gospel that we hear from a number of radio and tele-evangelists. Some people think if they do the right things, follow the right principles, listen to the Bible, live around other Christians--life will flow along smoothly. But such an attitude is usually void of developing any real relationship with God wherein God alone becomes the sole source of strength and joy.

What is the primary good God wants for us? I believe it is Christlikeness. He is committed to transforming our lives into the image and likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). But due to our proneness to wander, our tendency to live independently of Him and manage our own lives, God must sometimes orchestrate suffering or pain. This is illustrated in the pictures of the Vine Dresser (John 15) and that of a father who disciplines or trains his children (Heb. 12:5f).

Even though the Lord has richly blessed us in Christ, and though He may meet our needs in marvelous ways, it never means we are immune to trials down the road or around the next corner. He knows our hearts and the hearts of those around us. He certainly, therefore, knows what we all need. The fact and presence of trials never means God has removed His grace and love. If anything, as the biblical analogy of God as our heavenly Father and Vine Dresser illustrates, it is the evidence of His love and faithful care. It proves He is at work preparing us for heaven and using us in His plan even now (Rom. 8:28-29; John 15:2; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:5f).

As the One who knows our hearts better than we ourselves, God must often engineer suffering, or allow it after times of great blessing, because it is necessary for one or more obvious reasons: (a) We may begin to take Him for granted, to presume on Him. We can begin to treat the Lord as though He owed us something. (b) Or we may begin to live for His blessings (like the flour and the oil of this story) rather than for Him. We become occupied and caught up with the **blessings** rather than the **Blessor**. (c) In the process of all this, we may begin to live independently, seeking our happiness, security, and joy from other sources.

The Second Problem With Her Thinking

Her reaction and words to Elijah suggest another aspect of her thinking which is so common. She felt guilt and thought perhaps she was to blame for the child's death. Because she did not understand what the Scripture teaches about suffering, she may have thought all suffering was caused by sin. Perhaps there were some skeletons in her closet. Surely the question, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God?" followed by the statement, "You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance, and to put my son to death!" most likely means something like: "What have I done to displease you or your God." "What did I do to deserve this?" "Why has your God done this? Haven't I given you shelter?"

People tend to see suffering either as a product of random, meaningless pain, or as caused by some sin. This results in living in a world of guilt and fear. Yes, sometimes suffering is discipline or because we have broken the principles of Scripture. In other words, it is often self-induced misery, but this is only one of the several causes of suffering or trials.

The Third Problem With Her Thinking

Because her eyes were not on the Lord, because her expectations were wrong, and because she felt guilty thinking maybe she was to blame in some way, her guilt and pain took the form of despair, anger or resentment, and then blame. She took the downward process. Pain is never wrong. It is only natural and God expects and allows us

to feel pain. The problem comes when we allow our pain to twist and deform us and cause us to react rather than respond to what God is seeking to do in us or in others.

How typical and how ironic. When things take a turn we aren't expecting, rather than looking up to the Lord to draw upon His resources and learn what He is seeking to teach us, we so often take out our anger on the very person or persons whom God has used to bless and minister to our lives.

Phillips Brooks once said, "O, do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle."

Illustrations:

(1) In the pictures of the ancient Roman method of threshing grain, one man is always seen stirring up the sheaves while another rides over them in a crude cart equipped with rollers instead of wheels. Sharp stones and rough bits of iron were attached to these cylinders to help separate the husks from the grain. This simple cart was called a tribulum--from which we get our word "tribulation." When great affliction comes to us, we often think of ourselves as being torn to pieces under the cruel pressures of adverse circumstances. Yet as no thresher ever yoked up his tribulum for the mere purpose of tearing up his sheaves but to disclose the precious grain, or remove the chaff from the grain, so our loving Savior never puts us under the pressure of sorrow and disappointment needlessly.

(2) The Scriptures exhorts us to be filled with the Spirit and by the Spirit's strength to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit--various godly virtues. How do we know if we are "full of goodness" (Rom. 15:14) or "full of faith," for example? Think a moment about a water-saturated sponge. If we put even slight pressure on the sponge water runs out. We immediately know what fills the sponge. The same is true with us. We can tell what fills us on the inside by what comes out under pressure.

The Response of Elijah (17:19)

Why didn't Elijah call on the Lord to heal the child before he died? Had Elijah been away a day or so only to arrive to find the child dead? Or was this like the healing of the man blind from birth whom Jesus healed "that the works of God might be displayed" (John 9:1-3), or like the raising of Lazarus in John 11? Remember what the Lord told the disciples before hand? He said, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him" (John 11:14-15).

Our need is to learn to see the problems of life and the sudden intrusions of pain on our world from the standpoint of the Almighty and His purpose in our lives. Though her tone was somewhat caustic, it is important to see that Elijah did not react to what she said. Rather he responded with positive compassion and action. Let's note what he did:

(1) He did not take this personally. He had compassion for her hurt. He knew her need was to know the Lord and believe His Word. He put her spiritual and emotional needs above his own longings for appreciation (Phil. 2:3-4).

(2) He was secure in the Lord. He sought his sense of significance, his security, and his joy in the Lord, and not in the responses of people. He wasn't seeking to defend his turf as a prophet (John 13:1f; 1 Cor. 4:1-5).

(3) Because he was secure through his relationship with the Lord, he didn't give excuses or turn to defense tactics with the woman. Instead, he reached out to her need and then took the matter directly to the Lord. He knew he was there to minister and that the Lord was in charge, in control, and working out His purposes (Mark 10:41-45).

To show that this was so with Elijah, note verse 20a: "O LORD, my God." He rested his needs in God and concentrated on this woman's plight rather than her retort. (a) With the words "O LORD" he was fervently reaching out to God, but as Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, the independent and sovereign God and the God of revelation and redemption. By this title, he showed he had a true knowledge of God and stood in a covenant relationship with Him. (b) With the words "my God" he was acting from his own personal relationship, trusting in the power and multiplicity of God's character as Elohim of the Old Testament.

The Request of the Prophet (17:20-21)

His question, “Hast Thou also brought calamity . . .” expresses his knowledge of God’s sovereignty over all that happens in life, but the fact he connected this death with his presence in the home of the widow suggests the realization of some special purpose of God for him in this tragedy. He was focusing on the Lord in terms of the revelation of God in Scripture. God had placed another bend in the road and he was considering what God had done and what the Lord might want to do through him. Many of the reasons for suffering apply here.

Based on the widow’s need and that of her son, Elijah takes action and goes to the Lord with the need. But what was he to do? The boy had died. He was dead. No one had ever been raised from the dead before--at least, not in the record of Scripture up to this point. What Elijah did was a first. Here was tremendous faith, but he knew nothing was impossible with the Lord, nothing. Putting it all together, as a prophet of God with the revelation gift of a prophet (a gift I am convinced we do not have today with the completed Canon of the Bible), Elijah knew or believed this is what God wanted him to do. Believing that, he acted on his faith and asked God for the life of the widow’s son.

Why did he stretch himself over the child three times? The text does not tell us, but this was undoubtedly symbolic, in some way, perhaps of his faith, of his willingness to identify himself with this child, and an evidence of his humility. But above all, the repetition with the repeated prayer, reminds us that it is persistence in prayer that often leads to answers to our prayers. It is important to note that it was the prayer of faith--the voice of Elijah crying out to God--and not the symbolic acts that brought about the answer to this prayer. As James tells us in James 5:15, it is the prayer of faith that restores the sick.

The Return of Life to the Son (17:22-23)

Can you just imagine the joy and excitement of this event. But will you note Elijah’s words, “See, your son is alive.” It’s like he was saying, “You see, the God of Israel is not only the only true and mighty God with whom nothing is impossible, but He is also loving, forgiving, and merciful.”

Today, our evidence is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus which declares Him to be both God’s eternal Son and the only one who can take away our sin, give us eternal life, and give life abundantly or capacity for real life. (Compare Rom. 1:4; 4:24-25 and note the context of the religious, the moral, and the immoral man.)

At death, the soul and spirit depart and the body begins the process of decay. It is only the body which dies. The immaterial part of man continues either in torments, the abode of the unbelieving dead (Luke 16:22-23), or in paradise, which today is in God’s presence, the abode of those who know the Lord by faith (Luke 16:22; Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:8). When we speak of faith in Jesus Christ, we are talking about the Bible’s definition of who Jesus Christ is, not the version of groups who redefine Jesus Christ as merely a good man or a special prophet.

For resurrection to occur, two things must happen. (a) The physical body must be rejuvenated even to the point of recreation as when the body has decayed. For our resurrected body of the future, the Apostle calls this the transformation of the body of our humble state, this earthly and perishable body, into conformity with the body of his glory, a glorified resurrection body like the Lord’s. But the resurrection in this passage, like the resurrection of the body of Lazarus, was not a glorified resurrection body. It was a rejuvenation to a perishable body that would again die. It required miraculous rejuvenation that reversed the processes of death like decay. (b) The soul and spirit or the immaterial part of man must be reunited with the body, the physical part. Our passage tells us the life (soul) of the child returned to his inward part.

This was a great miracle, a supernatural act which had the fingerprint of God on it since only God has the power of life and death. Miracles are the exception, not the norm, and the miracles of the Bible contain the fingerprint of God. They are completely successful; they are immediate; they can heal any disease or problem, and they give confirmation of God’s messenger and his message. All of these apply here. Thus, what happens next takes us to the goal of the passage and the goal of the Christian life.

Recognition of the Prophet's Message (17:24)

Here is one of the major reasons for this incident. Certainly, God was concerned for this widow, but He did not do this for every widow who lost her son. This miracle was designed to teach important truth.

(1) It shows the general purpose of miracles in the Bible. They occurred to confirm God's messengers and thus God's message of grace (17:24).

(2) But in the process (by way of application to us) it reminds us again of our purpose and of one of the major purposes for suffering. Suffering gives God an opportunity to manifest His power and the power of His Word through the production of godly character. When we consider fallen humanity, this is a miracle just as great as resurrection. Because of this, Christlikeness is likened to resurrection in the New Testament (Rom. 6).

(3) True godly character, not just external conformity, is always the result of the Word of God in one's life. It is the work of faith, the result of fellowship with the living God. Godly character, whether in the form of stability in the midst of suffering or in the form of loving ministry in the home, office, with a neighbor or friend, authenticates the message of Jesus Christ. It also demonstrates that we are truly the people of God and we are walking in fellowship and in faith with God who is alive. Godly character is always much more than simply religious conformity to a set of do's and don'ts. It means the capacity to respond as did Elijah. From the standpoint of the overall lesson of this heroic narrative, this story demonstrates Elijah's God was the true God. For who but God can bring the dead back to life?

Lesson 8: The Word of the Lord Comes to Elijah (1 Kings 18:1-6)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 1)

Introduction

The stories of the Bible are built around three basic ingredients: setting, characters, and a plot. In addition to the literal, historical meaning, the setting often assumes symbolic significance. Cherith, a place of cutting, and Zarephath, a smelting place, both portray the ideas of the testing and refining that God puts us through to transform our character. The setting of Mount Carmel is equally symbolic, if not more so. In the Bible, revelation often occurs on mountains (e.g., Moses' meeting with God on Sinai; Elijah's encounter with the Baal priests in this chapter before all Israel; his encounter with God himself in chapter 19; and Jesus' transfiguration on the Mount of Olives).

Chapter 18 is the story of Elijah's confrontation with the Baal priests on Mount Carmel, but it is also the story of the end of the three-and-a-half years of drought in the land of Israel. In fact, in keeping with the plot of the story of Elijah as heroic narrative, the confrontation on Mount Carmel was designed to show two things: (a) that the drought was not merely an unfortunate coincidence of nature, but divine discipline from Yahweh, the one and only true God, and (b) that the rain and the end of the drought were the work of Yahweh. It was not the work of Baal, the so-called god of thunder, rain, and fertility. This chapter and the Carmel incident were designed to teach us that our false gods of whatever sort--materialistic, idealistic, or human--are totally inadequate. Our false gods, of course, include whatever we place our trust in rather than in the true and living God as revealed to us in the Bible.

In the process of developing this larger story and its truth, a number of smaller incidents and happenings occur and each has its own message to tell and truth to teach as it becomes a part of the greater plot and picture. Let's focus our attention on the coming of the Word of the Lord to Elijah and the new directions he received from the Lord, which stand in such stark contrast to the actions of Ahab.

As a brief review to set the stage, we have seen Elijah in varying conditions:

(1) In 17:1 we saw him openly confront evil Ahab for the first time and warn him about the coming drought. He did this as one who stood, lived and served in constant awareness of the aliveness of Yahweh, the true God of Israel. The fact of the drought and now its end by the word of Elijah following the test on Mount Carmel, would be proof that only the prophets of Yahweh represented the true God and spoke the truth, and that God demanded obedience from His people. *A time of warning and declaration.*

(2) Then we saw the prophet in seclusion by the brook Cherith, which undoubtedly became a time for him to be alone with God to draw upon his supernatural resources in the Lord--the Word and prayer. This was *a time of preparation for things to come.*

(3) Finally, we saw Elijah in Zarephath at the home of the poor widow. This *became a place of testing, testimony, and confirmation.*

All of this serves to remind us that in the process of the larger purpose of God for one's life, God is always at work to test, train, and prepare us for other things. We need to learn the importance of being faithful in the smaller responsibilities of life. Now three years have passed and it is time for God to make His point to Israel through the prophet. Elijah was a tool being sharpened and fashioned for things to come, but it is no different for us--if we are available to be sharpened and used.

If what Elijah did in 17:1 took courage, we can be sure what he was now called upon to do took twice the courage and faith. The confirmation and experience with the widow and her son were timely and sovereignly designed to get Elijah ready for the next phase of God's will.

How typical and gracious of our Lord. If we will listen, God is at work preparing us for the ministries he has for us in dozens of ways. He may give us the right passage of Scripture, or He may bring the right person with a word of challenge and rebuke, a word of comfort and encouragement, or some other manifestation of His grace.

Whatever, the Lord is always mindful of our needs and in His loving care is seeking ways to build our lives and prepare us for ministry. ARE WE LISTENING?

The Principle of One Day at a Time (18:1a)

“Now it came about” is the same construction we had in 1 Kings 17:7 and 17. Literally it is, “and it came to pass.” Again, let’s be reminded that this is not by chance, but by the *sovereign timing* of God who was providentially carrying out His purposes with Elijah and Israel. How we need to learn to see the hand of God bringing things to pass in our lives according to His timing and purposes. As His thoughts are not ours, so it is that His timing is often not ours as well.

“After many days.” Notice--not simply after years, or in the third year, but the verse says, “after many days . . . in the third year.” May I make some suggestions as to this wording?

(1) For God’s people, no matter how fast or slow the years may seem to pass, God deals with us on a day-by-day, one-day-at-a-time basis. Every day of the believer’s life is important to God and should be so for us. To illustrate this, in the Tribulation when talking about the nations or the Beast and his system, God measures time in terms of months (42 months--Rev. 11:2; 13:5). But when talking about the saints and their days in the Tribulation, time it is measured in terms of days (Rev. 11:3-6; 12:6). Why? (a) Because no day for a believer is unimportant to God regardless of who we are, where we are, how seemingly insignificant or how painful our situation may be. God cares for us and for all the details of our lives (1 Pet. 5:7).

If God is so concerned, shouldn’t I be as well? This means we need to carefully watch how we are walking day by day. Each day is to be redeemed by walking circumspectly and wisely because of our own sinful propensities and the constant threat of our enemies (Eph. 5:15-16). Each day is to be numbered, reckoned as important with opportunities in view of the shortness of life (Ps. 90:12; 39:4-5). Each day is to be viewed in the light of eternity because every day has eternal ramifications. *It takes earthly time to lay up heavenly treasure* (1 Pet. 1:13f; Ecc. 3:9-13; 9:10).

(2) The term “many” brings up another point to be pondered. As we saw in 17:7, the text there was literally “at the end of days.” There the point was a specific time and plan. God had provision for Elijah for a certain number of days at the brook, known only to God from all eternity, though unknown to Elijah. While this is also included here, there is a change in emphasis. If we believe in the inerrant, verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture, we need to see this change is not by chance. There is a reason and it is brought out in the context that follows by the reference to the severity of the famine and the incident of Ahab and Obadiah looking for water.

Let’s reconstruct the picture. Elijah had been sent by God to accomplish a mission, and then the Lord took him out of circulation. In the meantime things were going from bad to worse in Israel. Elijah had been sort of stashed away in a Gentile city ministering to two instead of dozens. Of course, he was a blessing to this woman and her son as we have seen. But we might wonder, could he not have done much more in Israel preaching the Word? But God’s plan was different! So the days passed and it must have seemed like “*many days*” to Elijah who surely longed for action. It must also have seemed like many days to the nation that had been suffering under the drought for three-and-half years.

Do you ever feel like that about your life? Do the days sometimes seem like weeks and the months like years? When the days seem like many, what are we to do? When those times come, I believe God wants us to remember that He is *El Olam*, the God of eternity with whom one day is as a thousand years and vice versa. But how is that to help?

This name for God, *El Olam*, and the Hebrew term *olam*, often translated “everlasting,” are used to express God’s eternal duration (Ps. 90:2, “even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God”), but it also stresses God’s unchangeableness, His immutability, and His faithfulness. As the everlasting God, He is also one who can always be counted on.

What this means to the believer is seen in most of the passages where *El Olam* or *Olam* alone are used (Ps. 25:6; 93:2; 100:5; 103:17; 125:1; Isa. 26:4; 51:6; 40:28; Gen. 21:33). It means life is full of changes and uncertainties and times that often seem like “many days.” Conditions change, times change, people change, needs change. We see this every day as we go through life. One’s needs as a child, as an adolescent, as a young adult, or as an

adult in the evening years of life, change. Furthermore, our world, our government, our society, everything undergoes change, and usually for the worse as we are seeing in our society today. But God, as *El Olam*, never changes. “He is the same yesterday, today, yes, and forever” (Heb. 13:5).

Scripture teaches us that God’s eternity is fundamental to God’s immutability, His unchangeableness, which is the foundation for God’s faithfulness and His ability to care for us and come to our aid. Hebrews 1:12b reminds us of this very fact. In contrast to the world that is running down like a clock, we read, “But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end” (cf. Ps. 102:26-27).

So, what does this mean to God’s people? How does this affect the way we think and respond to life and its constant changes and the days that sometimes seem like many days? “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable” (Isaiah 40:28-29). Two wonderful attributes of God as *El Olam* are declared to us in Isaiah 40. Knowing these attributes ought to change the way we live.

God Is Inexhaustible. He never gets tired. God rested on the seventh day not because He was tired but because His work of creation was finished. He never faints or grows weary. So what does this mean? Isaiah answers that in the next verse. “He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power” (Isa. 40:29f). It means God is there for us day after day through the ups and downs and through those days that seem like many days. What, therefore, should we do? We need to wait on the Lord and seek our strength in His care.

God’s Understanding Is Inscrutable. There is no end to God’s understanding. He knows the beginning from the end and every detail of our lives and history. God knows what He is doing and what He is doing is best regardless of how it appears to us.

I think it is significant the Hebrew word *Olam* includes the idea of secret or hidden. The secret things belong to the Lord. As the eternal I Am, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, everything is running according to His purposes (cf. Isa. 46:9-11). So, when our times seem like many days, we must not run ahead or away, but rest in the Lord as *El Olam*. We need so much to wait on the Lord like Elijah and not move until the Lord says go. Elijah did not worry or venture out of retirement on his own. He did not complain, but simply continued to keep check on his own relationship with the Lord. He trusted and waited patiently for the Lord to direct him, use him and enlarge his sphere of usefulness and ministry as the Lord directed--if God so directed. Certainly, there was no demandingness with Elijah! In the meantime, he was a blessing to the widow and her son and God was able to prepare him for things to come. Too many times we become so wiped out by our problems we become useless to the Lord and to others.

The Principle of Guidance Based on Hearing God’s Word (18:1:b)

Here we see that God finally spoke to Elijah and sent the prophet back to Israel to confront King Ahab and the people with the truth. But God had already been speaking through the conditions of barren fields and sealed up heavens. Note the comment of 18:2b, “Now the famine was severe in Samaria.” There are times when God’s servants need to be silent, when hearts are cold and ears are deaf. These are times when God sometimes speaks through the trials of life to get people’s attention, to force them to see their need, inadequacy, or the inadequacy of the life they have chosen in place of God and His plan.

“The Word of the Lord” occurs in 17:2, 8, and here. In fact, this phrase occurs in the Bible 254 times. It is used of God’s special revelation to mankind to bring people to Himself and to provide the guidance for their lives they so desperately need. Each time I see this phrase, I am reminded of my need to go to the Word for guidance, for the principles and promises of Scripture that I need to direct my way according to God’s precious will.

“Go, show yourself to Ahab, . . .” In 1 Kings 17:3 he was commanded “to hide himself” and now he is commanded “to show himself.” Elijah was as willing to do one as the other. Neither was naturally easy. Each required faith and fellowship with God, and one was preparatory to the other (Luke 16:10).

“I will send rain on the face . . .” The people had experienced the fulfillment of the warnings of Deuteronomy 28 concerning drought for disobedience. Now it was time to bring rain, but the people needed to know for sure that the lack of rain and now the rain that would come were from the Lord and not Baal.

The Principle of Obedience in Spite of the Danger (18:2-6)

“So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab.” Do we truly grasp the full significance of this? Note, the very next words. “Now the famine was severe in Samaria.” Perhaps these words were quickly added to help us grasp the faith and integrity of Elijah. This clause and the verses that follow (3-6) are designed to highlight the awful conditions of the drought that we might truly appreciate what Elijah was facing. For more than three years, due to Elijah’s prayer and prophecy before Ahab and his court, there had been no rain. As a result, there had been pain, misery, death, hunger, and starvation. And with that, there had also been anger, hate, feelings of revenge, all aimed at the prophet--especially by King Ahab and his court. In this regard, note Elijah’s new title in 18:17. He was seen as “the troubler of Israel.” He was blamed as the *cause* and seen as a *curse*.

Furthermore, for more than three years Ahab had persistently searched for Elijah to kill him, but to no avail. Can you imagine the humiliation to the King’s arrogant heart, and the increased resentment against the prophet who had been able to avoid the search of the King, his men, and allies (18:10). And now the Lord says, “Go show thyself to Ahab.” That is a little like saying, “See that 18-wheeler? Go jump in front of it.”

There is a story of a monk that illustrates what it means to trust the Lord in difficult circumstances like Elijah faced. There was a monk who excelled all his peers, and for leisure and relaxation he was a bird watcher. One afternoon he came across a very rare bird that flew over the ledge of a high cliff and lit on a small ledge down below. The priest excitedly peered over, but to no avail. So he stretched a little farther and little farther until finally he slipped. As he fell over the edge, he was able to grab a shrub that grew out of the rock. His arms were tiring, but being a man of faith, he thought proudly, “Someone will be on top to help me.” So he yelled, “Hey up there, I need help. Hey, anybody up there?” Then a deep voice was heard; the voice of God. The voice said, “I am here, do you have faith?” “O yes,” answered the monk. “Then let go” replied God, “and I will take care of you. Just rest in my care.” For a moment there was dead silence, then the monk said, “Anybody else up there?”

When the Lord brings trying and difficult circumstances into our lives and tells us, as the Word does, to trust Him and move out in faith, how do we act? Do we look around for other solutions? Do we look into our bag of tricks and come up with our own strategies of self-protection like escape, withdrawal, defensiveness and other defense-like strategies? Do we become depressed? Do we complain and murmur or blame? Do we lose the joy of the Lord? Do we get out our resume and update it? Or do we demonstrate faith and Christ-like character?

Verses 2-6 contrasts the character of Elijah with that of the King. Elijah moves out in obedience to do the will of God. He was available for ministry and to confront the people concerning their spiritual needs. But King Ahab, the shepherd of Israel, is another story altogether. With his people suffering from the drought, he was out looking for grass for his mules, and cattle, rather than caring about the conditions of his people. (From secular records, we know Ahab had several thousand horses.)

What is character? Someone has said “character is what a man is in the dark.” It is what we are in private, in our homes, when faced with temptation, or as here, with a test of our courage when the so-called odds are stacked up high against us. Elijah was called to ministry, as all believers are, and that ministry was to glorify God and minister to the needs of others. But ministry and leadership are only religious activities or even worse--religious business--unless there is real spiritual character as the product of a deep and living faith.

The Pharisees called what they did ministry and leadership, but Jesus called it *hypocrisy*! Jesus knew these religious actors were more interested in selfish things like position, praise, power, possessions, and their comfort than in fellowship and service to the living God and ministry to people. Christian character, Spirit-filled living, means obedience to God. It means faith and courage. It means service to others and that means involvement and sacrifice.

God told Elijah: “Go show yourself to Ahab”; here was God’s *command*, and then “and I will send rain on the face of the earth,” this was God’s *promise*. But obedience to this command also meant glory to the Lord. It bore testimony that God’s Word by the mouth of God’s prophets was true. And it meant for God’s people the removal of suffering, and perhaps for some who would see these things and believe, spiritual blessing as well. But what was in it for Elijah? Where was the promise for him of blessing and deliverance from Ahab? It simply was not there, at least not directly!

For people of faith, spiritual integrity and character, for people who love God and people, the blessing is in the privilege of serving the Lord and people, in seeing God's name vindicated and Satan defeated. Here is the ultimate goal of the Word--love for God and love for others (Mark 12:29-34). This is the heart of ministry--*Service* and *Sacrifice*! Unfortunately, what many people know about service and sacrifice is simply how to spell the words. Elijah had to have his eyes on the Lord and, as he indicated in 17:1, live in the light of the aliveness and faithfulness of his God as the God with everlasting arms.

Applicational Questions:

(1) Are we living one day at a time, resting and waiting on the Lord as El Olam and drawing on His wisdom and strength, waiting on His wise and perfect timing?

(2) Are we listening daily to God in the Scripture? Are we taking time to learn God's principles and then are we using them to direct our path, to build our faith and character to keep us from running ahead of the Lord with our tactics?

(3) Do we have the courage to act on our convictions? Or are we ever looking for ways to avoid having to step out in faith and trust the Lord? What's going on in your life that needs a decision of faith, but you are afraid to do so because of possible consequences?

Lesson 9: Elijah Ministers to Obadiah (1 Kings 18:7-15)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 2)

Introduction

Let's review again the theme and purpose of 1 Kings 18. It is the story of Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. But equally important, it is also the story of the end of the three-and-a-half years of drought in the land of Israel. In fact, the confrontation on Mount Carmel was designed to show that the drought was not merely an unfortunate coincidence of nature, but Yahweh's discipline as the one and only true God. The rain and the end of the drought were likewise the work of Yahweh, and not Baal, the so-called god of thunder, rain, and fertility.

In the process of developing this larger story and its truth, a number of smaller incidents occur and each has its own message to tell. In other words, there is the big picture, the main plot of the story, and there are also smaller stories, each with its own lesson. As believers in Christ, we are all part of a big picture which includes many little stories each with opportunities for growth, ministry, and glory to God. We want to focus our attention on Elijah's meeting with Obadiah, a fellow believer, and see how Elijah ministered to him.

Three-and-a-half-years had passed since Elijah marched up the steps of the palace and into the throne room of King Ahab to announce the fact there would be no rain again except by the word of the Prophet who was, of course, but the mouth piece of the Lord. The clouds and the rain had been driven from the land of Israel, and the pain and misery within the kingdom had become more and more pressing.

Ahab had searched both the land and the neighboring countries for Elijah, but in vain. He was angry and frustrated over his futile attempts to locate the prophet (18:10). Furthermore, Jezebel had worked her futile vengeance on all the prophets of the Lord that she could get her hands on, as if they had been Elijah's accomplices and their deaths would somehow bring an end to the drought (18:4). Perhaps she thought if all the representatives of Yahweh were exterminated, His power could no longer be exercised in the land. Primarily, it was her desire to get revenge and crush all resistance to her insidious will that drove her to kill the prophets.

Weary day after weary day crept by with the sun rising and sinking on a cloudless sky over an arid land. There was no sign of relief. Ahab stayed in Samaria to attend to pressing matters caused by the drought while Jezebel was in the cool summer residence at Jezreel (cf. 18:45-46; 21:1-2).

In the meantime, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah who is told to show himself to King Ahab. This meant it was time to demonstrate the power of the true God and to face the nation with a decision to choose for the Lord. Therefore, in the verses that follow, God providentially worked to bring about the meeting with Ahab through another of God's servants named Obadiah. But, as is always the case, the Lord works on many fronts at the same time. Not only was He working to bring Elijah and King Ahab together, but He would use Elijah in the life of Obadiah to strengthen his faith and broaden his capacity for ministry. This story shows us how, in the process of using us in God's primary purpose, the Lord also wants to use us with others whom He brings into our lives along the way. *Life is full of opportunities for ministry if only we have eyes to see them!*

Elijah Encounters Obadiah (18:7)

Obadiah was a court official in charge of the household of the King; a steward and manager of the palace and all its affairs. This meant he had a high position and the responsibility of leadership himself (vs. 3a). He was also a believer who feared the Lord and was a man of faith (vs. 3b). Because of his faith he had hidden 100 prophets from Jezebel. Like all of us, however, his faith needed further growth and maturity. And he needed encouragement.

God is in the business of stretching us to become more effective vessels for His purposes. We, however, like to stay within the comfort zones of our little routines, which include our places of work and even our places of

spiritual ministry. This was the case with Obadiah but the Lord had other plans for him--just as He has for us. It was God's plan to use the younger prophet to announce Elijah's presence to Ahab. Due to the conditions, this was no small challenge.

"Now as Obadiah was on the way, behold . . ." When did Obadiah face this test and challenge to be God's messenger of Elijah's presence to Ahab? While he was on the job, attending to the King's business. This is life. This is where the tests of obedience and challenges come--while we are out involved in the everyday affairs of life. Here is where we meet people and needs and here is where God wants to work to stretch our faith.

Have you ever noticed that the trials of life usually do not come when we are in church all cozy and asleep. Excuse me! I mean, listening to inspiring hymns and stimulating messages. No! Usually they come when you are not being highly motivated by inspirational settings. Tests and challenges come when we are faced with drought-like conditions, with difficult personalities, with temptation, and the manifold pressures of life. Then our motivation, our courage, and obedience have to truly come from the Lord and faith in Him.

We have all seen old movies or news strips of our Marines taking the beach head on Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima or Normandy. Usually, in the background is playing a song like *From the Halls of Montezuma*, or our National Anthem. This stirs the emotions but in the real-life situations, there was no music. It was all blood and guts, and without being properly drilled, disciplined, and trained, these men would have fallen apart. Were they scared? Certainly! But it was their training and mental toughness that gave them the faith and courage to charge up those beaches.

To further illustrate this, let's compare Elijah and Obadiah:

(1) Both were believers, both loved the Word and the Lord. Both had served the Lord and others, and had shown courage. It took the courage of faith for Obadiah to hide 100 prophets and care for them.

(2) Elijah, however, had just come from a time of special preparation and solitude with the Lord and with confirmation in the home of the widow and her son. Thus, when the call came to show himself to Ahab, he arose and went trusting in the Lord. His delight was to serve the Lord and accomplish His purpose.

(3) With Obadiah, it had been different. He had been working with unbelievers and living in the midst of idolatry. This was not wrong. Though we are not to be of the world, God has called us to go out into the world and into the work place to demonstrate God's love and the new life we have in the Savior. But Obadiah had probably been without much close fellowship and the encouragement of other strong believers. His time with the prophets that were hidden away was undoubtedly encouraging, but most likely very short and sporadic.

Verse 13 might suggest Obadiah was a victim of the past victories syndrome. He may have been looking back at what *he had done for God* rather than focusing on the Lord Himself and what *God had done through him*. Since the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever, remembering the past can be beneficial as long as we use it to remind us of what God is able to do today or tomorrow. Obadiah was not very prepared for his encounter with Elijah, but he was open and positive and he becomes one of God's chosen instruments in this drama that helps to prepare the way for Mount Carmel. But first, he needed the encouragement of Elijah. Truly, this illustrates our need of one another and the encouragement and challenge that we can get from each other in the body of Christ.

"Behold, Elijah met him." As in chapter 17, the word "behold" is here for a reason. This is again the Hebrew *hinneh*, an interjection used 942 times in the Old Testament to arrest attention. It means "look!" "see!" It is used to point something out and to emphasize the information that follows. What is so important about the fact Elijah met him while "Obadiah was on the way"?

First, it strongly points to the loving fact of God's providence. Here was Elijah in hostile territory sent to accomplish God's will and carry out one of God's purposes for his life. Elijah does not have to go into the capitol, Samaria. Instead, God prearranges a meeting with a faithful follower of the Lord, one who had demonstrated courage, and one who had access to and the confidence of the King as very few might have. This was not by mere chance.

Captain Johnson was serving as chaplain in the South Pacific during WW II. He prepared to go on a bombing raid over enemy-occupied islands several hundred miles away. The mission was a complete success, but on the homeward course the plane began to lose altitude and the engines

faded out. A safe landing was made on a strange island. It was learned later that the enemy was just one-half mile in each direction, yet the landing had gone undetected.

The staff sergeant came to the chaplain and said, "Chaplain, you have been telling us for months of the need of praying and believing God answers prayer in time of trouble, and that He does it right away. We're out of gas, base is several hundred miles away and we are almost surrounded by the enemy."

Johnson began to pray and to lay hold of the promises of God and believed that God would work a miracle. Night came and the chaplain continued his intense prayer. About 2 A.M. the sergeant awakened and felt compelled to walk to the water's edge. He discovered a metal float which had drifted up on the beach--[loaded with barrels of] octane gas. In a few hours the crew reached their home base safely.

An investigation revealed that the skipper of a U.S. tanker, finding his ship in sub-infested waters, had his gasoline cargo removed so as to minimize the danger in case of a torpedo hit. Barrels were placed on barges and put adrift six hundred miles from where Johnson and the plane crew were forced down. God had navigated one of these barges through wind and current and beached it fifty steps from the stranded men.¹⁸

Second, it reminds us of God's loving care (1 Pet. 5:7), and if God sends us to do a job, He will provide the resources we need (Phil. 4:13, 19).

"And he (Obadiah) recognized him and fell on his face." In the book of Revelation when the Apostle John fell on his face before the angel at the announcement of the marriage feast of the Lamb, the angel said, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren . . . worship God" (Rev. 19:10; cf. also 22:8-9). John's actions fell in the realm of worship for the angel of this wonderful revelation. Because Elijah did not correct Obadiah's action, this was merely seen as respect for the prophet as a true man of God with the word of God fulfilling the mission of God. Since he called Elijah his master in verse 7, this may indicate that Obadiah belonged to the school of the prophets of which Elijah was a headmaster. It was a term of reverence and recognition of Elijah's leadership within Israel.

Elijah Calls for Obadiah's Help (18:8)

As those World War II airmen saw that barge of oil as a God-send, so Elijah obviously saw Obadiah as a God-send. Here was the logical, indeed, the perfect person to send word to the King. But would you also note that Elijah had not prayed for a miracle. At least there is no record of it. He didn't ask God to give the King a vision to come and meet him. He used the means and opportunities that God sent his way--and so should we.

This illustrates the principle of getting help from people according to their training, gifts, talents, opportunities, and of course, their availability to the Lord. Sometimes, as we will see here, that takes encouragement and biblical insight from us or the promise of our aid and faithfulness.

Obadiah Responds with Fear and Excuses (18:9-14)

During a combined elder/deacon meeting in one of my ministries we were examining some of the things that could be keeping us as men and as a church from moving more in the direction of the ideal--of what God has called us to be. One of the things mentioned was the fear or anxiety we often face when asked to consider certain ministries or responsibilities. We all face the problem of fear at times. We might be afraid we will lack what it takes to handle the job. We might be afraid of what it may cost us. Afraid of having to give up our time, comfort, or the things we love to do.

¹⁸ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, #2051, Earl C. Willer, "God Navigated the Cargo," Assurance Publishers, Rockville, MD, 1983, p. 519.

In times of real persecution, serving the Lord can be life threatening, as it was for Obadiah. For most of us, our fears generally fall into three categories: (a) *fear of failure*, (b) *fear of rejection*, and (c) *fear of loss*, i.e., fear we might have to give up something we think we must have to be happy. The cost of this rejection can be anything from being snubbed or having people think we are odd or dumb, to loss of a job, or even one's way of life.

Fear can paralyze and thus neutralize us. Fear can keep us from venturing out and being available to the Lord. This was what was happening to Obadiah. But we have a mighty God who has promised to stand with us so we can overcome our fears. We are told in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity (fear), but of power and love and discipline (a sound mind)." We need the encouragement of others, as happened here. We need the power of a Spirit-filled, Word-filled life. We need genuine love that is willing to sacrifice for God and others. And we need the discipline of sound mind thinking that counts on the promises and principles of Scripture.

Obadiah's thinking was undermining his ability to respond to Elijah's request and need. It shows us how we need to bring every thought into captivity and to think with the perspective of the promises and principles of God's Word.

(1) There seemed to be a *misconception* about trials or difficult assignments. He evidently saw them as one of God's means of punishment for sin (vs. 9). This illustrates our need to know God's Word, understand His grace, and keep short accounts with the Lord concerning sin in our lives. Certainly, one of the causes for suffering is discipline from the hand of a loving God who is seeking to train His children. But as stated in previous lessons, it is only one of many causes.

(2) There was a *misdirection* of his focus. Obadiah had his eyes on the problems rather than the Lord. A wrong focus makes mountains out of mole hills and in our perspective reduces the Lord to a mole hill. It's the age old grasshopper syndrome of Numbers 13.

(3) There was a *mismanagement* of his mind. He failed to control his mind or thought patterns with the promises and principles of the Word, as we are challenged to do in Philippians 4:8 and 2 Corinthians 10:4-5.

When we fail to focus on God's person and claim God's promises as did Obadiah, we start assuming all kinds of things about what can or is happening. We become rather paranoid. Obadiah imagined Elijah would disappear and he could just see himself hanging from the gallows (vs. 12). When we do not control our minds with the principles and promises of God's Word, our imaginations will paralyze us with fear.

Ahab had so long and so systematically sought for Elijah, that Obadiah could only imagine the prophet had been miraculously removed from shelter to shelter, just in time to save him from being detected by the messengers of Ahab. In point of fact, we know that such was not the case; but those who have lost the habit of seeing God in the ordinary Providence of everyday life--as is the case with all who are conformed to the world--are too often in the habit of looking for things strange, or for miracles, and thus become at the same time superstitious and unbelieving.¹⁹

(4) There was also a *misplacement* of his confidence or faith. It seems he was trusting more in his past performance than in the ever present reality of God's presence and power. Knowing our God-given gifts and talents is important to our confidence in God's will and the ability to do a job. The primary basis of our effectiveness or ability to do a job, however, is never our record nor our gifts and training but God and His faithfulness--ALWAYS.

Elijah Removes Obadiah's Fear (18:15)

He Proclaimed God's Person

This is seen in the words, "As the Lord of Hosts lives." Elijah was firmly convinced of the aliveness of Yahweh and His mighty power as the Lord of Hosts (or Armies), the Lord who has all of heaven's mighty and holy angels at His command. By this oath, Elijah was focusing Obadiah's eyes on the Lord and assuring him that his own life was ordered by this fact.

¹⁹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Vol V, 1890, p. 12.

As believers in Christ and especially as leaders, we need to help others to see the majesty of the Lord and see that our lives are ordered and directed by that same majesty. This illustrates why it is so important for leaders to be models of integrity, men and women who are faithful and stable. One of the signs of decay in a church or in a nation is when the leadership acts as capricious children governed by their own whims and fancies (cf. Isa. 3:4).

He Pointed to His Call and Commitment

This is seen in the words, “before whom I stand.” Here Elijah assures Obadiah that he was, above all else, one of God’s men and that he stood to serve the Lord and not himself. He was not controlled by self-protective measures or capricious whims. Believers need to give evidence they are under God’s orders, at God’s disposal, and truly His representatives governed by the eternal truths of God and thereby reliable.

He Promised to Not Let Obadiah Down

By the words, “I will surely show myself to him today,” Elijah was assuring Obadiah that he could count on him. He would not let him down and would be there as promised. The emphasis here is “You can count on me because I am counting on the Lord.” Obadiah knew from the life and history of the prophet that Elijah could be counted on. Faithfulness is such a needed quality. What is faithfulness? It is the product of a life full of faith.

Obadiah Responds with Courage (18:16a)

Part of Obadiah’s anxiety and uncertainty was caused by the fact he was not sure of God’s will or of what was going on. He needed the motivation of Elijah’s leadership through the example and encouragement of the prophet. We all vary in our leadership roles, but there is a sense in which we each have some kind of influence on others as believer priests, as those who are to function as salt and light, and as people who are to be an encouragement to those around us. As we see in this passage, God wants us be sensitive to needs and to be examples by demonstrating the reality of Christ in authentic Christianity. “Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you are doing” (1 Thess. 5:11).

Application:

(1) Are you facing the challenge of a ministry opportunity, but find you are fearful? Then find a mature believer and seek their encouragement and guidance to strengthen your trust in the Lord.

(2) Perhaps you know of someone who is facing the challenge of a ministry opportunity, but is holding back because of fear or anxiety. Then try to reach out to encourage them.

(3) Are you fearful of ministry opportunities? Then evaluate your thinking. Are you making mountains out of mole hills? Are your eyes on the problem rather than on the Lord? Are you seeking your happiness, significance and security from people rather than in Christ? Are you resting on your past victories instead of on God’s presence and provision?

Lesson 10: Elijah Meets and Rebukes Ahab (1 Kings 18:16-19)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 3)

Introduction

As we move forward in God's primary purpose in the expression of the gifts and abilities God gives, we each face many smaller events in the circumstances of life. These mini-events are like threads woven into a tapestry that combine to create an elegant and beautiful picture. By themselves, they may not appear significant, but they are all vital to the overall plan of God. In this lesson we view more threads woven into the picture of the great confrontation that takes place on Mount Carmel. This is a confrontation designed to demonstrate the power of God, to reprove the people for their vacillation and idolatry, and to challenge them to choose for the Lord. Part of the picture is that of an evil King who had miserably failed to shepherd God's people. In this scene we get another glimpse into the character of this leader. It obviously stands as a warning for all who hold positions of leadership and influence, and yet there is a sense in which this applies to all of us because we each have some influence on others.

The great display of the power of God later in this chapter is set against the impotence of Baal. It is designed to teach the people and King Ahab that the three-and-a-half years of drought followed by the coming rain was the work of Yahweh, the only true God. The drought was discipline for disobedience to God's Word and the rain was the provision of His grace. In the unfolding of this drama, several scenes occur that are important because of the lessons we can learn by pointing out the contrasts between those who walk with God in faith, trusting Him rather than their own plans, and those who do not.

In addition, 1 Kings 18:16-24 presents us with confrontation and conflict. We simply do not like that. Our natural tendency is to avoid confrontation and conflict. It's so much easier to swim down stream or float with the tide than it is to confront issues, problems, or whatever may be causing conflict.

Confrontation is rarely painless, never easy, often rejected, and always risky. But in some conditions it is commanded by Scripture, illustrated in Scripture, and often essential to spiritual growth, godliness and biblical change. Of course, confrontation needs to be done according to biblical principles, in a biblical way, for biblical reasons, and out of right motives. We usually avoid it for selfish reasons--out of fear of the consequences to ourselves. Such a response is neither faith nor love. It is cowardice. It is pleasing ourselves rather than acting in faith and love. "Better is open rebuke Than love that is concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy" (Pro. 27:5-6).

The prophets of old were often confrontational. They regularly faced people with their sins of independent living and called on them to face their need. The Lord Jesus and his apostles did the same. Remember, it was Jesus who called the Pharisees "hypocrites" and "white washed mausoleums." He confronted the woman at the well with her adultery, Nicodemus with the emptiness of his religion, and Peter with his denials. Paul opposed Peter to his face for his religious duplicity mentioned in Galatians 2:11-14.

The Bible is not only confrontational but comforting. It not only confronts us with our self-centeredness, sin, rebellion, and independent ways, but it offers us grace, reconciliation, power, and many other blessings of the gospel given to bring forgiveness, designed to change us, and designed to lead us into God's blessing and protection. Nevertheless, because of the hardness of our hearts, because we love darkness rather than light and are so committed to living by our self-protective solutions, we are sometimes faced with the need of confrontation, resistance and conflict.

Still, confrontation that challenges our commitment, our sources of happiness, significance, and security is essential and basic to the nature of the Word of God and the condition of men and women. Certainly, confrontation can be sinful depending on the method, the manner, and the motivation. When confrontation is biblical, however, it is a great act of love that demonstrates obedience to God and faith in Him regardless of the consequences.

1 Kings 18:16 is a verse of transition. In it we see Obadiah, having responded to the ministry and encouragement of Elijah, leave to tell Ahab about Elijah who then goes to meet the prophet. This verse also moves us from

Elijah's ministry and method with Obadiah to his ministry and method with Ahab. In one we have encouragement. In the other confrontation and conflict. There is also a difference of needs. Obadiah needed only to be focused and encouraged. Ahab, who was caught up in the idolatry of Baalism, needed to be confronted with his sin that he rationalized by blaming others.

Obviously we must deal with people differently and one of our tasks in ministering to others is to be discerning, to listen, and seek to understand the needs of the other person.

Elijah Meets Ahab and Is Accused by the King (18:17)

Ahab's reaction and accusation illustrate a fundamental truth: "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Pr. 23:7). Or as our Lord put it in Matthew, "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil" (Matt. 12:34-35).

A heart filled with resentment or any kind of "stinking thinking" is like a volcano ready to erupt. All it needs is the right situation--and bang! The mouth speaks out the corruption that has been smoldering and festering within. This picture of treasure used by the Lord in the Matthew passage suggests the following:

(1) The Lord compares the thoughts we harbor in our hearts to treasure. We store and keep them in our minds because we value them and put our trust in them. We keep them because we think they will provide us with our needs and wants. We think they will solve our problems. We think they will handle our pain or meet our needs as we perceive them.

(2) It is obvious some treasures of the heart or mind are evil. "Evil" is the Greek *poneros* which refers to what is toilsome or worthless like bad or spoiled fruit, or dangerous animals. It is that which is opposed to God. This is the word used of the Devil as "the evil one." It is never passive. It refers to an active evil that is malignant like cancer.

(3) Such thoughts are equivalent to "vain thinking" which rises up like a fortress against the knowledge of God. It is against who and what He is to us and needs to be torn down, destroyed like a condemned building. As a treasure of the heart, it needs to be devalued, condemned, and thrown away as worthless (2 Cor. 10:4-5). These evil treasures represent our human strategies by which we seek to handle life independently of faith in God and His principles of life. "Vain thinking" is faith in ourselves and unbelief in God and His solutions. And that which is without faith in the right object, God, is sin (Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6).

(4) On the other hand, the treasure of the heart can be good. "Good" is *agathos* which is used of intrinsic good, of that which is truly valuable like good fruit, or gold that gives purchasing power or brings blessing (cf. Phil. 4:8).

Ahab's heart was filled with evil treasure--with resentment, hatred, the desire for revenge, and with his solutions for dealing with Elijah. So, immediately, when he saw Elijah, his volcano of corruption erupted in accusations, name calling, maligning, criticism, and blame. We need to keep a close check on our hearts, our focus, and on the nature of what we store up as treasure. In Matthew 15:19 the Lord teaches us that murders, adulteries, thefts, false witness, and slanders come from the heart. Solomon warns us of this in Proverbs 4:23. Literally, the Hebrew text is "above all keeping, keep, guard the heart." The NIV translates, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

"Is this you, you troubler of Israel?" With this question, you can see the agitation, anger, and hurt to King Ahab's pride over his inability to find Elijah during the preceding three-and-half-years. Though he was the King of Israel, he had been helpless. This illustrates the presence of evil treasures. His futile searches for Elijah hurt his pride and that fueled the anger and resentment stored in his heart. His pride was so easily hurt because he was living a life of futility and unbelief. He was seeking his security and significance in things other than in the Lord and God's calling. Out of his evil treasure, therefore, came the maligning accusation, "you troubler of Israel." The Hebrew verb means "to disturb, stir up, cause trouble." It was used of stirring up water. Elijah had been making waves! He was confronting the people with their sin, idolatry, vacillation and indifference to God's Word and their calling as the people of God. Rather than having a witness to the nations, they had been conformed by the nations (Ex. 19:4-6).

Oh how this scene has been repeated throughout history. Whenever people disturb our comfort zones, challenge our opinions, values, and sources of trust with the truth of God's Word and His calling, we often react in resentment and self-denial. Then, as a protective mechanism, we label them as "troublers" rather than dealing with our own hearts.

The great pity of this scene is that there was no confession or repentance. Even after three-and-a-half years of famine, which was declared to be God's judgment by the Word of the Prophet, there was still only cold rebellion and hostility. These years had demonstrated the impotence of Baal and the Baal prophets, yet Ahab still refused to turn to the Lord. He refused to confess his sin and instead used another strategy from his evil treasure or bag of tricks. He turned to the old game of casting blame, hoping to cover his own tracks and guilt.

Application:

(1) How typical of people in religious and cultic apostasy, or of people as a whole when they pursue a course contrary to God's plan. Even when faced with the impotence of the way they have chosen, people typically refuse to face the music and tenaciously cling to their own ways of handling life.

(2) When we are confronted by godly examples and biblical truth, rather than responding with repentance and belief, do we react with conflict and unbelief? Do we resort to our protective solutions and attack the messenger God has sent to protect and bless us? (cf. Heb. 13:17).

(3) And who are these messengers? God's messenger may be a close friend, a parent, a husband or wife, an elder or deacon. But to the unrepentant and hard of heart, the messenger becomes a "troubler," a disrupter of families and tradition. He is one who disturbs our comfort zones and as a result is often maligned, shunned, criticized and more.

How did Elijah respond to King Ahab's accusation? What should be our response when facing such blame and accusations? Do we compromise the truth? Do we run and hide? Do we react or retaliate or do we level with people? Do we communicate the truth in love?

Elijah Answers the King (18:18-19)

Though outnumbered and facing the King of Israel, Elijah confronted him with the biblical facts and issues. This was not retaliation, but an act of courageous love for King Ahab and all concerned.

Elijah Denies the Charge

"I have not troubled Israel." Note the boldness here. Elijah was standing before a king who was without any moral integrity. King Ahab hated him and Jezebel wanted him dead, yet there is no fear in Elijah's words, only bold proclamation of the truth. How could he be so bold? What can we learn from this so we too can handle the false accusations of those to whom God has called us to minister?

Elijah had the boldness to confront because his confidence was in the Lord. He was an ambassador and servant of the King of Kings, the Sovereign of the universe, Yahweh Elohim, the One who holds all kings in His hand. Elijah was one who stood boldly aware of this as his comment in 18:15 demonstrates. As God's ambassador and servant, he knew the truth of Psalm 118:6, "The Lord is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Or as Hebrews 13:6 puts it, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid, what shall man do to me?"

Elijah was counting on the fact no one could touch his life unless the Lord willed it and then, his loss would really be his gain (Phil. 1:21-23). Like David, he knew his glory, reputation and significance likewise had to come from God, not people. "On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God" (Psalm 62:7).

This gave the prophet boldness and courage. But there was another reason for his boldness and confidence—he was a man with a conscience void of offense. Though not sinless (as none of us are), he knew he had not compromised with Baalism. He had stood boldly against it and had been faithful to pray for the people. Faithfulness to the Lord gives us courage to minister and to confront from right motives. Remember Paul's words in Galatians 6:1 "You who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness . . ."

Elijah's answer shows us it is not wrong to answer false accusations for the sake of protecting one's ministry and promoting the truth. But by this denial, he was not simply trying to protect his ego or meet some need for praise and applause to feel good about himself. (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:1-5.)

Elijah Confronts the King with the Issues

"But you and your father's house have, . . ." Elijah could have said, you are the real troubler of Israel because of your licentious wife, because of your drunken, perverted, sexual orgies, because of your lack of justice and equity, and so on. All of these things were true. All were evil and often the prophets did preach against such evils, but they did so primarily as evidence or symptoms of a deeper spiritual problem. Elijah indicted Ahab and his father's house for two things that stand to each other as *root and fruit* or *cause and effect*.

Cause

"You have forsaken the commandments of the Lord." In other words, you have ignored and rejected the Word of God. You have sought to live independently of God's wisdom. This is always the **root problem**, the **cause** of all else--trusting in one's own resources. King Ahab was living independently of God and His principles for life. This began in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve chose of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Let's compare some other passages:

(1) Hosea said to Israel, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hos. 4:6).

(2) Isaiah wrote to Judah, whom he described as a "sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity," and said: "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:10).

(3) Jeremiah had the same message for Judah (cf. Jer. 2:4-13).

Effect

The effect of turning away from the Word is seen in the next clause of Elijah's indictment of Ahab, "and you have followed the Baals." Remember Baalism was an idolatrous cult that was popular, in part at least, because it included gross immorality. It appealed to the flesh and the sexual appetites. But above all, idolatry represents the substitutes of man's empty imagination when he attempts to live apart from God.

When we turn away from following the Lord through fellowship with Him in the Word, we experience what we can call the vacuum action of the soul, or the pursuit of life through our own devices and the substitutes offered in the world around us. When we turn away from a personal relationship with the Lord, from depending on Him through His Word, we naturally turn to what we think will make us happy, secure, and significant. The Bible defines this as vain imaginations or futile speculations of the heart (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:17; Jer. 2:4-5).

When we turn away from the Word and its careful application, we turn to our (or the world's) solutions in an attempt to handle our fears, our loneliness, and our pain. Some people turn to materialism, some to the occult. Others turn to religion and ritualism. Some become workaholics and pursue the corporate ladder in search of position, power, and prestige. In the midst of all of this, people use their own defense and escape mechanisms to deal with rejection, fear, personality conflicts, family problems, and even our national problems.

All these futile attempts to handle life constitute independent living, living apart from faith in the Lord and His principles for life given to us in the Scripture.

All false routes to joy, . . . have one thing in common: they represent strategies for living that in some measure we can control. They do not require us to yield our core commitment to dependence. God's message is consistent: utter dependency is the route to satisfaction.²⁰

²⁰ Larry J. Crabb, *Understanding People*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 109.

Conclusion

In James 1:21-27, we are warned about the subtle self-deception of our religious practices. We can be very religious. We can be Bible-believing, Bible-toting, Bible-talking believers who rigidly hold to the Bible, who talk about trusting the Lord and even admonish others to do so, while still living by our own protective inventions in self-willed independence. Note what James says in 1:26 about the self-deceived person. He “thinks himself to be religious.” He goes to church, believes the Bible, uses the right terminology, prays, etc. “and yet does not bridle his tongue.” The tongue is a good barometer of the heart and its treasures. When we do not control our tongue, when we complain, murmur, whine, blame others by focusing on their faults (to avoid seeing our own), when we criticize and malign, or lose control, scream and cry, or do any of the things we do when we are out of control, we do so in the belief that these actions will get us our way. We think they will protect us in some way against hurt, or build up our own self-esteem.

What’s the point? These are self-protective inventions of our mind in which we trust, but like a person leaning on a pointed stick, they damage rather than support. They are strategies of independent living. These are not actions of faith and God dependence. So James quickly adds: “. . . but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.” In such cases, our religious activities have only deceived us. Why? Because we are not really walking by faith in God’s presence and supply. We are living by faith in our schemes.

First Kings 18:19-20 not only contrasts two very different personalities, but two different ways of life.

(1) One was a man of the **world**. One was a man of the **Word**.

(2) One walked **independently** of God in open rebellion. One walked **dependently** on the Lord in humble submission.

(3) One **depended on the substitutes** of the world, the inventions of his own mind. One **trusted in the principles and promises** of Scripture.

(4) One was resentful, bitter, angry, fearful, frustrated, and **failing in his responsibility**. One was bold and **effective for the Lord**.

Applicational questions we might each ask ourselves:

(1) Does my life resemble Ahab’s or Elijah’s?

(2) Am I willing, in faith and love and for the right reasons, to confront others whom God has brought into my life with the truth of God?

(3) Are the treasures of my heart good or evil?

(4) Is my heart filled with the good treasures of God’s solutions, or does it reveal an evil treasure of human solutions and strategies?

Lesson 11: When One Becomes a Majority (1 Kings 18:19-22)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 4)

Elijah's Stand Before the Nation

Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel, and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:19-20).

One of the great needs at all times in a society, but especially in times of great apostasy, is for God's people to step forward for God and His truth. Those who do, however, are nearly always a minority. While God always has His people, they are, as they are described in the Bible, a remnant or a minority. Even in Elijah's day, there was a remnant. Seven thousand had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kgs. 19:18; Rom. 11:4-5). But to Elijah it seemed as though he was the only one left. All the other prophets had either been murdered or reduced to a state of inactivity. They were hiding in caves. Elijah alone stood on Mount Carmel to confront the hundreds who belonged to the idolatrous cults of Baal and Asherah.

Taking a stand for the truth and facing a majority who stand against the truth often leaves us feeling lonely. Humanly speaking it very often appears we are alone. We must remember, however (as Elijah did at this point), when we stand for the Lord we are in the majority because standing with us is the Infinite Almighty and His myriad of hosts.

One of the descriptive titles of God in the Bible is "the LORD of Hosts." What we need is the insight and faith of Elisha, Elijah's successor. Elisha prayed for his servant, "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Elisha's servant was terribly disturbed because he could see only the large number of enemy that surrounded them. He prayed that his servant might have eyes to see the myriad of God's host surrounding them (cf. 2 Kgs. 6:15-17).

Now back to Elijah. Later, in a state of depression with his eyes off the Lord, this feeling of aloneness covered Elijah like a cloud and wiped him out. Here, however, Elijah was in essence saying to the people, "Look, I stand here alone against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. Unless the Lord is who I claim He is, what, humanly speaking, can one man do against so many?" In view of what Elijah knew God would do, he was calling their attention (and ours) to an important truth. When we stand for the Lord of the Bible, we stand in the sovereign strength and majority of the true God of the universe who surrounds us with His hosts.

This is a day in which the body of Christ needs to be like Elijah. As in Ezekiel's day, God is calling out from among His people those who will stand in the gap and count for the Lord. There are huge gaps in the walls of our nation and society. These are breaches in the wall of biblical values and our Christian heritage. These are places where the enemy has been swarming through to destroy and corrupt. Ezekiel wrote, "And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one" (Ezek. 22:30).

Do you feel alone at the office or on the job? Are you facing that call to stand in the gap or stand before the majority and take a stand for the Lord? Ask the Lord to give you eyes to see His presence with His multitude of hosts. Before we will do this, however, something dynamic must happen in our lives.

Elijah Summons All the People

The place chosen for the contest was Mount Carmel. "Carmel" is a Hebrew word that means "a garden land, a place of fruitfulness or fertility." It comes from karam, "to tend vines" or kerem, "a vineyard."

No spot in Palestine is more beautiful, more bracing, or healthful than Carmel, "the Park-like." Up in the northwest, it juts as a promontory into the Mediterranean, rising to a height of five hundred feet. Thence it stretches about twelve miles to the S.S.E., rising into two peaks. The first of these, about four miles from the promontory, is not less than 1740 feet high. Still further to the southeast

is a third peak, 1687 feet high, which to this day bears the name of El-Maharakah, or “place of burning” (sacrifice). This, there can scarcely be a doubt, was the place of Elijah’s sacrifice.²¹

Elijah’s Demand For a Decision

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people did not answer him a word. (1 Kgs. 18:21)

In verse 21 we see one of the key issues of our day and any day--*the instability of indecision and double-mindedness*. It’s so easy to straddle the fence. But what a dangerous position! It’s inconsistent with the reality of God and it leads to great instability in every part of one’s life. Sometimes it seems like the thing to do because of the pressure, but it is pure insanity.

It would seem reasonable to conclude that both King Ahab and his subjects were expecting Elijah to pray for rain to end the drought. But not so. Neither Ahab nor the people were in any way ready for the blessing of rain. The Lord had them under judgment for neglecting His Word and for their idolatry, which they had as yet failed to acknowledge. There were some serious issues in their lives that had to be faced before God could bless them with rain. How like us! We want God’s blessings without facing our responsibilities concerning our relationship with Him and the need for deep down repentance. Much of Christendom today, departing from the message of the Bible, appeals to this desire for blessing without calling attention to man’s real need as set forth in Scripture.

Let’s look at 1 Kings 18:21 in four parts: (a) the problem, (b) the question, (c) the issue, and (d) the silence.

The Problem

The basic problem is seen in the words “hesitate between two opinions.” “Hesitate” is the Hebrew *pasach*. It is debated whether or not there are two distinct verbs in Biblical Hebrew in this form, but the form of this verb with the consonants *psch* is used in two distinct ways: (1) “to pass over, spring over;” or (2) “to limp, be lame, or be crippled.” It is translated “crippled,” (NASB) and “lame,” (KJV, NIV) in 2 Samuel 4:4. In 1 Kings 18:26 it is translated “leaped,” (NASB), and “danced” (NIV). One of the foremost Hebrew lexicons believes this word should be translated “they went limping about the altar” in 1 Kings 18:26.²²

Here in 1 Kings 18:21, it means “to limp” and refers to the unsteadiness of a person because of indecision. It is like a person who limps and hesitates between steps. It gives us a striking picture of what we are like when we are double-minded about our commitment to the Lord. “Between two opinions” is literally, “limping on two opinions” like someone on two unequal legs. “Opinions” is the Hebrew *seippah*, “division, divided opinion.” An adjective of the same root is translated “double-minded” in Psalm 119:113. The Psalmist says, “I hate those who are double-minded, but I love Thy law.” Clearly the people were divided in their allegiance between belief and commitment to Yahweh and belief and commitment to the idolatrous cult of Baal. The Spirit of God and their conscience warned them against Baalism and pulled them toward the Lord, but their fear of men, persecution by the queen, and their attraction to the immorality of the cult pulled them in the other direction.

Likewise today, there is always a great pull for people to lead lives of duplicity to some degree. They may go to church on Sunday, but the rest of the week they are dominated by other loves, concerns, and commitments. They feel the tug of God on their hearts and the love of the world at the same time. Like a fan, oscillating back and forth, they become indecisive because they are trying to love God and the world at the same time.

Elijah, as with the rest of Scripture, demanded a definite decision. A decision that is fundamental to all of life. *We cannot walk the fence with the Lord*. Scripture and a true grasp of who the Lord is demands our full commitment. Anything else is not only insane, but leads to serious consequences that affect every aspect of the life. Indecision leaves us spiritually and morally lame and unstable in all our ways.

²¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Vol V, 1890, p. 14.

²² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford Press, London, 1907, p. 820.

Scripture speaks clearly on this:

Matthew 6:24--"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." This warns us that half-hearted commitment to the Lord leads to no real commitment at all. We end up choosing against the Lord in the crucial issues of life.

Matthew 12:30--"He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters." In practical terms, either we are with the Lord 100 percent, or we end up standing against Him and His plan and purposes for us as His people.

James 1:5-8--Teaches us that failure to completely rest one's life in God's hands leads to instability that touches every area of the life.

The Question

With the words, "How long" the prophet was asking them what it was going to take to wake them up. How much of God's discipline would they have to endure before they realized the way of life they'd chosen was not working? Not only had God closed the blessings of heaven, but He was revealing the emptiness and barrenness of the life they had chosen. What was it going to take?

The question here relates to two things: (a) It relates to *time*. "How long" brings out the principle of the hardening of one's heart as time passes (Heb. 3:7). (b) It relates to the *effect*, just limping along with a walk that is lame and weak. It calls attention to a walk far from God's plan of abundant living for believers. Isaiah spoke to the dynamic effect that faith in God's person and plan brings into one's life. He said, "Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary" (Isaiah 40:31).

We might compare the challenge and call of Hebrews 12:11-15. The recipients of this book were under the discipline of the Lord because they were not walking by faith in the sufficiency of the Savior. In these verses the author shows us what happens when we depend on our own means of living the Christian life. We become weak and feeble. We are like a person who is lame because of a limb that is out of joint. We need to allow the Lord to bring healing and His strength into our lives by resting in His means of sanctification through the Lord Jesus.

The Issue

This is seen in the two conditional clauses beginning with "if." The first "if" calls attention to the reality of the God of the Scripture. Here we see the principle that the reality of God, who is the Creator and Sovereign, demands that mankind, the creature, trust Him and then follow Him. Anything else is logically absurd; it is pure madness. The second "if" challenges us to acknowledge the fact we may have placed our faith in a false god. If that is true, we need to acknowledge the futility of that false god. Once we know who the true God is, it's absurd to follow the false gods of our own making. Our false gods cannot save us nor deliver us from the pain of this life. They only distract, destroy, and deter us from the blessings of the true God.

Finally, two religious systems that are diametrically opposed might possibly be right if God was not God, but not if God has manifested Himself clearly in human history. In view of that, both paths simply cannot be right. Contrary to modern opinion, one must be right and the other wrong. One must result in blessing, life and peace. The other in cursing, death and destruction.

When we totter along in indecision about our trust and commitment to God, we need to remind ourselves of Elijah's challenge and the ultimate issue. If God is God (and He is), follow Him. Don't try to sit on the fence or pursue what is clearly false.

The Silence

The text tells us "But the people did not answer him a word." I am reminded of Job's response to God's revelation to him concerning His infinite majesty. Job repeatedly proclaimed his innocence to his three friends. In the process, he became somewhat demanding of God. Then the Lord came on the scene and began to reveal His

majesty to Job. After God's first speech, wherein He revealed His awesome majesty, Job was brought to silence. He said, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job. 40:4). Likewise when faced and challenged with the truth of what Elijah said, the people were speechless. There was simply no room for self-justification. They had no argument that would make sense against this challenge of Elijah, and *neither do we*.

Conclusion

There is no argument, at least not one that makes sense, against total commitment of our lives to follow the Lord. Any other decision is nonsense. It is absurd in view of the facts of who God is, of what He has done for us in Christ, and of the emptiness of a life without total commitment to Him. When the reality of the true God and His claims on our lives grip us, we find we have no logical or sensible choice but to trust Him to the degree that we then commit our lives totally to Him.

The decision for God as our one and only true Master, is also the decision to lay up treasure in heaven. It is also the decision to cast our needs and burdens on Him. Above all, it is the decision to trust in God's solutions rather than our own tactics to handle life. Enslavement to the visible and man-made gods of this world like materialism, power, pleasure, position, etc., makes faith in the invisible suspect. Certainly, if we are so enslaved, God is not directing our lives.

First Kings 18:21, like Matthew 6:19-21, is a challenge concerning heavenly treasure and a call for a radical evaluation of our lifestyle, our sources of trust, our goals in life, and our commitment. Jesus sees earthly and heavenly fortune hunting to be in direct competition. He says, do not lay up earthly treasure, but lay up heavenly treasure. We might prefer it to be a question of both/and whereas He shows us it is an either/or.

First Kings 18:21 teaches us that when we attempt to straddle the fence we become like a tottering cripple. Furthermore, James 1:5-8 shows straddling the fence creates an instability that assaults every area of one's life. I may claim to have faith in the Lord, but as long as I am distressed and anxious about my lot in life, financial status, social status, reputation, self-image, or whatever, my profession is hollow and footsteps unstable. I am like a person with one leg shorter than the other.

Who is a Christian? A Christian is one who is in vital relationship with the sovereign God of the universe through faith in the person and work of Christ. A Christian is a child of the living God who created the marvels of the universe. In view of that, perhaps nothing is more pathetic than to see a child of the living God, tottering between two opinions, torn between a vital commitment to the Lord, and seeking happiness in the gods of this world. As an illustration, let me share a story, one shared by John White in his book, *The Golden Cow*.

A self-made Cantonese importer invited my wife and me to dinner once. His house was breathtaking--a fortress outside and all softness and luxury within. In the foyer stood an artificial tree, perhaps five feet high, whose leaves and flowers were exquisitely fashioned from clusters of semiprecious stones. Ornate cabinets displayed valuable treasures. His tableware looked like solid gold but we did not dare ask.

Our host was about sixty years old and displayed a considerable knowledge of Scripture, yet as he talked there was not glow of joy about him. He told us he planned to make enough money to spend his closing years in serving the Lord "without being a burden on anybody." (The tableware alone could have kept some of us going in Christian work for quite a while.)

He never did get to serve the Lord. He had sold his heritage for stone and metal trinkets inside a painted fortress. He would have agreed that spiritual things matter more than material security, but his behavior contradicted his professed beliefs. Riches had coiled like a living vine around his heart, slowly strangling his love for God and people.²³

The principle of 1 Kings 18:21 and that of Matthew 6:19f means that as long as the idols of this world fascinate us, i.e., the things we think we must have to be happy--money, power, praise, attention--we are going to find

²³ John White, *The Golden Cow*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1979, p. 39.

life miserable. White writes, “We were created to have one center. To have two is to be miserable and to enjoy neither spiritual things nor material.”²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

Lesson 12: The Ineffectual Prayers of the Baal Priests (1 Kings 18:23-29)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 5)

Introduction

In our last study we left Elijah with a challenge to the people of Israel and to the Baal priests, and, I might add, to us. We were challenged to choose decidedly to follow the true God. Now we come to the test proposed to prove who the true God really is. The principle is simply once the true God has manifested Himself and is known, it is foolish, indeed it is absurd to follow the false man-made gods of idolatry. But why is it illogical and foolish to follow our man-made idols? Well, that's the point of this passage and we will let the passage speak its bold message into our ear.

This passage gives us a test between the idolatrous systems of Satan and mankind, and the plan of God. Standing boldly for the God is Elijah, a man of God who uncompromisingly believed God's Word. As a representative person in heroic narrative, the test illustrates the testimonial effect and power any believer can have when they, like Elijah, become confident of their mighty resources in the Lord and stop operating by their own idolatrous solutions.

In this chapter we have three illustrations of prayer:

- (1) The Prayers of the Baal Priests: But **NO ANSWER** from Heaven (vss. 26-29)
- (2) The Public Prayer of Elijah: **FIRE** from Heaven (vss. 30-40)
- (3) The Private Prayer of Elijah: **RAIN** from Heaven (vss. 41-46)

Elijah Proposes the Test of Fire (18:23-25)

The Procedures for the Test

It is important to note the particulars of what Elijah did to remove any possible excuses and to show the complete futility of their faith, he let them go first and gave them plenty of time. He gave them all day to pray and go through their religious routine. Later in the day he added some cold and cutting sarcasm, but he did this to highlight and make the issues dramatically conspicuous. Furthermore, note the odds. Elijah made this entire scene as difficult as possible, not only for the prophets of Baal, but also for the LORD. The Prophet was neither people-oriented, nor problem-oriented. He knew there was no problem too big for the Lord. The issue is never the size of the problem--never. The issue is knowing and acting in faith on God's will regardless of the outcome.

What is our tendency? It's to be either people-oriented or problem-oriented, or both. We tend to gather all the data we can on the problems, and then start telling ourselves how this or that is simply not going to work. We back off because the problems are too great for God to handle. Maybe it's because we don't want to get the Lord in a bind. Certainly we need to gather the data to know the score. That's why He sent the twelve spies into the land at Kadesh Barnea. The goal, however, is not to get our eyes on the problems, but rather to know the problems so we know what to trust the Lord for, if we are confident God is telling us to do it.

Three times Elijah mentions putting no fire under the sacrifice (twice in vs. 23 and once in vs. 25). *So What's the Point?* God does not ask us to give Him a hand with the impossible. Sometimes we are guilty deforming God into our own little helpless idol who must be helped along by the fires we build under Him to consume our sacrifice. Does this mean we are to sit by and do nothing? Of course not! Elijah repaired the altar and the sacrifice and he did it according to the principles of the Word. But he put no fire under the sacrifice.

God wants us to study, pray, and witness by life and lip, but we can't make people believe or change. That's God's job. He doesn't need our manipulative schemes to get us to move toward the truth or accomplish the

job He sends us to do. A classic illustration of this is a wife who has a disobedient or unbelieving husband. The typical pattern for many wives in this situation is to badger their husbands about spiritual things or manipulate them into going to church. This is building a fire under her sacrifice, but it's not the method nor the means prescribed by Peter in 1 Peter 3:1-6.

The Purpose of the Test

The test was obviously designed to manifest and prove the true God. Was it Yahweh, the Lord of Israel, or Baal? Even these idolatrous people recognized that was a good idea. Why? Because it is foolish to worship what is false, or to worship in a false way because both are an exercise in futility.

There is an obvious lesson here. We each need to examine the authenticity of our own spiritual lives. Who and what is the object of our worship? How can we test that? By the effectiveness of our Christian lives when measured by the principles and tests of the Word.

There are two general tests to consider:

(1) Am I really saved? Have I put my trust in Christ by faith. I can't experience real life and the power of Christ if I am not a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ. If I am not truly regenerated by the Spirit of God, I will definitely be building my own fires under my own sacrifices. The test for us is 1 John 5:11-13.

(2) But a child of God, a true believer in the person and work of Christ, can also fail to experience God's power in his or her life in authentic, transformed living. This occurs when we fail to walk with the Lord in the light of His Word by faith in His provision and power. Some important questions we might ask are:

- Am I growing and changing?
- Are there marks of Christ-like change taking place in my life?
- Do I manifest the fruit of the Spirit?
- Am I consistently faithful to God and others?
- Am I learning to control my temper and my tongue?
- Are my values and priorities in line with heavenly treasure?
- How is my relationship with my spouse, with my children, with those at the office, at church?
- Am I ministering to others, sharing the gospel, etc.? In other words, is there bonafide fruit?

The test of the reality of our fellowship is the primary message of 1 John. It is written to test our claim to *fellowship* (1 John 1:5-10), not *relationship* or *salvation*. It tests our claim that we are walking in the light when in reality we might be walking in darkness--in a state of carnality and dishonesty with God and ourselves. 1 John 5:11-13 is a message of assurance based on personal faith in Christ, but this is not the theme of the book.

There is, therefore, the need to ask the question: Does my life demonstrate the marks of a life of faith and fellowship with the Lord? And we are not just talking about overt behavior--conforming to a set of do's and don'ts, or going through some religious routine. We are talking about the inner life--our faith and attitudes that form the foundation for actions.

The Nature of the Test

The test consisted of an answer "by fire." Elijah declared, "The God that answers by fire, He is God." But why fire? Baal was worshipped as the Lord of Fire, the Lord of the Sun. Some even worshipped him by passing their children through the fire (2 Kgs. 16:3). So the failure of Baal to bring down fire would demonstrate the fallacy of their beliefs about Baal. In Scripture, fire is used symbolically to communicate certain spiritual principles according to the contexts:

(1) In the Old Testament fire was a sign of the presence and supply of the Lord (e.g., the burning bush in Exodus 3:2, and the pillar of fire in Exodus 13:21-22). Obviously, then, fire would be a clear sign that Yahweh was the true God.

(2) It was a sign that God had accepted the priests, their sacrifices, and their service, and that Israel could have access to God through the priestly ministry inaugurated in the Old Testament (Lev. 9:1-24). After the sacrifices were prepared and offered according to the prescribed ritual of God's Word, the priestly service was inaugurated in Leviticus 9. It was then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people and fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar.

(3) Likewise, the fire in 1 Kings 18 would also demonstrate God's acceptance of Elijah's sacrifice and ministry and His rejection of the Baal prophets and their sacrifice.

(4) Fire was viewed as a means of purification (Num. 31:21-23). Perhaps the Lord was showing Israel that if they returned to Him, they could have their sins forgiven and be restored to fellowship.

(5) Fire is a sign of divine judgment and wrath against sin and rejection of God's plan. Over and over again it is a picture of God's wrath (Isa. 26:11; Heb. 10:27; 12:28-29; 1 Cor. 3:13-15). The fire would further demonstrate God's wrath on the system of Baal. Right after this the prophets were seized and put to death (vs. 40).

The answer of God by fire to consume the sacrifice would clearly demonstrate that Yahweh was the only true God, that God had completely rejected and judged Baalism and the Baal prophets, and that access to the true God could come only through the prescribed sacrificial system of the Old Testament that foreshadowed the person and work of Christ as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

The Baal Prophets Prepare the Test and Call on Baal (18:26-29)

The activity of the Baal priests was a total waste, an exercise in utter futility, and it illustrates the futility of all false religion and all forms of idolatry. *False religious systems are futile for two reasons.*

First, they are futile because they cannot give access to God. They can and do give access to demonic or satanic powers, but not to the living and true God. In this scene, we have all the ingredients of false religion. We have religious priests, we have a sacrifice, an altar, prayer, religious ritual, and religious zeal to the point of lengthy activity (from morning until noon). There is also great loudness (calling out with a loud voice), and zeal to the point of mutilation of the body. Some might say, "but that was fanatical idolatrous Baalism and demonic. You can't say all the practices of other religious groups are futile." We *can* say that and we *must* because the Bible clearly declares all other religions to be false as well as demonic with doctrines that are the product of nothing less than demonic inspiration and activity (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 4:1-3).

The religions and idolatrous systems of the world may vary in their particulars, but they all have certain ingredients in common that demonstrate they are false. These we need to know so we can recognize them for what they are.

(1) They have people working, doing something to be saved or to become spiritual. There is a basic trust in mankind and his works, and a failure to see the awesome holiness of God along with our sinfulness. This forms a barrier of separation between us and God. To get God to answer, the Baal priests worked themselves into a religious dither. Elijah, on the other hand, prayed a short and simple prayer. He prayed in faith while resting in God's grace and covenant promises.

(2) They reject the person and work of Christ as God's one and only means of reconciliation and salvation. The Baal priests built their *own altar* while Elijah repaired *the altar of the Lord*, a shadow of the cross and a portrait of coming to God through Christ. The Baal priests rejected God's solution while Elijah trusted in it.

(3) They tend to be ecumenical (eclectic or syncretistic). They readily combine and accept many beliefs as legitimate means of access to God. They may accept Jesus as one of the great religious leaders or prophets, but not as the Son of God and the one and only Savior of the World. Many of Israel's leaders sought to combine the worship of Yahweh and the worship of Baal, the heathen systems of idolatry. Israel sought to be eclectic just as the modern New Age Movement.

(4) While friendly to those religions that are eclectic, they eventually become hostile and engage in some form of persecution against those who proclaim the truth. But Scripture and Jesus Christ Himself emphatically declare that there is only one way to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Matt. 7:13-14).

The second reason all false religious systems are futile is because they fail to meet man's needs: They can't save from either the penalty or power of sin. They can't deliver from the power and darkness of Satan. They can't give the Holy Spirit (a proof of salvation, Romans 8:9), can't give the kind of peace the Lord gives (John 14:26), and they can't bring God's answers through prayer. Elijah stresses this in 18:27.

The Mockery of Elijah (18:27)

Note the cutting sarcasm here. "Occupied" probably means in the Hebrew "he is relieving himself." This reminds us that to worship what is false, worship in a false way, or in disobedience to the Word, deceives our hearts and is an exercise in futility. Scripture repeatedly warns us that there are many hindrances to prayer and bonafide worship even for those who know the Savior.

See Appendix B for a summary of Hindrances to Prayer.

The Bible teaches us there are many forms of idolatry including greed and covetousness (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Actually, anything mankind worships or depends on for security, significance, or happiness, other than the Lord, becomes a form of idolatry. Today, people do not generally construct gods of wood and stone, but they do make gods out of their own ideas, opinions, and strategies for life. All false religions and forms of idolatry, including our strategies for handling life, are the products of the vacuum action of the soul. They are the workings of our own blindness to provide substitutes to fill the void in our lives and are substitutes for God's plan for life (Rom. 1:18f; Eph. 4:17f).

What are some of the forms of idolatry we might engage in? What are these gods of idolatry? They consist of the things we devise by which we seek security, happiness, or by which we seek to get our needs met apart from a faith relationship with the true God. These idols may be religious, philosophical, or materialistic. They may be any of the strategies by which people seek to meet their needs as they envision them.

Some important questions we might ask ourselves.

(1) Is pleasure and comfort our god? Do we set our hearts on having fun and being comfortable? In other words, do these dictate what we do so they keep us from ministry or availability to the Lord. Do we determine whether we will go to church, or a fellowship group by what's on television or whether the fish are biting?

(2) Is business or mammon our god? Do we set our hearts and security on making money and spend all of our energy and time in the pursuit of climbing the ladder of success so that it interferes with our ability to carry out other priorities such as family, church, and community?

(3) Is social standing and position our god? Is our life, our schedule, our time dictated by a desire to become accepted among the social elite or among a particular peer group?

(4) Since covetousness is a form of idolatry, an important question to ask is who and what we are coveting or depending on to meet what we envision as our needs and believe will fulfill our desires. What do I tell myself I must have to be secure, happy, or significant? Is it people, things, position, acceptance, comfort, or just what?

Satan, as the deceiver, is powerful and can bring some answers to man's prayers, but only under the permissive will of God, and never to man's true blessing or benefit. He undoubtedly had the power to bring fire from heaven in answer to the ravings of the Baal priests just as the magicians in Egypt were able to counterfeit some of the miracles performed by Moses, but here, God's sovereignty overruled in order to make the issue clear. So today, people can find some semblance of joy and peace in false religions and in the details of life, money, power, and position, but they will always fall short of true and lasting peace. This only comes through faith in the Savior and through intimate fellowship with Him.

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

Lesson 13: The Prayers of Elijah (1 Kings 18:30-46)

The Confrontation on Mount Carmel (Scene 6)

Introduction

This study in 1 Kings 18 is extremely relevant. This is evident by the promises and principles of 1 Timothy 2:1-8, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 33:12, and Proverbs 14:34, and by the national decay we have witnessed in our nation over the past 30 years. We have seen our nation slide into the gutter of secular humanism and its sidekick--gross immorality. While there are still thousands of believers in our nation and "in God we trust" is still on our coins, we are no longer a nation whose God is the Lord, not in the biblical sense.

Instead, we worship at the altar of a modern Baal with a strange mixture of idols consisting of materialism, secularism, ecumenicalism, and New Age mysticism. For most people today, even if they believe in God, He is not a real issue in their lives and a large portion of the population does not believe in absolutes. Recent surveys show this is true even with many who profess to be Christians. Though confessing some kind of faith in God, many live as practical atheists. Many are caught up in one of the cults or even in the occult.

What is desperately needed in our society today are more men and women who, like Elijah, can have an Elijah-like impact on this society. Elijah was used to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord (18:37). But what was so special about this man? James reminds us that he was a man of like passions with us, but then James goes on to show that the thing that made him effective in his day of spiritual and moral decadence was his prayer life.

In the next section of chapter 18, verses 30-46, we get a glimpse of Elijah as a man of prayer. In this section, we see: (a) Elijah's preparation for prayer in verses 30-35; (b) his public prayer and its results--fire from heaven, hearts returned to the Lord, and the Baal prophets removed in verses 36-40; and (c) his private prayer and its results: rain from heaven and special strength in verses 41-46.

Elijah's influence was primarily felt in the northern kingdom, not the southern kingdom. His ministry was to the north. Likewise, we all have our own areas of influence and places of impact. This varies with each one of us, but faith, faithfulness, integrity, and effectual prayer can tremendously increase our capacity for influence, wherever that happens to be.

Do you want a pattern for your prayer life? Do you want to effectively change your life and increase the effectiveness of your prayer life and your impact? Then, absorb the details of this passage and claim the promise of James 5. James, the Lord's half brother, was nicknamed "Camel Knees" because of the calluses that developed on his knees from long hours in prayer. Well, who do you suppose God used to turn James into such a man of prayer? It was probably none other than Elijah.

For the size of the epistle, James says more about prayer than any other New Testament book. Over 14 verses in James are devoted specifically to prayer or principles of prayer. Compare 1:5-8, 3:9-10, 4:2-3 (actually everything in between is related), and 5:13-18. This is equivalent to about 15 percent of the book.

Elijah's Public Prayer (18:30-40)

Preparation For Prayer (vss. 30-35)

The Invitation to the People (vs. 30a)

Why do you suppose Elijah called the people to come near? Because what he was about to do, his preparation and his prayer, was designed to be instructive. It was doctrinally significant and important to faith and effectual prayer. The people had just witnessed the futile praying of the Baal priests, and Elijah wanted them know Yahweh

was the true God who answered prayer when people come to Him according to His plan of grace. He wanted them to witness the power of prayer. When we pray in public, we should never pray pretentiously, to be heard and seen of people in order to gain their approval. Still, public prayer is a means not only of exalting the Lord and seeking His grace, but of providing encouragement and a blessing to people (1 Cor. 14:15-17).

The Restoration of the Altar (vs. 30b-32)

What an important act! Elijah teaches us we must come to God on His terms and through His means of access. We will say more about the altar in a moment, but the point is this was the Lord's altar of sacrifice and represented His prescribed means for access and fellowship. Note two things:

(1) One of the words used for offering a sacrifice in the Old Testament was *qarab*. It meant "to come near, approach, draw near," and then, "to offer, bring." Another word used, *alah*, meant literally, "to go up, ascend, climb." The ascent of the smoke of the sacrifice symbolized access to God through a sacrifice that satisfied God's holiness in anticipation of the substitutionary death of His Son.

(2) Repairing the Lord's altar depicted coming to the Lord on His terms by repentance or confession, and restoring the areas of access we have neglected as had been the case--not with Elijah--but with Israel. God's altar (or His prescribed way of access) had been neglected and was in shambles. In its place, they had substituted the idolatrous system of Baal.

For God to hear our prayer, we need to repair or correct those things in our lives that hinder fellowship with Him. Please review the following important passages: Compare Isaiah 59:1f; Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 28:9; Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Peter 3:7; with 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32:1f; 51:1f; and Proverbs 28:13.

Note also how Elijah repaired the altar--he used 12 stones. Why 12? Elijah was addressing the northern kingdom of ten tribes. After Solomon, the kingdom had been divided into the southern kingdom of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, and the northern kingdom of the remaining ten tribes. This demonstrated God had never accepted this division. One of the things that always hinders the impact of God's people in the world is disunity. God wants His people united and working together. This is clear in John 17.

The Preparation of the Sacrifice (vss. 33-35)

This was all done for the purpose of authenticity. Not only did he not put any fire under the sacrifice, but he drenched it with water so there could be no mistake about how the sacrifice was consumed. It was a work of the living God. Do our lives give unmistakable evidence of the power of God, or are we building fires under our sacrifices? Is it evident that we are the ones running our lives rather than the Lord? How we need to give evidence that our lives are unexplainable apart from God who lives within us.

The Time and Place of His Prayer (vss. 36a)

"Then it came about . . ." This little clause is again instructive. As we have seen several times already (17:7, 17; 18:1), this did not mean simply, "and it just happened." It should remind us that what specifically came to pass was a product of the work of God in the life of Elijah. In the preceding verses, this phrase referred to what happened through the providential working of the Lord circumstantially, but what happened here was doctrinally motivated; it was the work of God through the Word. It was a result of what Elijah knew as a result of his personal faith in the Word and as a result of his desire to glorify the Lord. Elijah waited until this specific time of the day to act and to pray before the people. As a testimony to the power of the Word, Elijah wanted the people to see that his life was ordered by God's Word.

Please note the following important points:

(1) The *time* of his prayer was the time of the evening sacrifice as prescribed by the Old Testament.

(2) The *place* where he offered his prayer was near the altar where the bullock lay.

(3) These were both symbolical acts indicating Elijah's faith in God's truth.

(4) Elijah was acting according the revelation of the Lord in the Old Testament Scripture. He was standing on the promises!

What can we learn from Elijah's actions? There is no access to God and thus no prayer heard apart from God's prescribed sacrifice and access. But remember this Old Testament sacrifice (as with all Old Testament sacrifices) was a shadow or type of Christ and God's sacrifice for the sin of the world through His Son (Heb. 10:5-10; John 1:29). What does this mean for us today now that Christ, God's Lamb, has come and borne the sin of mankind?

(1) All must come to God through faith in the person and work of Christ who died in our place to bear our sin (cf. John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Ephesians 2:13-18; 3:12).

(2) We are to pray to the Father in the Name of the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24; Eph. 6:18).

(3) We must be in fellowship or our first prayer needs to be the prayer of confession by which we honestly deal with the problems of the heart as well as our overt behavior (Ps. 66:18; 28:13; Eph. 4:30 and 6:18).

(4) It also means the believer who publicly prays in the name of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us stands out as a testimony and as a condemnation of the ecumenical spirit of the day where prayer is made merely in God's name or in the name of the deity.

The Manner of His Address to God (vs. 36b)

He said, "O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel." This proclaimed Yahweh as the God of the covenants and promises to the nation. Elijah's confidence in prayer was based on the revelation of the character and nature of God as Yahweh, and on the specific principles and plan of God as revealed in the covenants of promise as given to the patriarchs of Israel.

First, when he addressed God as Yahweh, he was:

(1) Relying and counting on God as "I Am," the eternal, immutable, and independent God of the universe with whom all things were possible.

(2) He was relying on God as the One who revealed Himself to the nation through Moses and the Law, and who had redeemed His chosen people for a three-fold purpose: (a) to be the custodians of the Word; (b) to be the channel for Messiah, the Savior of the world; and (c) to be a light to the nations (Gen. 12:3; Ex. 19:4-6; Deut. 4:6-8; Rom. 3:2; 9:4-6).

Second, when he addressed God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, he was specifically thinking and praying in the light of the covenants and promises and the principles that related to Israel such as: (a) God would not forsake His people; (b) they were to be a nation of priests to the nations of God's salvation in the coming Messiah; (c) they were to avoid idolatry at all costs; (d) for obedience there would be blessing but for disobedience there would be cursing or the cycles of discipline as spelled out in Deuteronomy 28-29 and Leviticus 26; and (e) they were to be a people of the Word of God. This was to be their daily diet that they might remember the mighty works which He had done. In other words, Elijah's prayer was motivated and directed by the principles and promises of Scripture.

The Purpose and Content of His Prayer (vss. 36c-37)

He said, "Let it be known." Elijah had four concerns and each of them concerned the glory of God and the well being of His people. Here are four great things people need to see and know.

(1) "That Thou art God in Israel" (18:36), and "that Thou, O Lord, art God." (18:37). O how people need to see there is a true God, know who the true God is, and know He is alive and well and involved with their lives and nation.

(2) "That I am Thy servant." This statement shows us Elijah wanted the people to see that not only was Yahweh real, but he (Elijah) was real also. Though he served people, he was not a servant of people or a people-pleaser (1 Thess. 2). The world is full of religious phonies who worship and serve their own appetites (Phil. 3:18-19). It also shows he wanted them to see the truth of God which he held and believed and which had transformed his life. This truth had brought the power of God into his life.

(3) “That I have done all these things at Thy Word.” This is an advancement on the above. As God’s servants, our lives are to be ordered and directed by the Word of God, and not by the whims and caprice of people, whether from our own desires or those of others. People must come to see that the issues of life revolve around adherence to the divine Word. They also need to see that this as a word from God is not just a group of arbitrary restrictions designed to make people miserable. Rather its design is protective and soteriological. God wants to bring blessing and meaning into people’s lives.

(4) “That Thou hast turned their heart back again.” Elijah sought no credit for the results of this miracle. It was all the work of the grace and power of God (1 Cor. 3:5-7; 15:10). Grace! Grace! Grace! Elijah wanted the people to have their confidence not in him, a mere man, but in the Lord and His Word which Elijah followed (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Also, Elijah wanted people to realize something of God’s love and mercy: that without God’s grace that had pursued them like the hound of heaven, they would have proceeded deeper and deeper into sin and the judgment they so richly deserved.

The Brevity of His Prayer

His public prayer occupies only two verses and 63 words in the English Bible, and even fewer in the Hebrew. Here we find a principle seen throughout the Bible. Public prayers should usually be brief, clear, and to the point. The Lord does not hear us for our many words. Too often public prayers are long, monotone, humdrum, or flowery oratories that sound as though the person is auditioning for a part in a Shakespearean play. Very often, long prayers are pretentious (Mark 12:40).

The Results of His Prayer (vss. 38-40)

In these verses we see the power of God manifested from heaven to do two things. First, we see men and women turning back to the Lord. We see revival, restoration, and repentance. Second, we see people become bold enough to defy Jezebel and execute the Baal prophets. Remember, this was their covenant duty and a protective measure under the law of Israel (Deut. 13:4-5; 18:20).

How, then, does this apply to us today? The fervent prayers of the righteous move the Holy Spirit of God to accomplish His work in the hearts of people. The objective is to turn them to the Lord and then, as God’s people, to give them courage to take a stand against the apostasy of the day. We need a bold witness. We need to refuse to be like the world, or to go along with its ideas, patterns, and schemes that are so clearly contrary to Scripture. God wants us to get involved in the issues of the day that face our society.

This means earnest prayer for our nation and leaders. It means taking a stand on the job or at the office. It means being informed, witnessing and giving answers, praying, writing our elected representatives, voting, and other avenues open to us in a free society.

Elijah’s Private Prayer (18:41-46)

A Contrast of Persons (vs. 41)

It appears Ahab goes up to eat and drink totally unappreciative of the grace of God. He is a picture of hardened insensitivity from years of rejecting the Lord. For three-and-a-half years his kingdom had faced a severe drought and famine covered the land. The prophets of Baal had now been slain before his eyes and God had performed a miracle through Elijah, a prophet of the Lord. Still, God was simply not in Ahab’s thoughts. He had but one thought. “Rain is coming, the famine will pass, so now I can enjoy myself without hindrance.” On the other hand, Elijah knew his work was not done. God works through prayer and he went up to the top of the mountain to pray.

This obvious contrast is a warning to all of us. It shows what can happen to the human heart. One man is occupied with himself and his own plans. One is occupied with the Lord and His promises. May this be a warning to all of us. Our prayer life and our hunger for the Word are clear barometers of the condition of our heart. When we continue to ignore God’s revelation and pursue our own desires and plans, it has a hardening effect on the heart (Heb. 3:7-13; Mark 6:51-52).

The Basis for Elijah's Prayer

The basis for Elijah's actions was, of course, the promise God made to him in 18:1. But why pray? God had said, "rain is coming." In Matthew 6:32, warning the disciples against wrong priorities and being anxious over the details of life, the Lord said, "for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." If He knows and He cares and He has promised to meet all our need according to His riches in glory, then why pray? I believe the answer lies in two very simple principles of the Word.

(1) Prayer is the human tool of faith that God has sovereignly chosen to translate His promises into performance. God not only ordains the end, i.e., the rain, but He also ordains the means of making the promise a reality, prayer. The second principle flows out of the first.

(2) Prayer is also one of the means God uses to draw us to Himself and to conform us to His will. Prayer reveals our dependence on the Lord and keeps us dependent and occupied with Him. This not only glorifies the Lord, but it promotes spiritual growth in us as it builds our faith and keeps us focused on Him.

Right after the Lord said, "for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things," he also said, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Then, in the next chapter He said, "Keep on asking . . ." (Matt. 7:7). The Christian life is a life of faith and occupation with the Lord, a life of trusting and developing a relationship and commitment to God. Prayer is the hand of faith that reaches out and grasps the promises of God. It is one of the instruments God uses to mold us into His image and purposes.

The Meaning and Significance of Carmel

Perhaps there is analogy here that comes out of the meaning of the name of this mountain where the contest occurred and where Elijah prayed for the rain that would bring fruitfulness to the land. As seen earlier, "Carmel" is a Hebrew word that means "a garden land, a place of fruitfulness or fertility." It comes from *karam*, "to tend vines" or *kerem*, "a vineyard." Elijah went to the place of fruitfulness. The place of fruitfulness is our prayer life, if we are praying biblically.

Elijah's Position in Prayer (vs. 42b)

This simply shows us Elijah prayed earnestly or fervently (James 5:17). He was genuine. He was not merely being religious nor was he trying to impress God by falling on his knees. Kneeling merely expressed the genuineness of his heart and was undoubtedly a position in which he could concentrate, but it gained no merit with the Lord nor was it the means of getting God to answer. A number of postures are seen used in Scripture for prayer--standing, kneeling, prostrate, the hands raised, etc. It's not the posture that counts. It's the heart, the attitude, the motives, the faith, and the nature of the prayer according to the will of God.

Believers are not commanded to assume any special position. We should assume a position that will allow us to think and focus on the Lord--this is what counts. If some people assumed Elijah's position for any length of time, they might not be able to get back on their feet. They would need a tow truck.

The Conversation with Elijah's Servant (vss. 43-44)

This scene provides a second contrast of persons. It shows that Elijah prayed in faith, expectantly. He prayed believing God's specific promises and with perseverance he continued in prayer, never fainting, wavering or doubting. "Seven times" he told the servant to return. Seven is the number of completion or perfection in Scripture. It is not a magical number. It simply teaches us what perseverance and unwavering faith accomplishes. It is designed to teach the principle of Luke 18:1, "that at all times they (men) ought to pray and not to lose heart." The need is to keep going until we see evidence of an answer. Elijah wasn't saying he'd quit after seven.

Another contrast of persons is seen in the servant who kept running back and forth, up and down the mountain to Elijah while Elijah remained steadfast in prayer. The servant is like many believers who pray a few minutes, look out the window and think, "just like I thought, nothing." Then they try something else and when that doesn't work, they try a little more prayer. But to pray like that is to be like the double-minded man of James 1:5 who asks, doubts, wavers, asks, then doubts and so on. Elijah did not doubt even after six negative reports. He con-

tinued to pray. Why? Because he was standing confidently on what God had promised! Elijah knew God's will from God's direct promise.

Have you ever been like this servant? Have you found yourself running back and forth, almost frantic because God didn't seem to be listening? Well, I certainly have faced that in my own life and I suspect you have too. Let me make four suggestions that can help.

(1) Be sure your prayer is grounded in the Word. This gives confidence.

(2) Be sure your prayer is not from carnal or wrong motives, but directed by biblical principles. Rest in the intercessory ministry of the Holy Spirit who always prays according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26-27).

(3) Keep on asking, looking, and knocking in a faith that rests in God's fatherly care, love, and timing (Matt. 7:7-8).

(4) Above all, ask the Lord to teach you what He wants to do in you and through you during this period of waiting.

Either the servant was filled with surprise when he said, "Behold," or it was sarcasm like, "behold, there is a cloud out there all right, but it's only about the size of a man's hand." If surprise, it may have been like the early church when they prayed for Peter. If sarcasm, it was like the typical doubting Thomas, the "I told you so" pessimist or exponent of Murphy's law.

For Elijah, as one with the eyes of faith who was resting on the promise of God, the little cloud was just the start of something big. In Elijah's reaction we see the expectation of the faith and of a man grounded in and believing the Word of God. He didn't hesitate. Immediately he sent his servant with a message to Ahab. In essence, his message said, "Get back to the palace or you are going to get caught in the rain and it is going to be such a rain that you will not be able to travel." Evidently Elijah expected the ravines would be filled with water and there would be flash floods.

The Products of Elijah's Prayer (vss. 45-46)

Rain on the Land (vs. 45)

The drought was broken through the prayer of faith according to the will of God, but the ultimate goal was the removal of the spiritual drought in Israel. It was designed to turn sinners from seeking life apart from God. This is the context for the way James uses Elijah as an illustration of the effectual working of a righteous man. The Lord often waits to answer our prayers for physical needs in order to deal with our spiritual needs. It becomes the means of ending the spiritual drought in our own souls and then in our community.

Strength for Elijah (vs. 46)

Elijah received supernatural strength to outrun Ahab. This undoubtedly portrays the dynamic effects of living in the Word and prayer. The disciplines of Bible study and prayer (when done in faith rather than in a spirit of legalism) bring energy to a sagging spirit that often wants to give up or throw in the towel. They bring vitality into the life of the believer as we are taught in Isaiah 40:31.

The Lesson for Elijah's Servant

There is another effect to the praying of Elijah in this passage. It's not mentioned in the text, but can you imagine the effect this must have had on the servant? What must this have done for his spiritual growth?

A neat illustration is found in the book, *Elijah*, by Howard Hendricks:

We have a lovely family in our community. The father felt God was compelling him into vocational Christian work. So he sold his business at a loss and entered the work to which the Lord had called him. And things got rather rough financially.

One night at family devotions, Timmy, the youngest of four boys, asked, "Daddy, do you think Jesus would mind if I asked Him for a shirt?" "Of course not," answered his dad. So they wrote in

their little prayer-request book, "Shirt for Timmy." Mom added, "Size seven." You can be sure that every night Timmy saw to it that they prayed for the shirt. For weeks they prayed for it--every night.

One day the mother received a telephone call from a Christian businessman, a clothier in downtown Dallas. He said, "I just completed our July clearance sale. Knowing that you have four boys it occurred to me that I have something you might use. Could you use some boys' shirts?" She said, "What size?" "Size seven." "How many do you have?" He said, "I have twelve of them."

What would you do? Some parents would take the shirts and stuff them in the bureau drawer and make some casual comment to the child. Not this enlightened family. That night, as expected-- "Don't forget, Mommy, let's pray for the shirt." "We don't have to pray for the shirt, Timmy. The Lord answered your prayer." "He has?" "Right." As previously arranged, brother Tommy goes out, gets the shirt, brings it in, and puts it on the table. Timmy's eyes are like saucers. Tommy goes out, gets another shirt and brings it in. Out, back, out, back, until he has piled twelve shirts on the table, and Timmy thinks God has gone into the shirt business. There is a boy today by the name of Timmy who still believes that there is a God in heaven who is interested enough in a boy's needs to provide a shirt. Do your kids know that? Do you know that in an affluent society?

Sometimes we have to write "No" in the answer column . . . this is just as much an answer as a yes.²⁵

While we should not look back to our experiences as the primary basis of our faith for the future, certainly such memorable experiences have a dynamic impact on our faith as they remind us of God's faithfulness.

Conclusion

If prayer is so important, why is it so many believers are continually halted in their prayer life? Well, it's no accident. It is the result of satanic scheming plus our own natural tendencies. Satan doesn't mind if we witness near as much as he minds if we pray because he knows it is far more important to talk to God about people, than to talk to people about God. It's when we start talking to God about people that our witnessing becomes most effective.

The same applies to studying the Word, teaching it to others, or Christian activity. If Satan can keep believers off their knees, and keep us running up and down the various mountains of our lives, very little of the Word will really take hold. Instead spiritual pride will develop and the activity will become just busy activity, but ineffective. Prayer is a very important dimension in the life of every believer. May the Lord enable us to keep the dimension of the power of prayer in focus.

²⁵ Howard G. Hendricks, *Elijah, Confrontation, Conflict & Crisis*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, pp. 46-47.

Lesson 14: The Vulnerability of Victory (1 Kings 19)

Introduction

The humanness of the heroes of the Bible can be tremendously instructive and encouraging to the heart, and there is probably no passage that we can relate to more than 1 Kings 19. While we should know better, we tend to think of the heroes of the *Hall of Faith* as possessing something special that we do not have access to. We think of them as though they were a different breed, almost god-like, with special attributes we can't have.

Some look at the Elijah of chapters 17 and 18, the man of faith, and then look at the Elijah of chapter 19, the man of fear with a critical spirit. They wonder, "How could he change like that?" It's almost like, "If I had seen God's power displayed like that, I would never run like he did." In essence, however, in the record of the New Testament we have a much greater display of the power of God in the person, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Furthermore, those who respond this way about Elijah's actions in chapter 19, are overlooking the many ways they may fail to take a stand or fail to do the things God has called them to do according to the clear principles of the Word. They see themselves as never running away because, like the seven thousand hiding in caves, they never put themselves at risk as Elijah did. Rather than deal with a problem, for instance, they remain at a comfortable distance, but isn't that really the same thing?

Or perhaps we are plagued with another idea. We look at these heroes of the faith or listen to many Bible teachers today with their promises of deliverance. Then we think about our own struggles and failures and wonder if there is not something terribly wrong with us. We have adopted the idea that we should have somehow reached the point that we do not struggle. The myth is believers who are truly spiritual never get down. If we are truly mature, we will have finally learned to trust the Lord to the degree we can float effortlessly along on cloud nine because we have learned the so-called secret to the higher life.

But that kind of theology does not fit with the Word of God. It is a theology that says too much on the one hand and too little on the other. We can experience God's victory by faith. We can experience the Christ-exchanged life as we count on His life by faith and trust in the indwelling power of the Spirit of God. But none of us do that perfectly, and none of us will do that without difficulty and discipline. We can grow in Christ and we can become more experienced and consistent in trusting the Lord, but none of us will ever reach perfection at resting in the Lord in this life (Phil. 3:11-17; Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15-25; 1 John 1:8-10).

Elijah, remember, was a man of like passions with us (James 5:17). This teaches us Elijah was not some super-duper saint who had a special access to the power of God through the privilege of prayer that we don't have. Furthermore, God wants us to remember that Elijah had his own struggles of weakness and discouragement through which he had to contend. He too had to do battle with his mental attitude and his focus. Students of the Word should know this theologically since all who accept the Lord Jesus, though regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit, still possess sinful natures and are in desperate need of God's grace moment by moment. But just in case there are any doubts, 1 Kings 19 dramatically displays the truth of the statement in James 5:17.

Contrasts in Attitude

Chapter 19 stands in stark contrast to the preceding two chapters. It deals with the same man, but the difference is like night and day. The contrasts are noteworthy because they show us just how vulnerable we all are and how careful we need to be. For a few moments, let's take time to examine these contrasts to observe some ideas and thoughts concerning our attitudes and our vulnerability.

Contrast 1: In chapters 17 and 18, we saw Elijah strong in the power of God and his divine operating assets--the Word and prayer. But in chapter 19, we see Elijah weak--weak in himself and operating out of his own tactics or solutions.

Contrast 2: In chapters 17 and 18, we saw Elijah productive. There he was used of God to minister to others, to vindicate the name of the Lord, and to bring his people back to God. But in chapter 19, we see Elijah as a deserter, non-productive, running away and failing to be a helper to God's people.

Contrast 3: In chapters 17 and 18, we saw Elijah victorious, bold, confident in the face of all kinds of odds, facing 850 prophets of Baal at once. *He had a great attitude and focus.* But in chapter 19, we find Elijah in failure, depressed, fearful of Jezebel, running scared, and wishing he was dead. *He had a poor attitude.*

Contrast 4: In chapters 17 and 18, we saw Elijah occupied with the Lord, aware of God's presence, aware of the enormity of God's person, and using his assets in the Lord--the promises of the Word and prayer. But in chapter 19, we find Elijah occupied with people and conditions, not God. He was completely problem oriented. He failed to pray and stand on the promises of Scripture. *He had a wrong focus.*

Not once in this chapter do we see Elijah going to the throne of grace. Not once did he claim the promises of God. Furthermore, he acted as though what Jezebel claimed about the gods of Baal was the truth and what he had claimed and proven about Yahweh was false (cf. 1 Kings 18 with 19:2-3). Thankfully, God graciously came to Elijah.

This involves an age old problem. Again, it is one of focus and attitude. Whenever we become occupied with our problems rather than with the Lord it creates a terrible distortion. It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Instead of magnifying the person and power of God, focusing on the problem shrinks the person and power of God in our eyes, and magnifies the problem. Our problems become giants or mountains when in essence, from God's standpoint, they are not even mole hills. For three classic illustrations of this: (a) We have the Israelites who, seeing the giants in the land rather than the Lord, also saw themselves as grasshoppers and at the mercy of the giants (Num. 13:40-14:4). (b) Then there is David who, after being hounded by Saul for a long period, saw his only solution as one of running away to the land of the Philistines (1 Sam. 27:1f). (c) Finally, there is Peter who walked on the water until he took his eyes off the Lord (Matt. 14:30).

Contrast 5: In chapters 17 and 18, we saw Elijah physically nourished and sustained as he waited on the Lord. But in chapter 19, we find him physically weak, famished because of a lack of nourishment and lack of rest. He had failed to take time to eat or rest and he had failed to take his concerns to God.

This is another one of those chapters that point us to the realism and honesty of the Word of God--a mark of its character as God-breathed. As the late Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "The Bible is not such a book that a man would write if he could, or could write if he would."

Generally, when people write about their heroes, they tend to paint a beautiful picture while they ignore the failures and weaknesses, especially during this time in history. Remember the TV show called "This Is Your Life"? It was always a glowing portrait of a man's strengths, but all the weaknesses were removed. Someone has said, "When God gives us a portrait of a man, He paints him warts and all."

Why such a difference in the prophet's attitude? How could such a change occur? Why is this portrait of the Prophet in the Word? We dare not ignore this question because in its answer we find one of the reasons for this chapter in the Word of God.

We are given this portrait of the man Elijah:

(1) Because God is perfect veracity, truth, He can do no less than state the facts about man. God is not interested in deifying and exalting mankind as people try to do because that is harmful for us as the following points will show.

(2) Because it is so important for us to know the truth about ourselves that we might have no illusions about who we are. This includes our heroes. Elijah, remember, is a representative person and this portrait helps us to see ourselves. Why? So we will reach out and draw upon God's grace and mercy. Illusions about self hinder that. We need to have no such illusions so we will turn from our own resources to God's. We need to stop building broken cisterns that hold no water and come to the Lord as the river of life (Jer. 2:13).

(3) This portrait helps us see the need to glory in God rather than in people.

(4) Finally, perhaps this portrait and reality will help us stop trusting in the lies we tend to believe. These lies are devastating to a healthy spiritual walk with God.

Simply put, lies are beliefs, attitudes, or expectations that don't fit reality . . . We learn our lies from a variety of sources--parents, our friends, the culture we live in, even the church we attend--and they make life emotionally miserable, even unbearable.²⁶

The following are some illustrations of the lies we tell ourselves:

- I must be perfect.
- It is easier to avoid problems than face them.
- You are only as good as what you do.
- You are only worthwhile if you are successful.
- Life should be easy.
- Life should be fair.
- All my problems are caused by my sins or failures.

God gives us this portrait of Elijah to teach us how vulnerable we are, how important our focus and our attitudes are, and how much we constantly need the grace of God for every moment and every breath. God portrays people, especially the great heroes of the faith, as they really are--mere human beings, earthen vessels, clay pots. We are instruments used by God to display His glory, but worthless in ourselves apart from Him (1 Cor. 3:5-7; 2 Cor. 4:7).

Based on these contrasts in the life of Elijah, this great hero in God's Hall of Faith, I want to share some thoughts that are pertinent before we begin our exposition of the specifics of the passage.

Concept 1: These realistic portraits of the great heroes of the faith teach us to expect perfection out of no human being--including ourselves, and I might add, out of no church. Perfection is found only in heaven and in the person of the perfect God-man, the Lord Jesus.

Concept 2: They are designed to teach us that our strongest point is also our weakest--the very place where we are the most vulnerable and susceptible to defeat. A believer's greatest strength is focus, dependence and faith in the Lord, but this is also his greatest place of vulnerability. So where does Satan want to attack us? In the area of our need to depend on God. Unless this is remembered, defeat will always follow victory. Misery will follow blessing. This is why the Word warns us, "Therefore, let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). This warning occurs close to the end of a passage that deals with the principle that privilege never guarantees victory or success (1 Cor. 10:1-11).

Concept 3: Chapter 19 also reminds us that every public servant, evangelist, elder, Sunday school teacher, etc., no matter how apparently gifted and used of the Lord, is only an earthen vessel, a man or woman of like passions with feet of clay. They are not saints who have successfully climbed the mountain of sanctification like a super spiritual athlete who now sits enthroned over the world, the flesh, and the devil, while the rest of us poor souls struggle along trying to learn their secret. Unfortunately, many believers look at their pastors, church leaders and famous Bible teachers through rose-colored glasses. Their attitudes and expectations are, to say the least, completely unrealistic. In view of this principle, let's consider several important concepts about leadership:

(1) Those who are in places of leadership (and this includes parents) are to be examples, models to the flock and to their families. Scripture is clear on this. Being a model for others is one of the great challenges of leadership (1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7-8; 1 Pet. 5:3b; Heb. 13:7). We should expect our leaders to be models of the faith, but we should not expect them to be perfect. Remember, Elijah was a model of praying in faith, but he was not perfect as chapter 19 illustrates.

(2) Scripture teaches that leaders are to be respected and held in honor for their work's sake (1 Thess. 5:12, 13), and followed as examples within reason as long as their lives comply with the Word.

(3) As mentioned above, we should never expect them to be perfect. We should never regard them as anything more than ordinary men of like nature, as brethren, as mere earthen vessels. Like us they have feet of clay and are just as prone to sin and a fall as the next person (Acts 14:11-15; 2 Cor. 4:7; Matt. 23:8-11; 1 Cor. 10:13). Every

²⁶ Chris Thurman, *The Lies We Believe*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1989, p. 24.

servant of the gospel is but an earthen vessel of clay in which God has placed His treasure, the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth of the Word, and the person of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he or she is not a vessel of steel or silver or gold, but an earthen vessel of clay. This means we are easily marred and cracked. But there is a special reason for this. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says, “that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not of ourselves.” The reason is that we might not glory in people, but in God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7 and 1 Cor. 2:1-5).

(4) We are all but instruments of God (1 Cor. 3:5). Note these points: a) The *message* which is alive and powerful, is God given. It is not the invention of our wisdom or brilliance. b) The *effects* of the message are likewise God given regardless of what people may think about our method, skill in teaching, or oratorical ability. Both the gift and the effects, if bonafide, are God given (1 Cor. 3:5-7; 12:4f). c) Thus, like a lamp without oil, the instruments are entirely without value and weak in themselves apart from the Spirit of the Lord. There is never any cause for self-glorification, nor should we boast in others (1 Cor. 4:5-7).

(5) God is jealous for His honor and glory and will not give His glory unto another. He has chosen the foolish, the weak, the despised, the base things of life, and the things which are not (mere nobodies) to accomplish His purposes. Why? That no person should glory in His presence (Isa. 48:11; 1 Cor. 1:27-31). Consequently, as God’s servants, we should all desire to be a clear vessel though which people may see Christ; not a stained glass window that draws attention to itself through flashiness or sensationalism. By the same token may we not become a dirty window, but one that is clean allowing people to see beyond us to Christ and the truth of the Word (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

(6) People at their best, apart from the sustaining grace of God are mere air, altogether emptiness, a mere breath (Ps. 39:5).

Concept 4: Not only do public servants, like Elijah, pastors, and evangelists, have feet of clay, but they often come under special demonic attack because of the work they do as proclaimers of the Word (1 Thess. 2:17-18; 2 Thess. 3:1, 2; 1 Cor. 16:9). This means they need the diligent prayer support of the body rather than criticism.

Conclusion

It is comforting to know that saints of God (such as Elijah) were of like nature with us. It illustrates the truth of 1 Corinthians 10:13, “there is no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.” Our temptations, our trials, our frustrations and failures are common to all men. You and I are not alone no matter what we are facing. God is faithful to enable us to handle the temptation, and God is gracious to pick us up when we fall.

The failures and weaknesses of the great heroes of the faith should never be taken as boulders for us to hide behind so we can excuse our failures in continued irresponsibility. God holds us all responsible for what He has given us.

Examples like Elijah in 1 Kings 19 stand as warnings or danger signals, not as excuses for failure. In the lessons that follow, we will look at the failures of Elijah and how the Lord lifted him up, put him back on his feet, and back into ministry.

The all important ingredient is focus and an attitude of trust in the Lord. The following is one of the best illustrations I know of the importance of keeping a focused and right attitude:

The colorful, nineteenth-century showman and gifted violinist Nicolo Paganini was standing before a packed house, playing through a difficult piece of music. A full orchestra surrounded him with magnificent support. Suddenly one string on his violin snapped and hung gloriously down from his instrument. Beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead. He frowned but continued to play, improvising beautifully.

To the conductor’s surprise, a second string broke. And shortly thereafter, a third. Now there were three limp strings dangling from Paganini’s violin as the master performer completed the difficult composition on the one remaining string. The audience jumped to its feet and in good Italian fashion, filled the hall with shouts and screams, “Bravo! Bravo!” As the applause died down, the violinist asked the people to sit back down. Even though they knew there was no way they could expect an encore, they quietly sank back into their seats.

He held the violin high for everyone to see. He nodded at the conductor to begin the encore and then he turned back to the crowd, and with a twinkle in his eye, he smiled and shouted, “Paganini . . . and one string!” After that he placed the single-stringed Stradivarius beneath his chin and played the final piece on one string as the audience (and the conductor) shook their heads in silent amazement. “Paganini . . . and one string!”²⁷ (And, I might add, an attitude of fortitude.)

Swindoll goes on to say:

This may shock you, but I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-do-day basis is my choice of attitude . . . Attitude is that “single string” that keeps me going or cripples my progress . . . When my attitudes are right, there’s no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me.

Yet, we must admit that we spend more of our time concentrating and fretting over the strings that snap, dangle, and pop--the things that can’t be changed--than we do giving attention to the one that remains, our choice of attitude.²⁸

For the Christian, however, we are not talking about just a positive attitude. We are talking about an attitude that comes from a heart focused on God and that trusts in Him.

²⁷ Chuck R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*, Word Books, Waco, TX, 1982, pp. 205-206.

²⁸ Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*, p. 207.

Lesson 15: The Crisis of Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-14)

Introduction

As brought out in the last lesson, the contrasts between 1 Kings 18 and 1 Kings 19 are sharp and startling. They are as different as night and day. In one Elijah is bold and courageous, victoriously facing all kinds of odds with the chapter concluding, “the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel.” Elijah experienced God’s supernatural strength to do the extraordinary. But in chapter 19, we find Elijah fearful, running scared, exhausted, depressed, and wanting to die.

In the section before us we see the cause of the change in Elijah. King Ahab tells the notorious Jezebel what Elijah had done. She reacts with vengeance and threatens Elijah’s life. Elijah runs for his life down to Beer-sheba in the desert in the southern most part of Judah. Leaving his servant, he continues another day’s journey further into the desert, crawls under a scrubby tree and, in deep depression, asks God to let him die.

Have you ever been there, in the gloom of despair and defeat when all your expectations exploded in your face? I don’t know what Elijah was expecting. With the power of God so clearly manifested perhaps Elijah thought there would be some change in Ahab, some positive response with the result there were going to be changes in the kingdom of Israel. We aren’t told. We can only guess. But something really shattered Elijah’s focus and his faith. Let’s look at the text and see what we can learn.

Ahab Recounts the Events to Jezebel (19:1)

King Ahab had been privileged to see the mighty power of God displayed, the name of Yahweh vindicated, and the prophets of Baal severely defeated and destroyed. But for Ahab all of this was futile. The futility of these mighty acts on this callused and vile king should be a warning to all of us as well because Scripture shows the same laws of hardening which affect unbelievers, can affect believers as well. There are those going around today claiming that things like this can’t happen to believers, that our new life in Christ immunizes us. But we can be around the Word, hear it taught, and even experience the work of God in our lives and still grow lukewarm or callused (cf. Heb. 3:7f; Mark 6:52; 8:17-18; Rev. 3:15-16).

We read “Now Ahab told Jezebel all . . .” The Hebrew text has the descriptive imperfect of past continuous action from the verb *nagad*, “to be conspicuous, apparent,” and then, “to expound, declare, make clearly known.” Undoubtedly Ahab declared in detail the events of the day, point by point. As the media so often does today, he distorted the issues and failed to present the truth because his pride and unbelief had hardened him against the truth. As a result, he brought great trouble and pain to Elijah, to himself, and to his nation.

Note the declaration of the text. “. . . all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets . . .” How like human nature. Note again the emphasis, “*all that Elijah had done*.” He failed to see God in what had happened and Elijah as but God’s instrument. Like so many today he was completely absorbed with a man and as a result misrepresented the truth of what had actually happened. Motivated by his hurt pride, his anger and resentment against Elijah blinded him to the work of God and the revelation of the event.

When we proudly protect our own turf, when we get our eyes on people and what they have done or said, we fail to see God at work. When our eyes are on people, whether in admiration of a person’s life or in resentment as with Ahab, we miss the truth. Indeed, we distort the truth, we blow it all out of shape, or hide it completely. We become blind to the work of God. All we see are the conditions. When this happens, we are unable to respond with the right kind of action—with ministry, endurance, and faith.

Becoming personality-oriented nearly always leads to another consequence. In place of bold faith and love, we cause pain and misery for all concerned (cf. Heb. 12:1-15). When people focus on people, one of two things happen: (a) either they brag about the person they admire, which may bring temptation to that person and encourage

others to glory in man, or (b) they attack and criticize bringing persecution and heartache. When God is not the focus, we lose.

I wonder what would have happened if Ahab had seen God in the events on Mount Carmel and then reported them as such to Jezebel. I wonder what would have happened if he had said, "I saw God, Yahweh of Israel, at work today. I saw Him prove to be the true God. He brought down fire from heaven and did that which the impotent Baal prophets could not do. He is God and the Baal prophets are false. Therefore, this house is going to follow Him." Instead, he ignored the facts about the Lord, and called attention to the acts of Elijah--how he had mocked the Baal priests, confused them, and eventually had the people help kill them. King Ahab's response took glory away from Yahweh, focused attention on the instrument, and fanned the flames of jealousy, revenge, and hatred. As a result, his focus precluded any chance for repentance.

Jezebel Reacts with Vengeance (19:2)

Unable to hurt the Lord, Jezebel did what Satan and people always do. She attacked the instrument and gave vent to her hatred and malice. She sent a messenger with her threat. Now I ask you. If she knew where he was, why didn't she send a platoon of soldiers to kill Elijah? Why send a messenger to warn him so he would have time to flee? This shows the sovereign overruling hand of God and how God uses the wrath of man to praise Him. Perhaps it was also because she was afraid of the people who had helped kill the Baal priests and were now on Elijah's side. So she attacked Elijah with a threat. Also note she was still trusting in her gods that had been thoroughly exposed as impotent and futile.

How this manifests the blindness and stubbornness of the human heart. People stubbornly cling to their self-made gods be it humanism, materialism, power, or whatever. Jezebel's actions were in keeping with her character. It's what we would expect, but not so with Elijah. Elijah's action is totally out of character, but it serves to remind us again of everyone's vulnerability--that we must each take heed lest we fall. The potential of a fall is always only one step away.

Elijah Runs For His Life (19:3-4)

The text says, "and he was afraid." There is a slight problem here. The consonants for the Hebrew word "afraid" and those of the imperfect of "saw" are the same. Thus, the KJV and the ASV have, "and he saw." The difference in the translation is in the vowel pointing. But nearly all other versions, NASB, RSV, NIV, Amplified, etc., have "and he was afraid."

Some have suggested the Massorettes repointed the vowels because they did not want to attribute fear to the great prophet. A number of commentaries have followed the same line of reasoning saying this would be too out of character for Elijah. They say his flight down to Beersheba and beyond was not a flight for his life, but a trip to get alone with God since he saw conditions were not going to change. I believe this interpretation is wrong for the following reasons: (a) "Ran" is *halak* which means "to go, walk, proceed, move," but it can be a synonym for running if the contexts suggest this. The words that follow it, "his life," are what suggest the idea of running for his life. (b) The immediate context of Jezebel's actions supports the view that Elijah was running for his life. (c) James' statement that Elijah was a man of like nature with us undoubtedly came from Elijah's actions in this chapter.

If "saw" is the correct translation it still does not remove the element of his fear that led to his flight out of the area. Though it would highlight several ideas: (a) our expectations, (b) our focus, (c) our strategies, and (d) the consequences, it would show how our focus (how we see a situation) can empower and encourage us, or neutralize and turn us into whimpering complainers or discouraged discontents.

The Problem of Our Expectations

Perhaps the first lesson we can learn from Elijah's response concerns our expectations and their impact on us. As already mentioned, he was expecting something different--something more positive. He was looking for a real turnaround in the spiritual conditions of the kingdom and his expectations may have moved into the realm of a sense of demandingness.

Life is full of disappointments and if we are not extremely careful, those expectations will derail us as they become demands of our heart. It is not wrong for us to hope for the best and to look to the Lord for that. First Corinthians 13:7 says “love . . . believes all things, hopes all things.” The same is true for faith according to Heb. 11:1. But 1 Corinthians 13:7 also says, “love bears all things, . . . endures all things.” Please note, believing and hoping is sandwiched between bearing and enduring.

God holds us responsible for trusting in Him, for obedience, for love, for endurance, and for faithfulness to do what He has called us to do. *He does not hold us responsible for the results.* The results are in His hands, not ours. We can’t change people, and we often can’t change our circumstances, only God can. Further, our expectations can easily slip into a sense of a demandingness--demanding that things work out the way we think they should. When that happens we are usurping God’s sovereignty and acting as though we the creature were the all wise Creator (cf. Job. 40:1-9). When we focus on our expectations and make the results we want the source of our happiness, security, or significance, we end up in the Elijah syndrome--fearful, ready to run away, and engulfed in feelings of failure and depression or fear and frustration.

The Problem of Our Focus

If “saw” is the correct reading, then this is even more emphatic. Either way, the issue of our focus remains a significant matter. Elijah knew Jezebel’s reputation and character. Now, disappointed over the turn of events and with his expectations shattered, he focused his eyes on the conditions--the wicked and irate queen, the military men at her disposal, the belief she would be persistent in her intentions, and the spineless condition of King Ahab who could not and would not control his wife.

Some principles we can glean from this negative focus and response of the prophet:

(1) We should never walk by sight--as things appear to us. We are to walk by faith in the sovereign control and providence of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:7; Ps. 103:19; 115:3). Does this mean we are to be ignorant of the problems or ignore them so that we stick our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich--if they really do that? I think not! Only a weak faith seeks to ignore the problems (cf. Num. 13:1-2; Rom. 4:19).

(2) Rather, it means we are to stay focused on the Lord and seek to look beyond the problems through the eyes of faith. By faith we are to see the very real, though invisible realities about God’s person and the faithfulness of His promises and principles for life as revealed in Scripture (Ps. 19:7-9; 93:5; Rom. 4:17-21). In Romans 4:16, Abraham is called the father of faith. With Abraham as our father of faith, we can glean four things about the kind of faith God wants us to have:

- **He was Confident in God’s Person** (verses 17, 21), “even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist,” “. . . He was able also to perform.” Faith knows God is the One who brings dead things to life and calls into being even the things which are not. The focus here is on God’s person.
- **He was Cognizant of the Problem** (vs. 19), “And without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead . . .” In other words, he did not act as though there was no problem. He faced it, but saw beyond it to the Lord.
- **He was Conversant with and Convinced of God’s Promises** (verses 17, 18, and 21). In other words, he both knew and claimed the promises of God. He stood on the faithfulness of God to keep His promises.
- **He was Constant against All Odds** (verses 18a and 20), “in hope against hope he believed,” and “he did not waver in unbelief.” Regardless of the difficulty, he endured and believed God was in charge and would be faithful to what He had promised, even if it meant resurrection (Heb. 11:17-19).

(3) Therefore, by faith, we are to continue to do the things God has called us to do like pray, trust, work, serve, go to a doctor or get counsel, etc. God forbid, however, that we should run ahead of the Lord with our escape and defense strategies through which we seek to change, manipulate or control the situation.

(4) Whenever we walk by sight, we forfeit a great deal of God’s blessing and provision. This does not mean He forsakes us. God did not forsake Elijah. Indeed, He sought him out and ministered to him. During our times of unbelief, however, we forfeit God’s best. Note the following examples: (a) Lot chose according to sight, not faith, and ended up losing everything (Gen. 13:1-13). (b) At Kadesh Barnea, the people walked by sight and

forfeited the privilege of entering the land. For forty years they wandered in the wilderness (Num. 13:33 and Heb. 3:18-4:2).

(5) Finally, it is helpful to remember we cannot truly remain occupied with the Lord and our problems at the same time. Obviously we will be aware of them, but our focus needs to be on the Savior. “Looking unto Jesus . . .” in Hebrews 12:2 is the Greek *aphorao* from *apo*, “from,” and *horao*, “to see” followed by the preposition *eis*, “unto.” The basic meaning is “to look away from and unto Jesus.”

There is a song that was popular in the 1950’s with the words, “O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day, I’ve got a wonderful feeling, everything’s going my way.” This song expresses the typical attitude of the world. This is the way we would like it, but it’s simply not the way things are in a fallen world. Wanting everything to go our way is not only unrealistic, it is self-centered. It also suggests we are seeking our security and happiness in good times rather than in the Sovereign Lord. It’s living according to sight, not faith.

By contrast, the Apostle said, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). But where did he say that? While everything was going his way? NO! He said it while he was chained daily to a Roman soldier awaiting trial, which could have meant his head. He said it while others were seeking to do him harm, even within the Christian community. Instead, Paul might have sung, “O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day, though things aren’t going my way, the Lord sits on the throne every day.”

The Problem of Our Strategies

The text tells us Elijah fled to Beersheba which is way to the south. Beersheba was a desert place, but even that was not enough. Elijah left his servant there and went another full day’s journey into the wilderness where he sought shelter, not in the Almighty, but in a scrubby bush. The juniper was a broom tree that grew from 10 to 12 feet high and provided some shelter, but not much.

Nowhere in this chapter do we find Elijah calling on the Lord or seeking His direction. The problem was not that he arose and ran, or went down to the desert to hide. It was that he did so without God’s direction and without God as his primary shelter. Let’s not forget how God had earlier directed Elijah to a lonely place (1 Kings 17:2-5), but not here.

For some things we don’t need God’s intervening direction. If we are in the way of an 18-wheeler, we move if at all possible. If we get a headache, we take medicine. Asa’s sin in 2 Chronicles 16:12 was not that he sought help from the physicians, but that he excluded God. Elijah’s situation was different. He reacted rather than responding to God. And so it can be with us. We so often react rather than respond by faith in what God is doing.

What about our expectations? Have they become demands God must meet for our happiness and security? What about our focus? Is it on the Lord, on His person, His sovereignty, wisdom, etc.? What about our strategies? Are we trying to meet our needs and wants by our own solutions according to our own timing rather than by God’s?

The Problem of The Consequences

In the next scene, we find Elijah discouraged, depressed, hiding, and failing to minister to his people. This is what some call burnout. Elijah’s actions were not the actions of faith or fellowship, but desperation and the results demonstrate this in the verses that follow. The consequences, which we will cover next, are in stark contrast to chapters 17 and 18.

Elijah in Depression (19:4, 10, 14)

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. Just like the rest of us, he experienced the problem of depression—that mental and emotional condition marked by feelings of discouragement, worthlessness, dejection, guilt, apprehension, and failure. Life is much like a roller coaster—full of ups and downs. The tendency is for us to experience happiness, joy, significance, and security according to where we are on that mean machine. We all have to ride it, but we do not have to be dominated by it. We can learn to ride it with a great deal more spiritual, mental, and emotional stability regardless of whether we are in the valleys, on the level places, or on one of the peaks. Spiritual stability is one of the blessings of our salvation in Christ. We experience it only as we learn to keep our focus on the

Lord and His purposes, and as we rest by faith in God's person, principles, and promises (Phil. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 4:8-18; Heb. 4:1-11).

But alas, we all have feet of clay. Keeping our focus on the Lord and our minds relating to God in the midst of a fallen and evil world that says, *happiness, security, significance*, (i.e., your needs), *are found in the details of life*, is not easy. We are bombarded with a general attitude that is illustrated in slogans like "life is short, so play hard. You only go around once, so get all the gusto you can." Even when we are not affected by that kind of thinking--and Elijah was not--it is still difficult to maintain our spiritual equilibrium or orientation to God. It is easy to get lost in the fog, the dense clouds that sometimes envelop us. We try to fly by the seat of our pants rather than by our biblical instrument panel. As a result, we get lost or we crash and burn emotionally.

In this chapter, Elijah becomes a classic illustration of a depressed person. We find in his thinking, words, and actions many classic symptoms of depression--withdrawal or escape, moodiness, apprehension or fear, self-pity, feelings of worthlessness, loss of hope or confidence, anger, irritability, painful and wrong thinking, and physical exhaustion to name some of the symptoms.

According to Doctors Minirth and Meier, the number one problem in America is depression. They say:

As psychiatrists we see more people suffering from depression than from all other emotional problems put together . . . At the present time, one American in 20 is medically diagnosed as suffering from depression . . . of course, many, many more are depressed but never receive help. According to one estimate about 20 million persons in America between the ages of eighteen and 74 are currently depressed . . . Depression occurs two times more often in females, than males, and it occurs three times more often in higher socio-economic groups. Money definitely does not buy happiness. Depression occurs most often in the fourth and fifth decades of life, but may occur during any stressful period from infancy to old age.²⁹

These statistics are interesting and important because we live in a day and in a country where the average person has a higher level of prosperity than probably any other time in history. People have more of the details of life, more potentials for pleasure, travel, fun and games, and luxury than ever before. Yet, depression is a major problem in this country. Paul Meier says:

I have had millionaire businessmen come into my office and tell me they have big houses, yachts, condominiums in Colorado, nice children, a beautiful mistress, an unsuspecting wife, secure corporate positions--and suicidal tendencies.³⁰

We might expect depression in this kind of person. But, as I am sure you know, and as the above statistics support, depression is just as big a problem among believers and even those in full-time ministry. The problem of burnout in the ministry among missionaries and pastors is huge. Why mention all of this in connection with Elijah? Because it stresses our vulnerability as Bible-believing Christians. Depression is a devastating, debilitating malady that affects our total person--spirit, soul, and body. And it negatively impacts us spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Note some facts about depression:

(1) It is universal. It is no respecter of persons. It touches the poor and the rich, the weak and the mighty, the educated and the uneducated. It hits everyone because, ultimately, it is not caused by circumstances, possessions, or position, but rather by the way one handles life.

(2) No profession is exempt from it. It reaches out and grabs doctors, lawyers, businessmen, cab drivers, construction workers, pastors, missionaries, nurses, secretaries, housewives, moms and dads, farmers, truck drivers, athletes, etc.

(3) Depression has nothing to do with one's IQ. If anything, people with higher IQs are more susceptible.

(4) Age is not a defense against it. It attacks the young and old alike. Each decade of age has its own special susceptibility to depression. This is often referred to as the cycles of depression.

²⁹ Frank B. Minirth and Paul D. Meier, *Happiness Is A Choice*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1978, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

(5) Depression ranges from mild mood swings (which we all face) to deep psychosis.

(6) It may of course have physical causes. A lack of sleep, improper diet, vitamin deficiency, exhaustion are among the more simple causes. It may also be caused by such things as drugs, low blood sugar, glandular disorders, allergies, brain tumors, and chemical imbalances.

(7) One of the most common causes, however, is in the area of the spiritual, mental, and emotional. This can also affect the physical (Prov. 14:30; 17:22). In other words, while there are physical causes, and these should be checked out, the most common causes are spiritual. Some of these causes are:

- **Disappointment or failure.** We tend to become depressed when our expectations are not met. Timothy LaHaye says, “of the hundreds of depressed cases I have examined, without exception they began with a disappointment or an experience in which the individual was displeased.”³¹ People tend to become depressed when they become disappointed in their performance, in another’s performance, or when something they were expecting did not materialize.
- **An Unbiblical Self-concept.** Thinking wrongly about ourselves can be a terrible downer. This involves disappointment in ourselves, which may be the result of a wrong self-image of who we are in Christ. It also may be the result of false and unrealistic expectations or unresolved guilt, real or unreal. In other words, seeking happiness, security, and significance from our success or performance rather than from the Lord is a real downer--a big cause of discouragement or depression.
- **Covetousness.** This is the strong desire for things--position, power, prestige, possessions, privileges, etc., in the belief that they will meet our needs, that they will give us happiness or security. When these things don’t meet our needs (and they won’t) depression sets in.
- **Rejection by Others.** We all have a basic need for the ABC tripod of stability--acceptance, belongingness, and competence. When any one of these suffer, it can cause depression. Again, however, the root cause is our failure to find this tripod of emotional and mental stability in God’s evaluation and declarations regarding our lives. In Christ, we have acceptance. As God’s children, we belong to the family of God and we have the capacity He gives us to live the Christian life.

Elijah had experienced a great victory on Mount Carmel with a long-time goal accomplished. Yahweh was proven to be the true God, the people had worshipped the Lord as the true God, and the Baal prophets had been put to death. But this was also a very vulnerable time; a time where anyone could easily let down. Elijah had expended a great deal of energy--both physical and spiritual. It was truly a mountain-top experience, but now he needed to watch for the valleys that always follow.

As soon as Jezebel heard of the victory of Elijah, she sent her threat and his expectations for revival and reformation were dashed into pieces like a china cup on a concrete floor. Being disappointed, Elijah got his eyes off the Lord, became fearful, and ran for his life down to Beersheba and then beyond into the desert. He was alone, having left his servant behind. He was tired, exhausted, and in the wilderness by himself without food and water. Of course, he was not alone because the Lord was there, but he felt totally alone, helpless, fearful, hurt, a failure, and he wasn’t thinking with the viewpoint of the Word.

In such a state, what do we do? We become apathetic and faithless. We seek escape, feel sorry for ourselves and think irrationally (biblically speaking). We lose our perspective. The situation becomes a mountain and the Lord becomes in our sight like a mole hill. We stop enjoying life, we forget our goals, lose ground, and withdraw from God and people--the very ones we need the most. With this in mind, let’s note some of the causes for Elijah’s discouragement or depression:

Psychological Reason: There is generally a natural let down after victory and the accomplishment of a goal or a large task. Sunday nights and Mondays used to be terrible for me because of the let down following the emotional high of Sunday.

Physical Reason: Have you ever noticed how quickly discouragement, irritability and depression can come when you are exhausted? Elijah was physically and emotionally drained from the whole experience of Mount

³¹ Tim LaHaye, *How to Win Over Depression*, p. 49.

Carmel, the run to Jezreel, and, added to all that, the flight into the desert. I get exhausted just thinking about it! When our bodies are tired, we can't think and respond to pressure as well as we normally can. In Elijah's exhausted state, he prayed, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life." Instead, the Lord lovingly and graciously sent an angel to feed and nourish him. There is a principle here: proper rest, diet, and exercise are essential to coping with depression.

Spiritual Reasons:

(1) Disappointment, or failing to rest his expectations on the Lord. Elijah was expecting revival and reformation, but instead he experienced rejection and a threat against his life. He failed to realize that God was at work regardless of how things appeared to him. Later in the chapter, God illustrates that to the Prophet.

(2) Anger and hurt that quickly led to self-pity. He was angry at everyone including himself and the Lord. People didn't care. He had failed. God had let him down, and no one would stand with him in the fight. He was all alone. But when our hurts fester into anger and replace love and endurance, we quickly lose our perspective and begin to imagine things that only reinforce our bad feelings and increase our depression.

(3) Wrong thinking about himself. This is seen as we examine 19:4, 10, and 14. There was the thinking that he was indispensable and poor God, He was left alone with just Elijah. So, suddenly, all became hopeless. Note three things: (a) He became occupied with his own importance, as seen in his words, "I am very zealous for the Lord, . . . for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant . . ." This was basically true, but focusing on this caused him to forget or ignore some other important principles of the Word. (b) He began to think of himself and his ministry as indispensable to the Lord's cause. We see this in his words, "the son's of Israel have forsaken . . . and I alone am left," i.e., there is no one else to maintain your cause, God. He was ignoring God's independent sovereignty and the doctrine of the remnant. God always has a remnant (Isa. 1:9). Though the Lord uses individuals as his instruments, He is dependent on no one. (c) Finally, he saw himself as an absolute failure, as worthless, as no better than his fathers who had allowed the nation to fall into this condition. In other words, he was seeking his significance, his value on his life, from his success in terms of outward results.

All of this "stinking thinking" blinded him to the Lord and the principles of Scripture. He lost sight of these principles: (a) Though we are soldiers in God's army, the battle is the Lord's (1 Sam. 17:14). (b) While we are fellow workers with the Lord with one sowing and another watering, the Lord alone gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-9), and He does so in different degrees (Matt. 13:24), and according to His timing (Eccl. 3:1; Gal. 6:9). (c) The Lord prospers His Word as He sees fit, and sometimes it becomes the basis of His judgment rather than blessing (Isa. 55:11; 6:9-11).

One of the great causes of discouragement is the lack of apparent progress, yet progress is not always obvious especially in spiritual matters, at least not to us.

The Chinese bamboo tree does absolutely nothing--or so it seems--for the first four years. Then suddenly, sometime during the fifth year, it shoots up ninety feet in sixty days. Would you say the bamboo tree grows in six weeks or in five years? Well, our lives and ministry are often like the bamboo tree. Sometimes we put forth effort, put forth effort, and put forth effort . . . and nothing seems to happen. But if you do the right things long enough, you'll receive the rewards of your efforts.³²

Compare 1 Corinthians 15:58 and Galatians 6:9, "And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary." We are all to find our significance, our value in the Lord and His grace. We need to know we are complete in Christ and have been given gifts of grace to serve Him (Col. 2:10; Rom. 12:3f).

Elijah, of course, was not alone. The Lord was there and even sent His angel to minister to him. Not only is the Lord omnipresent, but how comforting to know He has promised to never leave nor forsake believers no matter what we face (Ps. 139; Heb. 13:5-6). He was also not alone from the human standpoint. God had 7,000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal.

Note how the Lord handles Elijah's depression:

³² S. Truett Cathy, quoted in *Secrets of Staying Power* by Kevin A. Miller, Word Books, Waco, TX, 1988, p. 51.

(1) Before He dealt with Elijah's spiritual condition, He rejuvenated Elijah physically with rest and nourishment.

(2) He then got Elijah to face his true condition, the real problem. Taking the position of a counselor, the Lord twice asked Elijah "why are you here?" In other words, take stock, think about what you have been doing (vss. 9 and 13).

(3) God spoke to him personally in verses 9, 12, 13, and 15. This illustrates the need to be in the Word where we listen to the Lord (hear His still small voice), focus on Him, and apply truth. We will study this in more detail later.

(4) He got Elijah active and involved in ministry again. Note the "*Go, return on your way . . .*" in verse 15. When feeling down, depressed, apart from getting needed rest, do not give in to the temptation to mope about and do nothing. Doing nothing only reinforces the depression. By the same token, never use activity to narcotize the pain. Give it to the Lord. Rest, relaxation, and solitude with the Lord needs the balance of involvement in work and ministry, but always out of a spirit of faith, never just activity.

(5) God provided Elijah with a companion. He commanded him to find Elisha. Elijah was trying to do too much himself. He had to learn to share the work load and burden with others. Eventually, others must be able to share our load and even take our place.

Conclusion

Depression, as we have been discussing it here, is not something we catch like a virus, something that is unavoidable. We bring it on ourselves by wrong thinking and wrong choices, and for some reason we unconsciously choose to get depressed. It is a choice we do not want to make, but we make it anyway. Why do we choose it? Because it is one of our strategies for coping with our disappointments. Depression is simply a man-made and temporary solution to our pain. The world offers many solutions for relief, but they are not only temporary and shallow, but they invariably lead us away from God's solutions. This makes them part of Satan's program of deception. People want to feel better and to be comfortable. Some of our ways of coping may be legitimate, but if they do not ultimately lead us to find and know God's sufficiency, they become a part of the problem rather than the solution. As Proverbs teaches us, "there is a way that seems right unto man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

We must count the costs of depression. Depression costs us tremendously in terms of our productivity, our effectiveness, and our happiness physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Depression affects us in every sphere--at home, on the job, in the community, and in our church and in the Lord's work.

This lesson has dealt more with the subject of depression. In the next lesson, we will look in more detail at verses 5-19.

Lesson 16: The Restoration of Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-18)

Introduction

Of all the chapters on the life and ministry of Elijah, 1 Kings 19 is, in my opinion, the most instructive and, in many ways, the most encouraging because we can all so easily identify with the prophet and his failure. Just when the Lord needed him the most, this divinely trained prophet proved to be a notable failure and ended up running away from his post in a terribly depressed condition.

Elijah had demonstrated courage before Ahab in the king's palace and on Mount Carmel. He had also witnessed God's supply by the brook, in the home of the widow, in the years of famine, in the fire from heaven that consumed the sacrifice, in the coming of the rain, and in the ability to outrun Ahab back to Jezreel. However, when faced with the threat of Jezebel and the obvious fact there would be no immediate revival in the land, he suddenly became fearful and discouraged. He then deserted his post and ran for his life. If Jezebel had really wanted him dead, she would have tried to seize him without warning, but, cunning as she was, she wanted rather to discredit him before his new converts and she was successful.

We have asked the question, how could this have happened to such a man of God? We saw that part of the reason undoubtedly lies in the problem of his expectations, in the problem of his lost focus, and in the problem of turning to his own strategies (with the last two problems being the result of the first). It is right to expect the Lord to work, but our expectations must never be the source of our happiness or our confidence in the work of God. We must learn to rest our expectations in God's sovereignty, trusting Him for the timing and the means.

But the Lord wasn't through with Elijah and failure doesn't mean defeat or an end to our ministry. This is also one of the encouraging elements of this chapter. Before God could use Elijah, however, there were some things Elijah had to learn. Elijah's failure and discouragement (because of his expectations) were due in part to two things. First there was his view of what it would take to change the nation. His God-given successes had made him take his own importance too seriously (19:4, 9, 14). Furthermore, he thought the primary means of reaching the people was the display of God's power in dramatic and spectacular ways. He thought if they didn't respond to that, there was no hope. So, when he failed to see the results he expected, he was shattered. Oh, how we often set ourselves up for discouragement by our pride and our expectations which we fail to rest on the foundation of God's wisdom.

Now as we move into this section, note that five times the word "*behold*" is used to highlight an important fact or truth of God's dealings with the prophet (19:5, 6, 9, 11, 13). Against the backdrop of Elijah's failure, this little demonstrative particle highlights God's gracious work to restore the prophet back to his ministry regardless of what he had done. Let's look at how the Lord worked to restore the prophet.

God's Provision for Elijah (19: 5-18)

The Provision of Sleep (vs. 5a)

The juniper tree is not the coniferous tree of the *genus juniperous*. The Hebrew word for this tree or bush is *rothem*. This was a shrub found in abundance in southern Palestine. It had long slender branches with small leaves and provided very poor shade or protection from the sun. And so it goes with our man-made solutions from which we seek shelter, refuge or solutions to our pain. Out of exhaustion, Elijah fell asleep. God has ordained sleep and rest as necessary for our survival and ability to function, so the Lord allowed a time of sleep before He brought on the next phase of His provision for Elijah. How interesting. God remembers that we are frail. He knows our frame, that we are but dust. He is mindful that we possess material bodies that must be cared for, often, before the spiritual part can function (Ps. 103:14).

Before we expect too much from ourselves or from others, whom we are seeking to encourage with the Word, let's remember this principle of the need of rest and that sometimes the physical needs to be cared for before the spiritual.

The Provision of an Angel (vs. 5b)

The Time and Place of God's Provision

With the word "behold" the Hebrew text has the word *zeh*, an adverb of place or perhaps time that means, "here" or "now." Literally, the Heb. text reads, "behold here" or "behold now." This highlights the place and time when God's angel, His messenger of mercy, comes on the scene. What's the Lord pointing out to us in this picture? This special work of God's grace did not occur on the summit of Mount Carmel, nor when in conflict with the prophets of Baal, nor by the brook where the Lord had sent Elijah, nor when he was in prayer and intimate fellowship. It occurred when he was in the wilderness, when Elijah was out of fellowship. It was when he was depressed and a deserter with the best his own strategies could supply--a scrubby desert bush.

The Nature of God's Provision

Verse 5 tells us an angel was touching him, awakening him to eat. But in verse 7 this angel is identified as "the angel of the LORD," a description always used in the Old Testament of a special manifestation of God Himself. This was no ordinary angel. It was a Theophany or better yet, a Christophany--a manifestation of the second person of the Trinity. This was no less than the Savior who came personally to minister to the prophet. God sent not the ravens as before, nor a widow, nor some other natural means, but the preincarnate Christ. Why?

(1) To show the prophet His love and grace and perhaps to remind us that it was when we were sinners and alienated from God that He sent His Son for us. It is also a reminder that the Savior never leaves us no matter how far we drift away. He is personally involved in seeking to restore us. The Lord was not condoning what Elijah had done or overlooking it, but rather (a) He was assuring Elijah he was still the object of His love, and (b) that He still had a plan and purpose for the prophet just as He does for us when we get out of His plan. Compare John 21.

(2) This also affirmed the power of God. Though the means may be completely lacking to us and all may appear lost and without hope, there is never an end to the degree of God's love and care, nor to the capacity and power at God's disposal to supply any need at any time.

The Provision of Food (vs. 6)

Elijah needed some special instruction from the Lord, but again, he first needed physical strength through nourishment. He was in no condition to listen or take in the Word of God. Twice he is told to eat and drink, and twice he is allowed to sleep. Again we are reminded that as human beings, we were designed to function in all aspects of our being--body, soul, and spirit. Though the spiritual is the foundation and vital for our overall well being and effectiveness as the Lord's servants, still, all aspects of our makeup need care and each part is affected by the other parts (cf. Matt. 6:33; 1 Tim. 4:8; Pro. 14:30; 17:22).

Let's note Elijah's response in verse 6: "So he ate and drank and lay down again." What does this tell us? When we are depressed and out of fellowship with the Lord, we tend to be as insensitive and ungrateful as the unbelieving world. Elijah seemed to be neither surprised nor overwhelmed by this supply of grace. There is no record of any response, not even a "thank you." It appears he simply took God for granted.

What would you have done if you had been the Lord? Probably made it rain on him all night or send a swarm of mosquitoes or fire ants. But God is merciful, loving, and gracious. Further, He knew Elijah was not yet able to respond and God didn't even expect it. His capacity for response and appreciation would come later. For now, God was patient and seeking to physically restore and strengthen.

The Trip to Horeb, The Mountain of God (vs. 8)

Verse 8 tells us "he arose and ate and drank, and went . . . to Horeb, the mountain of God." Because of the history of this mountain and the last statement of verse 7, we might be tempted to think he went there to find the

Lord or he went there at God's orders. I do not believe the text supports that idea. Notice twice Elijah is asked what he is doing there on the mountain (vss. 9 and 13). This was God as the Great Counselor working to get Elijah to evaluate where he was, why he was there, and what he was doing. He was there because he was still running away.

Furthermore, the text tells us "he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb." From where Elijah began, a day's journey south of Beersheba, he was no forty days and nights from Horeb. A straight trip from the broom tree would have required little more than seven, maybe eight days. It seems clear that he was simply wandering about much like the children of Israel had done for forty years

Furthermore, the forty days and forty nights is not without symbolical significance. (a) As the children of Israel had a significant spiritual failure (at Kadesh Barnea) and wandered forty years in the wilderness, so a defeated Elijah was to spend forty days in the desert (cf. Num. 14:26-35). (b) As Moses had spent forty days on the mountain without bread and water, sustained only by God while he awaited a new phase of service (Ex. 34:28), so Elijah was to spend forty days thrown upon God's divine enablement as he was being prepared for a recommissioning by God (cf. Matt. 4:1-2). (c) As Moses was to see the presence of God (Ex. 33:12-23), so Elijah was to find God, though in a different way than he could ever imagine.³³

By God's divine grace and providence, he was sustained as Israel was through the forty years, and he was drawn to Horeb, to Sinai, the special place of God's divine revelation of Himself.

By way of application, isn't this really another indication of the grace of God that even when we are out of fellowship, with our hearts devising our own way, the Lord still works on behalf of His children's needs to lead them back to Himself? Isn't this also an illustration of how we are so prone to prolong our trek in the wilderness in the pursuit of our own solutions to our pain and misery rather than quickly turn to the Lord. Why? Because we tend to believe so strongly in our solutions. Because of our pride or our sensitive egos. We just do not like to admit we are wrong and pursuing a wrong course.

Elijah in the Cave (vs. 9a)

His physical circumstances had now improved. This cave was a much better source of refuge than a broom tree, but his spiritual condition was still in shambles. In other words, the cave represents just another human strategy for refuge which, of course, was a substitute for God as his refuge. He may have felt better, but he was not where the Lord wanted him spiritually speaking. Now, because of his improved physical condition, he is in a better place to learn and listen. In fact, some believe that since this cave was somewhere on Mount Horeb, it could very well have been "the cleft of the rock" where the Lord had placed Moses when God's glory passed by (Ex. 33:21-33).

The Word of the Lord Comes to Elijah (vs. 9b)

Again we have a section highlighted by the word "behold." This calls our attention to what the Lord has been doing with Elijah--preparing him to hear the Word. Like all of us, he desperately needed to hear the Word. He needed further instruction and insight that he might see himself and God, and in the process learn a very important truth that is also very, very crucial for our day as well.

Please note God's question: "Why are you here Elijah?" This was designed, I believe, to be a soul searching question. Did he understand why he was there from his standpoint and from God's standpoint? Did he grasp what was happening? In this question, we have an illustration of the concept of the Word reproving and exposing us to our failures, our false belief systems, and to God's grace. Did he understand he was there because of his faulty thinking and his wrong focus? Did he understand that though he had been running from the Lord, it was God who had led him to this very special place to instruct and restore him?

Elijah's Response (vs. 10)

His answer shows us he had not grasped the issues. He was still smarting over his failure as expressed in verse 4. He was filled with his own importance, and angry over the lack of response and help from others including

³³ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelain, general editor, Vol. 4, 1991, p. 149, electronic media.

the Lord. He was somewhat bitter because he had served the Lord so earnestly and spectacularly and still, he had experienced only rejection and exile. Jeremiah had a similar experience (cf. Jer. 20:7-9).

The Lord's Response and Directions (vss. 11-13)

The Lord simply ignored Elijah's self-justification and reason for being on the mountain. Instead, He offers him instruction that would result in special revelation about the Lord and God's method of operation. Elijah is told to come out of the cave and stand before the Lord. Remember, this cave represented Elijah's human strategy for refuge--the product of his wrong focus and thinking. I believe the Lord was rejecting Elijah's solution and was showing him that He alone is to be Elijah's refuge.

It was to be as David said in Psalm 11:1, "In the Lord I take refuge; How can you say to my soul, 'Flee as a bird to your mountain.'" Or as David counseled himself in Ps. 62:5-6, "My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken."

In verse 11, we have another "behold" section designed to highlight another important event--the Lord passing by the cave on the mountain. Why was the Lord passing by? To reveal Himself and an important truth in the spiritual maturity of the prophet. But suddenly, before Elijah comes out of the cave, four events occur, three of them spectacular.

(1) A rock-shattering wind smote the mountain around Elijah with rocks breaking in pieces. Surely such a spectacular event such as this would announce the presence of the Lord and illustrate how He would work in the future. But no, the Lord was not in the wind.

(2) A dreadful earthquake occurred shaking even the foundations under his feet, but again, the Lord was not in the earthquake.

(3) A sudden fire followed, but this too did not announce the presence nor the activity of the Lord. Still, the Lord was not there. "All of these physical phenomena were known to be precursors of God's coming or presence" (Ex. 19:16, 18; Jud. 4:4-5; 2 Sam. 22:8-16; Ps. 18:7-15; 68:8; Heb. 12:18).³⁴ But the fact God was not in any of them was tremendously significant.

(4) After the fire, Elijah heard a gentle blowing, a faint whisper, a quiet voice, hushed and low. "Elijah knew it instantly (vs. 13a). It was God! What a lesson for Elijah! Even God did not always operate in the realm of the spectacular!"³⁵

In fact, the miraculous and the spectacular are the exception, even in the Bible. I believe the still small voice portrays the work and power of God in His inspired Word, the Scripture which is itself alive and powerful, a spectacular and miraculous book in that it is God breathed and infallible. And would you note that it is this that aroused Elijah and brought him out of the cave where he could have fellowship with the Lord, hear His voice, and be restored. Out of reverence for God's presence, Elijah pulled his mantle over his face and went out of the cave.

What was Elijah to learn from this? What's the lesson of God's absence in the spectacular, but His presence in the small, low voice? God's primary vehicle for changing people and bringing reformation and revival is not the miraculous, the sensational, and spectacular like Israel experienced on Mount Carmel. It is God's voice speaking to people as He did in olden days through the prophets and the Old Testament and now to us in the complete inspired Word through the ministry of the Spirit of God (cf. Luke 16:27-31; 2 Pet. 1:1-21; Heb. 1:1-3). The Bible is called the Word of God because it is His voice, not in audible sounds, but in the words of the pages of Scripture. And when we hear it preached and taught (so far as what is preached and taught is true to the text of the Bible) we are hearing the voice of God that effectually works in those who believe (1 Thess. 2:13).

If people will not respond to the Word that is alive and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, they are not going to respond even if someone comes back from the grave and tells them about hell (Luke 16:31). Certainly, many people are impressed by the miraculous and seek the sensational and the spectacular, but generally, that's not what changes lives.

³⁴ Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 150 electronic media.

³⁵ Ibid.

This four-fold manifestation of God was given with these four-fold phenomena to show God honors and works through the message of His Word, that He cares for his people who share His Word, and that it will not return to Him void. Either, it will bring judgment on those who spurn it, or it will result in positive spiritual fruit for those who believe and respond to it. The following sequel of events clearly demonstrate this fact of Scripture.

Again in verse 13, Elijah is faced with the divine question, a voice comes to him asking, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” But again in verse 14 his reply was the same. How slow we are to learn and how deep seated our feelings of rejection and hurt become established. We keep clinging to them as our way of escape and defense. Remember, depression that is not caused by physical problems, is one of our methods of escape. It is a human strategy for dealing with pain and disappointment. The irony is we seem to be more willing to depend on it as a solution than we are to trust the Lord.

The Recommissioning of the Prophet (vss. 15-18)

Here the Lord, in the low, still, small voice of divine revelation to the prophet, explains and reveals the truth of the power of the Word that brings judgment on those who reject it, and blessing to those who believe it. Elijah is told to anoint three people and each one acts as an agent of divine judgment or blessing.

(1) The strong wind may be a figure of the work of judgment which Hazael of Syria would perform in Israel (2 Kgs. 8:12 and 10:32-36).

(2) The earthquake may be a figure of judgment and revolution under Jehu that would destroy the house of Ahab (2 Kgs. 9:1-10).

(3) The fire may be a picture of the work of judgment completed by Elisha, Elijah’s successor (1 Kgs. 19:17).

The call of Elisha, a young man available and positive to the Word and the Lord, and the 7,000 who had not bowed to Baal illustrate the other side of the coin. It showed Elijah that his ministry had not been in vain and that God’s Word does not return void no matter how things may look to us. The nation would not be totally exterminated and there were those who would carry on the work of the Lord.

Lesson 17: Taking Up Your Mantle (1 Kings 19:19-21)

Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Kings record the history of the nation of Israel from the time of Solomon through the division of the kingdom, the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 with the Assyrian captivity, and then the fall of the southern kingdom in 586 BC with the Babylonian captivity. The kingdom divided into the southern kingdom of Judah, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the northern kingdom of Israel that consisted of the remaining ten tribes.

During this time there were some good kings who reigned in the southern kingdom and who brought about spiritual reforms. But in the northern kingdom (where Elijah and Elisha served) all the kings were evil and there were no true revivals. All the kings of Israel (the northern kingdom) did evil in the sight of the Lord.

In the midst of this degenerate and idolatrous kingdom ruled by vicious, cruel, and degenerate kings, the Lord called two men, one the successor of the other. These two prophets stood as the heralds of God and His Word. They were also leaders for a school of prophets who actually served in both the northern and southern kingdoms.

Elijah's ministry does not end with the call of Elisha who became Elijah's attendant and student. Instead, it continued for several years as the mentor of Elisha. After his renewal by the Lord on Mount Horeb, Elijah began a ministry of mentoring or discipling Elisha. Mentoring others is one of the most important ministries any of us can have, especially leaders, but one that should not be limited to leaders.

Actually, the ministry here was dual. Not only did Elijah minister to Elisha, but undoubtedly, Elisha became a great comfort and encouragement to Elijah. At one time, Elijah thought he alone was left to carry on the work of God, but he was informed this was not the case at all. In fact, there were 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Among these were several schools of the prophets. Until this time, they were hiding in caves, afraid to come out and speak for the Lord. But after Elijah's experience and renewal on Mount Horeb, he began traveling over the country teaching in these schools with Elisha as his attendant and disciple.

The Call of Elisha (19:19)

In verse 19, we find Elijah now moving out of the place of loneliness and discouragement. The Lord had sought him while he was in that condition and revitalized and restored him to his ministry through the spiritual insight he received from the Angel of the Lord. Restored with new understanding about the way God works, the prophet left the mountain and found Elisha. The anointing of the kings mentioned in 19:15-16 would come later. The first priority was to find Elisha.

This illustrates how God's Word works to restore and renew our lives. Graciously, He works to put us either on track or back on track to make us fruitful. Like Elijah, we too can easily find ourselves down, lonely, and discouraged, but the Lord is the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3) and He has committed Himself to our renewal and restoration. What a loving and gracious Lord, but we need to make ourselves available to God's resources for renewal: (a) The Word (Rom. 15:4), and (b) other believers encouraging one another (2 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13). Thus, Elijah first went to find Elisha who became an encouragement to the prophet.

Elijah found Elisha "while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth." This seems to indicate that Elisha belonged to a family of considerable wealth. To obey the prophetic call would mean doing so at a considerable personal loss, financially speaking. It would mean counting the costs. It meant counting his financial security as loss and becoming a soldier of the Lord in the trenches of a tremendous spiritual conflict. But Elisha's responses in verses 20 and 21 show us he was a man of faith who was willing to do just that.

Elisha had developed biblical values, priorities and eternal perspectives that had captured his heart which then controlled what he did with his life. As a result, he acted on his faith by following God's call. He was willing

to be uprooted from his quiet, peaceful, and rural life with its financial security to follow the Lord. Obviously he knew what his nation needed was the Word of the Lord. Like the sons of Issachar, he understood the times and knew what he must do (1 Chr. 12:32).

But I think it is also important to note *where* Elisha was when Elijah found him. Though he belonged to a prominent family, he was at work in the field with the rest of the field hands. Though wealthy, he was not irresponsible or lazy. This didn't make him a leader, but it certainly demonstrated he had already developed the kind of character needed for leadership. Not only did hard work build character, it gave him a testimony to those around him.

I think it is interesting to note how many great men of the Bible were called into some special ministry after they had already demonstrated an ability and a willingness to work and where they had also shown faithfulness and loyalty? Note the following illustrations:

- Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law.
- David was tending sheep for his father.
- Peter was a fisherman.
- Paul had a trade making tents.
- The Lord Himself was a carpenter by trade who was trained by Joseph.

Many young people go through college or Bible school and then on to seminary. Upon graduation they seek a full-time ministry without the beneficial experience of having worked in the work place, been in the military or learned a trade. Then we wonder why they have problems in the ministry when faced with its rigid demands. Well, this can be one of the causes. Unless they worked their way through school, many do not really know what it is like to face the trials of the work place, nor have they developed the discipline of work. Furthermore, if, for whatever reason they must leave full-time ministry and work in a secular job, they have difficulty in supporting themselves and their families because they never learned a trade. When support for his ministry was lacking, the apostle Paul always turned to his trade as a tent maker.

As parents, we need to teach our children to work, first at home around the house and then encourage learning a trade as a part of their education. Learning to work helps to develop character, faithfulness, resourcefulness, and responsibility.

“And Elijah passed over to him (Elisha) and threw his mantle on him” (vs. 19). Let's notice three things:

(1) This mantle was the official garment of a prophet. There were three types of mantles worn in biblical times. This is the *`adderet*, a cloak that could be made of animal hair and was a garment of distinction worn by kings and especially by prophets (1 Kgs. 19:13, 19; 2 Kgs. 2:8, 13-14; Zech. 13:4). The mantle automatically marked a man as a prophet, a spokesman of God. It was also a symbol of sacrifice and commitment. The life of a prophet was not a life of luxury. The mantle represented a man's gift, the call of God, and the purpose for which God had called him.

(2) Throwing it over the shoulders of Elisha was a symbolic act denoting his summons to the office of prophet, but it was also a sure sign of God's gift that enabled him to fulfill the prophetic office and ministry. This act by Elijah was a prophetic announcement that the gift of prophecy had been given (or would come) to Elisha. It was immediately understood by Elisha even without words.

(3) While some will disagree, I do not believe God calls believers in the same way today. Today, every believer is a priest of God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) and is in some sense called to full-time service to represent the Lord even if their occupation is secular. As believers in Christ, we are God's representatives and called to ministry according to the gifts God gives us. Part of this occurs in the work place, part in the home, part may occur in the church, and part may occur with a neighbor, etc. Every believer has a spiritual gift (or gifts) and this represents at least a portion of the mantle of God's call on one's life.

What God has gifted you to do, He has called you to do. What He has called you to do, He has gifted you to do. How do you know God's call? By knowing your gift(s).

Understanding that all believers have been given a spiritual gift(s), we should seek to recognize our gift(s), develop them, and through God's leading, put them to work. Knowing what our gifts are automatically determines a

great portion of God's will and direction for our lives from the standpoint of priorities, commitments, goals, and training. For instance, if a person does not have one of the speaking gifts (teaching, exhortation, etc.), God has not called him to preach or be a pastor. While we are all to do the work of evangelism and should look for opportunities to disciple and mentor others on a one-to-one basis, we should do people a favor by staying out of the pulpit or classroom as a teacher unless we are so gifted. One's gift may be *helps*, or *showing mercy*. If so, that is where God wants to use us. 1 Peter 4:10 says, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." A good steward is one who employs his gifts (accepts his mantle) by faithful development (training and use).

This concept is true regardless of one's occupation. Our occupation may be anything from an engineer to a doctor, from a housewife to an executive secretary, a nurse or doctor. But our vocation, our calling, is to serve the Lord according to the way He has gifted us. Perhaps you know, as I do, of some who have found ways to reduce their workload and time in their business or profession in order to increase their capacity for other kinds of ministry. In some cases it meant reduced income, but they did so to invest more time with their families and in ministry. In some cases, God even blessed their occupation more. Their giving was not their lack. This, however, is not to suggest one's secular work is not a form of ministry. I believe it is and not just as a platform for the gospel. For an excellent book on this, may I suggest: *Your Work Matters to God*, by Sherman and Hendricks.

The Response of Elisha (19:20-21)

His Immediate Response (vs. 20a)

Elisha's response was immediate. There was no hesitation or riding the fence. As we will see, his request regarding his father and mother was not an act of hesitation. Rather, Elisha was decisive, which undoubtedly indicated the previous work of God in his life and the perfect timing of this event. For Elisha (and so it should be for all of us), there was no decision to make. The fact of God's call automatically made that decision for him. Any other decision would only lead to futility, unhappiness and a lack of purpose in life, a chasing after the wind.

Let's say, for the sake of illustration, someone has the gift of teaching or showing mercy. God's mantle or call on their life is to get involved to some degree and in some manner with the development and use that gift. They do not have to ask, "Lord, should I develop this gift and seek a place of ministry to use it?" To think and pray like that is equivalent to asking the Lord if they should use their feet and legs for walking. Of course, there are other factors involved for which we should seek wisdom and pray such as: what are my gifts and what training do I need to prepare for the opportunity and the specific place where the Lord wants me to serve? But we do not have to ask, should I use my gift(s)?

There are special commands concerning spiritual gifts: (a) we are to know our gift(s)--Romans 12:3; (b) we should never neglect our gift(s)--1 Timothy 4:14; (c) we are to stir up, be zealous for our gift(s)--2 Timothy 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20; and (d) we are to use our gift(s) in love, serving others by the strength which God supplies and for the glory of God--1 Peter 4:10-11; Romans 12:4f.

His Request to Honor His Parents (vs. 20b)

Elisha requested that he might go back to "kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you" (19:20). This was not an attempt to put off the call nor an act of hesitation. Some have wrongly related this to Luke 9:57-62. The Lord knew the heart of the men in Luke 9 and saw that for what it was, a lack of commitment and an attempt to avoid His call. It was a failure to deny themselves, etc.

But with Elisha, the case was entirely different. Elisha's request was prompted by two things: (a) It was an act of genuine respect and honor for his parents, and (b) it was prompted by a desire to celebrate his entrance into this ministry and to declare and confirm his commitment to follow the Lord before friends and family. We will see this in 1 Kings 19:21.

Elijah's Answer (vs. 20c)

Elijah allowed Elisha's request. He said, "Go back again . . ." Then he added a word of caution and said, "for what have I done to you?" This statement seems to be an idiom that sounds rather abrupt or even meaningless to us. According to the idiom, we might translate it something like, "go back and bid farewell, for I have done something very important to you, but think carefully on what I have done to you, for your call is not from me, but from God!" *The idea is that Elisha was accountable to God for what he did, not to Elijah.* What Elijah had done was to express God's call. Elijah would become Elisha's spiritual leader and mentor, but Elisha must understand that ultimately, he was accountable to God, not to a man.

As the servants of God, we must ever remember that we are ultimately accountable to the Lord for what we do with our lives. God uses men and women in our lives to reach us, to train us, to challenge us, etc., but they are only instruments God uses to point or guide us in the right direction. We are accountable to one another to some degree, but our ultimate or primary accountability is to the Lord (Rom. 14:11-12). It seems to me there is an important principle here. One of the goals of leadership, as with parenthood, is to help people learn to become accountable to God (Heb. 13:17).

The Celebration of Elijah's Call and Commitment (19:21a)

The oxen and the implements, the wooden plow with the yokes, represented the tools of his trade and the means and basis of his past life. Verse 21, then, is basically Elisha's declaration of his commitment to follow the Lord. In essence, he was burning his bridges and counting his past as loss for the Lord that he might gain and attain the new life and ministry that God had for him as a prophet (Phil. 3). Elisha was showing family and friends that he had new goals, aims, aspirations, new commitments, values, and priorities. It showed his determination to never look back, seek to go back, or leave the calling of God no matter how tough it might get. This is a must for believers and especially spiritual leaders. Romans 12:1-2 forms the foundation for the emphasis that follows. Romans 12:3-21 exhorts us to know and use our gifts in ministry.

Through the actions of Elisha, God is showing us we need to develop an unwillingness to throw in the towel, to never say "I quit." Life and service to the Lord are like a cross country race--not a hundred yard dash! One of the greatest needs in the Christian life as fathers or mothers, as husbands or wives, or as servants in any area is endurance with the commitment. We need to be problem-solvers, to work through our problems rather than quit. Elisha was burning his bridges on his past life.

The Preparation of Elisha (19:21b)

Elisha became the attendant, the servant of Elijah (2 Kgs 3:11). His time with Elijah was not only an education in theology and in practical ministry to others, but in humility, submission to authority, loyalty, faithfulness, and obedience in being a servant. All of this was vital to his training and preparation for ministry. In order to lead, one must first learn how to be led. In order to give directions, one must first learn how to receive and follow directions. In order to be faithful, one must first learn faithfulness. This seems to be one of the lessons of Luke 16:10, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much." Elisha's preparation reminds me of Christ's comment in Mark 10:43-45, "but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son man did not come to be served, but to serve."

Conclusion

God has placed a mantle, a call, upon every believer in Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 4:10-11). As believer priests, this mantle is our God-given spiritual gift(s). As gifted ones, we are each to be good stewards of the stewardship He has entrusted to us regarding our *time, talents* (including our spiritual gifts), *treasures*, and His *truth*. This requires Elisha's kind of commitment. When commitment is not there, we will be tottering on the fence and we will be unable to make the tough decisions needed to follow the Lord. This is undoubtedly what Jesus Christ meant in Luke

14:26, 27 and 33. The three conditions mentioned in Luke 14 deal with the necessity of total surrender. Without total surrender, we cannot be His disciples; we simply will not be able to make the sacrificial decisions that following Him will require. This means a reevaluation of our values, priorities, attitudes, and pursuits, but above all, answering the question, who and what is the source of my faith? Is it the Lord? Do I truly believe He will be all I need? Or is my faith in reality anchored in the details of life--pleasure, position, power, prestige, possession? Elisha, like Elijah, was an ordinary man, but he became extra-ordinary because he was available to the Lord, because he turned his life over to the Lord, lock, stock, and barrel, and God was able to use him in tremendous ways.

Lesson 18: The Translation of Elijah--Part 1 (2 Kings 2:1-11)

Introduction

In 2 Kings 2 we are given a glimpse of the mighty works of God through Elijah and Elisha. This in itself teaches us again about the might and power of our God. It also demonstrates a God who is loving and gracious and who cares for us as His people. As we study this passage, we must also remember that normally God does not work today as he did in the Old Testament or even in the New Testament. Even in the Bible, miracles were the exception not the norm or the rule. This is not to say that God does not have the ability to perform such miracles today or that He does not, on occasions, work in miraculous ways for He does. I am only saying that this is the exception. Today we do not have miraculous gifts as did Elijah and Elisha, and the Disciples of the first century. Remember, from a careful study of the New Testament, the disciples apparently lost their miraculous gifts even before the New Testament was completed (cf. Heb. 2:1-4; 2 Tim. 4:20; 1 Tim. 5:23).

Regardless of this fact, this chapter reminds and teaches us that our God is a mighty God and is both transcendent and immanent. By *transcendent* we mean that God is exalted above and is distinct from the universe. God is the source of all the immense power of the universe. There is no law, power, or fate that transcends Him since He alone is the absolute sovereign. By *immanent* we mean God is very much involved with our lives and our being. He pervades, sustains, and controls the universe. In His infinite and divine nature He is even concerned with our personal lives and needs no matter how small (e.g. Elisha and the ax head). This means that God did not simply create the universe and then withdraw, but He is personally involved with all of creation in a most intimate way.

God is above the creation and never bound by its laws which He Himself established. At the same time, He is personally involved with all our ways. These miracles both demonstrate and declare God's transcendence and His immanence.

As we study this passage, we want to be alert to the fact there is much to be seen in the personal working of God in the lives of these men to change and use them in His purposes. There are lessons to be learned which are not so obvious as in the parting of the waters of the Jordan. They are, nevertheless, still the mighty providential works of an intimate, personal and immanent God working in the normal events of life just as He is also doing today in our lives.

The Test of Elisha's Commitment (2:1-6)

Verse 1 calls our attention to the fact that the events of this chapter all occurred shortly before the translation of Elijah, who was one of the key voices for the Word of God. The Lord wanted a replacement for Elijah and Elisha was to become that person. He would take over the ministry of Elijah, but this would mean a great deal of responsibility for this young prophet. Would he be equal to the challenge? Would he have what was needed?

The power that Elisha would need was not a problem. His power would come from God, but he would also need spiritual character to face the trials and pressures in these decadent times. He would need courage, endurance, loyalty, and biblical longings and priorities. I believe the story and events that follow in verses 2-6 were designed to test these character qualities in Elisha and demonstrate his preparedness for the task before him.

After months of training and following Elijah, would Elisha be willing to continue? Would he be as good in the mile as he was in the hundred-yard dash? Was he determined to follow through and stay with Elijah to the very end that he might take on the tremendous responsibility that would follow Elijah's departure? Or could he be persuaded to throw in the towel?

Please note that three times in verses 2, 4 and 6 Elijah asks Elisha to stay where they were while he journeyed on as commanded by the Lord: *first* from Gilgal to Bethel, *then* from Bethel to Jericho, and *finally* from Jericho to Jordan. At both Bethel and Jericho there were schools for the training of prophets, virtual seminaries for training young men to teach the Word and use their gifts for the Lord. Elijah was evidently the head of these schools

and God was undoubtedly sending him to bid them farewell and to encourage them in their work before he was taken (cf. 2 Pet. 1:12f).

Our text does not tell us why Elijah requested Elisha to stay behind. Some believe it was because of humility. Perhaps he did not want anyone to see the glorious thing that was about to happen to him, but God wanted a witness. I also believe he was testing Elisha. Perhaps the Lord was using Elijah's humility and reluctance to have anyone see him taken to test the depth of Elisha's commitment.

God often uses the personalities and lives of others to work in our own lives in various ways. We need to recognize this and respond in faith to what He is doing. Is there someone whose life motivates or encourages you? Or perhaps the opposite exists. Is there someone who irritates you, tries your patience, or who challenges your viewpoints or opinions? Proverbs teaches, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17).

Each time, Elisha refused to stay behind. He even used a double oath to show his "bulldog tenacity" to stay with his teacher to the very last. He said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Please note that Elijah consents each time. He was not dead set against allowing Elisha to follow and this would suggest this was a test to prove the metal of Elisha. What does this teach us about Elisha and about the kind of character God wants in leaders and all believers since we are all leaders to some degree?

(1) It demonstrates a teachable spirit, a desire to learn and know more about the Lord and ministry. Certainly by this time, as Elijah's servant and student, Elisha knew a great deal. He also knew he had really only begun. Isn't that the case with all of us? No one has a corner on knowing God. Elisha was a man eager to learn and experience more of knowing the Lord.

(2) He was loyal, loving and committed to ministry. Elijah could certainly use his help and companionship over these journeys. This demonstrated Elisha's commitment to others as a servant, the most fundamental requirement of leadership.

Are you an elder? God has put you there to serve, not just sit on a board and make a few decisions once in a while in an occasional elders' meeting. Are you a spouse, a parent, a Sunday School teacher, a neighbor? God has called you and me to serve and minister to others. This means a willingness to go the extra mile.

This shows us Elisha really cared for his teacher. How we need loyal Christians who are not just looking out for themselves and what they can get out of a church or their leaders. We need servants who are genuinely concerned for others and determined to find ways to serve. By contrast, we are too often quick to criticize and cut others down when we ought to be looking for ways to help.

(3) He was devoted to God's calling. This means God's priorities and goals directed and controlled his life. The Lord had gifted him with the gift of a prophet. He was called to the work of a prophet. He was not ruled by other desires that could turn him off course and make him unavailable to God and others. In New Testament terms, he was a Spirit-controlled man. His attitude was like what the Apostle Paul expressed in Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

As a prophet, he undoubtedly knew that Elijah would be taken. Elisha somehow sensed that being there at that time was vital to his calling and the fulfillment of the work God had called him to do. He was determined, by God's grace, that nothing was going to keep him from being the person and the man God wanted.

Lesson for Elisha in Crossing the Jordan (2:7-8)

With verse 7 we have the third mention of the sons of the prophets (the school of the prophets). Evidently the prophets also knew Elijah was about to be taken and they too were interested in what was about to take place. Elisha had been Elijah's personal attendant and it was perhaps assumed that he would become the new leader of the prophets. Yet the prophets were not even sure Elijah's departure would be permanent (cf. 2:16f).

Still, there was the need to authenticate Elisha's ministry to show he was qualified to succeed Elijah. So we find the students from the school of the prophets, at least part of them, standing at a distance observing what was going on. There was undoubtedly an air of excitement and expectation. Note that at Bethel and at Jericho Elisha was asked, "Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?" We aren't told why this ques-

tion was asked, but perhaps part of the reason was to see what Elisha was going to do? Would he stay by his master to the end?

God calls all believers and especially leaders to be models of Christlikeness. Our profession needs to be backed up with authentic Christian living, not to give us assurance of salvation but to demonstrate the life-changing power of the gospel and to give people confidence in the message of Jesus Christ.

This also reminds us that people are watching to see evidence of the blessing of God's work in our lives. People want to see the authenticity of changed lives, lives of integrity, love, courage, commitment, faithfulness, and ministry. Only God can see our hearts. People must be able to see our works, the fruit of the Spirit, if it is going to have an impact on believers and non-believers alike (1 Tim. 4:12; James 2:14; Heb. 13:7).

So, Elijah and Elisha were standing by the Jordan as the prophets were looking on. Why the Jordan? Because in Scripture, the Jordan has a certain symbolic meaning. It represents barriers to the plan of God. It speaks of that which stands in the way of entering into God's blessing, service, and will. On the other hand, crossing the Jordan represents moving out under the power of God. It speaks of faith in God's power that removes the barriers and allows us to move on to fulfill God's call and work (1 Thess. 2:18; 3:10-11; 2 Thess. 3:1-2). What follows becomes an object lesson and an encouragement to Elisha. Later it would become a means of authenticating his ministry to the other prophets and to people in Israel.

Are there any Jordan rivers in our lives right now that need to be removed by faith and prayer so we can move on for the Lord. Such barriers would include things like wrong values and goals, laziness, preoccupation with the wrong things, or any form of some life-dominating pattern? Their removal becomes an opportunity for God to display His power, an encouragement to you and me, and a testimony to others.

Note the process: Elijah ministers to Elisha which in turn prepares him for ministry to others, and so on and so on. We see in this the principle and need for biblical multiplication (cf. Matt. 28:19, 20 and 2 Tim. 2:1-2).

Are we involved sufficiently in this process? Do we see ourselves first as a disciple, a learner, one teachable and willing to learn from others like Elisha? And do we see ourselves as disciplers, available and involved in helping others to grow? Or do we see ourselves simply as one called to be ministered to? In other words, do we believe in a professional clergy paid to minister to us and do the work of ministry while we sit in the bleachers as spectators.

In verse 8, Elijah took his mantle, folded it together and struck the waters of the Jordan. The waters divided and the two prophets crossed over on dry ground, just as at the Red Sea and at the Jordan when Joshua led the people into the Land. This was an overt act by Elijah, but it was a visible display of an inward and invisible faith in the power of God.

It was also a lesson for Elisha. As God had parted the waters of the Jordan, so He would enable Elisha to both be and do all that was needed for his work and life as Elijah's successor. Elisha was filling a large pair of shoes and he needed confidence in the Lord. I am sure this event stood as a reminder and a constant source of strength and faith not only to Elisha, but to all those who witnessed it.

The same God who worked for Elijah and Elisha is ever present today and available to our needs, working intimately and personally. No matter what our problem or needs are, God cares and will work to enable us to do what He has called us to do (1 Pet. 5:7; Phil. 4:13, 19). We must remind ourselves, however, that God does not work to meet needs indiscriminately or for selfish purposes. He cares and loves us and He meets needs because of that. But He must also often engineer failure and pain in order to conform us to His Son and to carry out His sovereign plan and purposes for our lives (Rom. 8:28-29; James 1:2f).

In this instance, God worked miraculously to remove an obstacle in order to teach, comfort, encourage, demonstrate His power, motivate, and bear testimony to a life. Therefore, a question we must regularly ask ourselves is, what is God doing in my life through this problem, circumstance, person, or condition? Remember, God is immanent! Too often we accept things as merely the product of natural forces or as accidental happenings and fail to see that it is God who has put the bend in the road (Eccl. 7:13-14).

Conclusion

We cannot all be an Elijah or an Elisha. As mentioned earlier, God does not generally work through miraculous events--not even in Old Testament or New Testament times. Today we have the completed canon of Scripture, the Holy Bible which is an even greater miracle. It is God's final revelation that records the mighty historical acts of God from creation through the early church and anticipates His miraculous acts in the last days.

While God is generally not working directly by such miracles like we will see Him performing in the following chapters and events in the life of Elisha. Nevertheless, He is still working providentially in a multitude of ways--*through His Word, through people, through circumstances of trials and blessings, and through His precious Spirit.*

Here are some questions we should ask ourselves:

(1) Am I like Elijah, seeking to be a blessing to others and used of God throughout my life right up to the end? Or have I placed myself on the shelf with a horde of excuses?

(2) Am I like Elisha, truly committed to the Lord's calling no matter what that calling may be according to my gifts and the needs in my family, in my church, in my community?

(3) Am I loyal and committed under all circumstances like Elisha--as a servant, as a disciple, as one behind the scenes learning to trust, serve and obey? Am I also willing, if gifted for it, to step out to be a leader, to step out into the thick of battle or into the spotlight, and to take on responsibilities?

(4) Am I willing to accept God's assignment whether it means latrine duty or duty in the front office? Whatever the assignment, Elisha was available--and not just on his terms.

This is not a direct quote, but I think it was Howard Hendrix who said: "the acid test is a person's response to the uninspired moments of the more behind-the-scenes ministries, the ministries which are less glorious, more trivial, and sometimes the more thankless jobs, the situations which may not necessarily turn you on, but which are still needed."

This scene, along with what has preceded it, reminds me of Luke 16:10-13:

He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Ultimately, mammon is any false god that gains the allegiance that only the true God deserves. It is any false god we depend on for our security, satisfaction, and significance that only the true God can provide.

Lesson 19: The Translation of Elijah--Part 2 (2 Kings 2:1-11)

Introduction

Second Kings 2:1-11 is the story of the translation of Elijah which brings to a close his ministry on earth. Elijah's translation and the events that surrounded it became a means of testing for Elisha whom God had called to step into the shoes of the older prophet. So also God works providentially in our lives through the events and lives of others.

In verses 1-6, there was a test of Elisha's commitment. When asked to stay behind while Elijah went on, Elisha each time responded with a double oath to show his "bulldog tenacity" to stay with his teacher to the very last, knowing his master was about to be taken. This demonstrated several things about his character--a teachable spirit, loyalty, and a commitment to God's calling to the very last.

Then, in verses 7-8, Elisha learned a lesson in the miracle of the parting of the waters of the Jordan. As God had parted the waters of the Jordan, so God would enable Elisha to both be and do all that was needed for his work and life as Elijah's successor.

Now, another test follows--perhaps the most critical of all. It was the test of his longings, a test to see where his heart was (Ps. 26:2; 139:23; Jer. 17:10; Matt. 6:21; 13:46; Phil. 3:8).

A Test for Elisha (2:9-10)

In verse 9 we are told that immediately following the crossing of the Jordan, Elijah poses a very simple question. It is a question with tremendous ramifications on the life of any believer in Christ. He said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." Please note the timing of this. Elijah waited until after they had crossed over the Jordan, after this great display of the power and provision of God. Why? What can we learn from this?

(1) I think it teaches us the principle of timing and discernment. We need to discern the right time to witness, confront, challenge, or even to encourage. Sometimes it is just not the right time and our tendency is to speak when we should be quiet, and to be silent when we should speak. "A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together; A time to be silent, and a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7). "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances" (Prov. 25:11). "A man has joy in an apt answer, And how delightful is a timely word" (Prov. 11:23).

(2) This also teaches us that a great time to challenge believers to action is when they have just witnessed the blessing of God and are encouraged by the Lord through His Word or through what He has been doing in their lives.

The question put to Elisha was, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." The reference to being taken also teaches us several things:

(1) None of us are indispensable to God. Sooner or later God is going to remove us or someone whose ministry we are depending on. No matter how important we may think we are or others may think we are to a work, a church, a family, or a nation, the only one who is truly indispensable is the Lord.

(2) God always has someone else, or some other way to accomplish His purposes, or He may have a different purpose or purposes. Our need is to rest in God's will and then carefully consider our responsibility in view of the removal of that one on whom we have been depending. When it was time for Elijah to go, there was an Elisha. When it was time for Moses to go, there was a Joshua.

(3) Elijah's question shows us we should seek to be a blessing to others as long as we are here. Always we must recognize that we are only an instrument of God's grace, a sower, a waterer, or a reaper--but it is God who is the indispensable and ultimate cause.

Primarily, this question was a test. The Lord, if you recall, asked Solomon a similar question at the beginning of his ministry and work as king.

Why ask such a question? Because our desires and requests show the condition of our hearts. It shows just how ready we are for ministry, responsibility, and sacrifice. It shows if our treasure is primarily here on earth or in heaven. It shows if we really see heaven as home or whether we are trying to make this fallen world our heavenly home. It shows if we are ready to be a servant or still want to be served.

Christians who are prosperous and comfortable on earth may give money generously to Christian work, but usually find it hard to think of heaven as home. It is one thing to speak piously about dying as "going home," but quite another to "put our money where our mouth is." Tragically, many who talk piously about "home" display little evidence of longing to be there. Home in Florida is more attractive. Tension exists between home on earth and home in heaven, there are practical ways to discover where our real interest lies.³⁶

Our desires and requests reveal where our true treasures are. This in turn shows where our hearts are, which will in turn determine our priorities and pursuits and willingness to make the necessary sacrifices to fulfill God's will. Ultimately then, the real issue is the motive behind the request, the deep down longings of the soul. Our requests may be good, but our motive may be evil. It may be an attempt to make this world our home. The request may be born of greed, or lust for praise, power, position, applause, prestige, or ease and comfort at the expense of God's purposes. In other words, it becomes an attempt to find happiness apart from the Lord.

Elisha's Reply (vs. 9)

In verse 9 we also see Elisha's reply. "Please, let a double portion of your Spirit be upon me." Let's note several things about this reply:

(1) Elisha was respectful and courteous. A person who says "*please*" is usually one who will also say "*thank you*." He is one who is genuinely appreciative of the loving acts of others. He is usually a person who doesn't take people for granted. Oh, how we need to cultivate the art and heart of appreciation, thankfulness, courteousness, and respectfulness.

(2) The words "*double portion*" do not mean two portions or twice as much of something. It especially does not mean twice as much of the Holy Spirit. Remember that the Holy Spirit is a person and not a substance that you can pour in by measure. John 3:34 tells us that God does not give His Spirit by measure. The words "*unto Him*" in the KJV are not in the original text. In the New Testament the command to be filled with the Spirit is a command to be controlled by the Spirit who indwells, not a command to get more of the Spirit. It means we are to allow the Spirit who indwells us to control more and more of our lives. It's not that we get more of the Spirit but that the Spirit gets control of more of us.

(3) The expression "*double portion*" was used in connection with the firstborn son, who by law inherited two parts of his father's property. He also became the one responsible to be the spiritual head of the family and responsible to perpetuate God's covenant promises.

So Elisha was not asking for more power or more of the Holy Spirit, but simply that he might be the successor of Elijah to carry on Elijah's important ministry. From what we know about Elisha's life and ministry that follows, this clearly was not a request of pride, for personal glory, or selfish gain of any kind. Instead, it was the request of a man responding to the challenge and needs of the day. It was a man wanting to be used of God for God's glory. And it was a man showing his willingness by faith to accept the responsibility of God's will for his life. Elisha wanted to be the spiritual firstborn son of Elijah and serve the Lord as God had called him to do. Above all, it was the request of a man with longings that were anchored in eternity. He "was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). He knew God had provided something far better

³⁶ John White, *The Cost of Commitment*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 1976, p. 67.

than what we have in this fallen world (Heb. 11:40). He was willing to make sacrifices and live as an alien and sojourner (Heb. 11:9; 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11).

Are we likewise living as sojourners? Where are our treasures? What drives us? What do we want out of this life--from our family, from our jobs, from our pleasures, etc.? Scripture teaches us that "God has given us all things to enjoy." If we are trying to use things to make this world our heavenly home and our basic source of satisfaction instead of the Lord, it will never work. We live in a fallen and evil world, not heaven. The ravages of sin are all around us and still in us even as believers (cf. Gal. 5:17). We will end up selling our birthright for a bowl of potage. We will fail to be good stewards of God's resources--our talents, treasures, time, and God's truth.

Scripture has a lot to say about man's longings, though the word used in our translations is usually the word "*lust*." Basically, lust is the strong desire for something caused by longing for satisfaction, security, significance, etc., apart from dependence on God and His righteous plan for one's life.

Elijah's Response (vs. 10)

Elijah's answer is given in verse 10. Knowing that he was only an instrument and that such things are in God's sovereign control, he said, "You have asked a hard thing." This could mean "this isn't mine to give. Only God can give it." Elijah, however, knew Elisha was to be his replacement (1 Kings 19:16). That's what he had been grooming him for over these several years. It is possible that Elijah is saying "that which you have asked will mean a hard life," a life with trials, persecution, and great responsibility.

Whatever the case, a condition was attached which would manifest God's will regarding such a request--the condition of seeing Elijah translated. This would manifest the will of God, demonstrate Elisha's determination, and show that Elisha, as the witness of this dramatic event, would also be the prophet's successor.

The Translation of Elijah (2:11)

Our text says, "Then it came about as they were going along and talking, that behold . . ." The Hebrew text is more like, "And it came to pass, they were going along, walking and talking, and behold . . ." The text highlights the fact that this glorious event occurred in the midst of their conversation and fellowship. They were no doubt talking about the things of God, about the nation and its condition, about ministry and the teaching of the Word.

Can we learn anything from this? I think so. Let me suggest a couple of applications.

(1) We see Elijah's continued commitment to minister to his young student. We also see Elisha learning all he could while he could--soaking up truth and the fellowship of his dear friend. This scene gives us a beautiful example of the importance of discipling among believers.

(2) We see Elijah involved in ministry right up to the moment the Lord took him. Isn't this the way we should all want to go--in fellowship and serving the Lord, redeeming the time for eternity. This doesn't mean we don't take time out for fishing, golf or gardening, or other leisurely activity, but such is never to be our reason for living. *We should never retire from ministry!*

Next we read, "that behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire . . ." I am sure Elijah had more he wanted to say to Elisha and certainly Elisha was not ready to lose Elijah. The implication here is that, suddenly, in the middle of their conversation, this manifestation of the Lord's presence appeared, separated the two, and took Elijah away.

This is the way the Lord works; it's the way life is. We are never ready to lose a loved one, a good friend or teacher. There is always more to say, more to teach and learn, more times we would like to enjoy together. But God, who alone is the indispensable one, suddenly breaks into our lives and takes our friend or loved one home to be with Him or moves them somewhere else. This hurts and causes pain for us, but it should never neutralize us. Rather, it should thrust us in another direction or into a new responsibility while trusting in the Lord and moving out for God. Life must go on. We must pick up the baton and keep moving toward the goal. Often it is a new goal God has set before us.

Please note that the prophet was not taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. He was taken up in a whirlwind. The chariot and horses of fire were manifestations of God's divine presence or a manifestation of His angelic forces

who came to get Elijah and accompany Him to heaven. The same is undoubtedly true for us in death. Elijah, like Enoch, was translated without seeing death. He was taken up into heaven which represents the paradise of God. He was removed from the pain of this fallen world into the bliss and joy of paradise.

Moses, the great prophet and giver of the Law, died and was buried. Elijah was translated without seeing death. So today, because of the imminent hope of the coming of the Lord, we too have the prospect of not seeing death, but suddenly being changed into glorified bodies and caught up into heaven to ever be with the Lord. This is the blessed hope of the body of Christ. Should it not occur in our lifetime, we still have the confidence that death means to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. Either way, all believers have the hope of being with the Lord--the hope of reward and of being with our Rewarder.

It is right here that we have one of the most important principles of the Christian life. It is a principle that was surely a dominating, driving, life-changing force in the lives of these two prophets--the hope of heaven and eternity and all that it holds. Our ability to live godly lives, to serve God rather than self, to forgive and love others, and find real peace and stability is directly proportionate to the degree that the glories of heaven grip our souls and become the motive and anchor of our lives.

What gave these two prophets the courage to do what they did? What gives us the courage to be the people God has called us to be and make the necessary sacrifices in order to love and serve God and others. One man has defined courage as "the willingness to sacrifice for a better day."³⁷ Until the refrain in the old hymn, "*This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through*" becomes real to us, we will not be truly free from those forces that dominate us and keep us from being more available to God and able to love and serve people.

Abraham never saw his vision turn into reality. Though he found the country he was looking for, he never possessed it. His descendants did. But hundreds of years were to pass before even they inherited the promise. Meanwhile Abraham remained a wandering stranger in the country he had intended to settle. He is described variously as "pilgrim," "sojourner," "stranger." Were he a child of the twentieth century, we might call him a "displaced person."

Abraham is thus the prototype of the follower of Jesus. We do not live in tents as Abraham the sojourner did. We may not even be called to "live out of a suitcase" as some of our modern brothers and sisters. Yet if we are serious about following Christ we share Abraham's outlook.

We do not "belong." We are temporary residents only. Our real home is not immediately available, but we refuse to settle permanently anywhere else. We are "pilgrims and strangers."

We have not chosen impermanence as a preferred lifestyle. We are not nomadic. A nomad thinks only of the next temporary pasture. Deep within us, however, is a longing for our true home. It is this longing that characterizes the people of God. They do not belong to this world because they do belong somewhere else.³⁸

Allender and Longman in *Bold Love* say:

It seems that most of my life is sacrificed protecting and enhancing a home that is supposedly not my home. I still read self-help books on parenting, hoping someone will finally tell me how to parent correctly so that my children and I can avoid the sorrow of life. I often listen to sermons with the same energy ("tell me how to make this life work better"). The root desire behind our propensity to find concrete, manageable steps for living the Christian life often boils down to a demand to find order, predictability, and consistency in a world where there is little to none. How would you answer the questions, "Do I live for heaven?" or "Do I live demanding that life be like heaven?" Your answers will determine what you will spend your life fighting for.³⁹

³⁷ Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1992, p. 139.

³⁸ White, *The Cost of Commitment*, pp. 65-66.

³⁹ Allender and Longman, p. 140.

Appendix A: The Doctrine of Suffering

Introduction

Why me? Why now? What is God doing? Suffering is a tool God uses to get our attention and to accomplish His purposes in our lives. It is designed to build our trust in the Almighty, but suffering requires the right response if it is to be successful in accomplishing God's purposes. Suffering forces us to turn from trust in our own resources to living by faith in God's resources.

Suffering is not in itself virtuous, nor is it a sign of holiness. It is also not a means of gaining points with God, nor of subduing the flesh (as in asceticism). When possible, suffering is to be avoided. Christ avoided suffering unless it meant acting in disobedience to the Father's will.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider--God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything *that will be* after him.

The following questions are designed to help us "consider" in the day of adversity:

- (1) How am I responding to it?
- (2) How should I respond to it?
- (3) Am I learning from it?
- (4) Does my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.?
- (5) How can God use it in my life?

Suffering Defined

What is suffering? What are these bends in the road that God puts in the path of life that we are to carefully consider? Simply stated, suffering is anything which hurts or irritates. In the design of God, it is also something to make us think. It is a tool God uses to get our attention and to accomplish His purposes in our lives in a way that would never occur without the trial or irritation.

Illustrations of Suffering

"It may be cancer or a sore throat. It may be the illness or loss of someone close to you. It may be a personal failure or disappointment in your job or school work. It may be a rumor that is circulating in your office or your church, damaging your reputation, bringing you grief and anxiety."⁴⁰ It can be anything that ranges from something as small and irritating as the bite of a mosquito or the nagging of a gnat to the charge of an elephant or having to face a lion in the lions' den as with Daniel (Dan. 6).

General Causes of Suffering

- (1) We suffer because we live in a fallen world where sin reigns in the hearts of men.
- (2) We suffer because of our own foolishness. We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-9).
- (3) We sometimes suffer because it is God's discipline. "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son He receives." (Heb. 12:6).
- (4) We may suffer persecution because of our faith--especially when we take a stand on biblical issues, i.e., suffering for righteousness sake (2 Tim. 3:12).

⁴⁰ Ron Lee Davis with James Lee Denney, *Gold in the Making*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1983, p. 17-18.

Of course, all of these do not apply at the same time. All suffering is not, for instance, a product of our own foolishness, self-induced misery, or sin. It is true, however, that rarely does suffering not reveal areas of need, weaknesses, and wrong attitudes that need to be removed like dross in the gold refining process (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

The Nature of Suffering

Suffering is Painful

Suffering is hard. It is never easy. Regardless of what we know and how hard we apply the principles, it is going to hurt (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6--“distressed” is *lupeo* meaning “to cause pain, sorrow, grief”).

Suffering is Perplexing

Suffering is somewhat mysterious. We may know some of the theological reasons for suffering from Scripture, yet when it hits, there is still a certain mystery. Why now? What is God doing? In this, it is designed to build our trust in the Almighty.

Suffering is Purposeful

Suffering is not without meaning in spite of its mystery. It has as its chief purpose the formation of Christ-like character (Rom. 8:28-29).

Suffering Proves, Tests Us

“Trials” in James 1:2 is the Greek *peirasmos* and refers to that which examines, tests, and proves the character or integrity of something. “Testing” in this same verse is *dokimion* which has a similar idea. It refers to a test designed to prove or approve. Suffering is that which proves one’s character and integrity along with both the object and quality of one’s faith. Compare 1 Pet. 1:6-7 where the same Greek words are used along with the verb *dokimazo* which means, “put to the test,” “prove by testing as with gold.”

Suffering is a Process

“We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, proven character; and . . .” (Rom. 5:3-4). “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect (mature) and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jam. 1:3-4). As a process, it takes time. The results God seeks to accomplish with the trials of life requires time and thus also, endurance.

Suffering is a Purifier

No matter the reason, even if it is not God’s discipline for blatant carnality, it is a purifier for none of us will ever be perfect in this life (Phil. 3:12-14).

Suffering Provides Opportunity

Suffering provides opportunity for God’s glory, our transformation, testimony, and ministry, etc. (See reasons for suffering given below.)

Suffering Requires Our Cooperation

Suffering requires the right response if it is to be successful in accomplishing God’s purposes. “We all want the product, character; but we don’t want the process, suffering.”⁴¹ Because of our make up as human beings, we can’t have one without the other.

⁴¹ Davis and Denney, pp. 19 and 32.

Suffering is Predetermined and Inevitable

1 Thessalonians 3:3 so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

1 Peter 4:19 Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

The question we must each face is not, “if” we are going to have trials in life, but how will we respond to them.

Suffering is a Struggle

It’s going to be a battle all the way. That’s why they are called “trials” and “testings.” Even when we understand the purposes and principles of suffering, and we know the promises of God’s love and concern given in the Word of God for handling suffering, dealing with the trials of life is never easy because suffering hurts. Trials simply give us the capacity to cooperate with the process (Jam. 1:4). They allow the process to work and allow us to experience inner peace and joy in the midst of the trials.

In order to handle suffering with inner joy and tranquillity, we must be able to look ahead to God’s purposes and reasons for suffering. This requires faith in the eternal verities of God.

Compare the blessings of affliction as seen in the testimony of the Psalmist in Ps. 119:

Before affliction:	Straying and ignoring (vs. 67a)
During and in affliction:	Learning and turning (vs. 71, cf. vs. 59)
When under affliction we need to:	Determine Causes if we can (Is it because of something I have done?) Determine Objectives (What is God wanting to do in my life or in others?) Determine Solutions (How does God want me to handle this?)
After affliction:	Knowing and changing (vss. 67b, 97-102) Resting and valuing (vss. 65,72)

We must understand God’s chief purpose for our lives is to be conformed to the image of Christ and He has determined in His plan to use suffering for our spiritual development. If we are going to endure suffering and the trials of life, however, we must also understand and believe in the other purposes and reasons for suffering as they are related to the chief purpose.

Purposes and Reasons for Suffering

(1) We suffer as a testimony, as a witness (2 Tim 2:8-10; 2 Cor. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:13-17). When believers handle suffering joyfully and with stability, it becomes a marvelous testimony to the power and life of Christ that we claim and name. Suffering provides key opportunities to manifest and magnify the power of God through His servants in order to verify and confirm the messenger and his message. It provides opportunities to reveal our credentials as ambassadors of Christ (1 Kings. 17:17-24; John 11:1-45). This includes the following areas:

- To glorify God before the angelic world (Job 1-2; 1 Pet. 4:16).
- To manifest the power of God to others (2 Cor. 12:9, 10; John 9:3).
- To manifest the character of Christ in the midst of suffering as a testimony to win others to Christ (2 Cor. 4:8-12; 1 Pet. 3:14-17).

(2) We suffer to develop our capacity and sympathy in comforting others (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

(3) We suffer to keep down pride (2 Cor. 12:7). The Apostle Paul saw his thorn in the flesh as an instrument allowed by God to help him maintain a spirit of humility and dependence on the Lord because of the special revelations he had seen as one who had been caught up to the third heaven.

(4) We suffer because it is a training tool. God lovingly and faithfully uses suffering to develop personal righteousness, maturity, and our walk with Him (Heb. 12:5f; 1 Pet. 1:6; Jam. 1:2-4). In this sense, suffering is designed:

- **As discipline for sin** to bring us back to fellowship through genuine confession (Ps. 32:3-5; 119:67).
- **As a pruning tool** to remove dead wood from our lives (weaknesses, sins of ignorance, immature attitudes and values, etc.). The desired goal is increased fruitfulness (John 15:1-7). Trials may become mirrors of reproof to reveal hidden areas of sin and weakness (Ps. 16:7; 119:67, 71).
- **As a tool for growth** designed to cause us to rely on the Lord and His Word. Trials test our faith and cause us to use the promises and principles of the Word (Ps. 119:71, 92; 1 Pet. 1:6; Jam. 1:2-4; Ps. 4:1 [The Hebrew of this passage can mean, “You have enlarged, made me grow wide by my distress]). Suffering or trials teach us the truth of Psalm 62:1-8, the truth of learning to “wait on the Lord *only*.”
- **As a means of learning what obedience really means.** It becomes a test of our loyalty (Heb. 5:8). Illustration: If a father tells his son to do something he likes to do (i.e., eat a bowl of ice cream) and he does it, the child has obeyed, but he hasn’t really learned anything about obedience. If his dad, however, asks him to mow the lawn, that becomes a test and teaches something about the meaning of obedience. The point is, obedience often costs us something and is hard. It can require sacrifice, courage, discipline, and faith in the belief that God is good and has our best interests at heart regardless of how things might appear to us. Regardless of the reason God allows suffering into our lives, rarely does it not reveal areas of need, weaknesses, wrong attitudes, etc., as it did in Job.

Suffering itself is not the thing that produces faith or maturity. It is only a tool that God uses to bring us to Himself so we will respond to Him and His Word. It forces us to turn from trust in our own resources to living by faith in God’s resources. It causes us to put first things first. Ultimately, it is the Word and the Spirit of God that produces faith and mature Christ-like character (Ps. 119:67, 71).

In James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 the key word is “proof.” “Proof” is the word *dokimion* which looks at both the concept of testing which purifies, and the results, the proof that is left after the test. The Lord uses trials to test our faith in the sense of purifying it, to bring it to the surface, so we are forced to put our faith to work.

(5) We suffer to bring about continued dependence on the grace and power of God. Suffering is designed to cause us to walk by God’s ability, power and provision rather than by our own (2 Cor. 11:24-32; 12:7-10; Eph. 6:10f; Ex. 17:8f). It causes us to turn from our resources to His resources.

(6) We suffer to manifest the life and character of Christ (The Fruit of the Spirit) (2 Cor.4:8-11; Phil. 1:19f). This is similar to point (4) above with more emphasis on the process and defining the objective, the production of the character of Christ. This has both a negative and a positive aspect:

- **Negative:** Suffering helps to remove impurities from our lives such as indifference, self trust, false motives, self-centeredness, wrong values and priorities, and human defense and escape mechanisms by which we seek to handle our problems (man-made solutions). Suffering in itself does not remove the impurities, but is a tool God uses to cause us to exercise faith in the provisions of God’s grace. It is God’s grace in Christ (our new identity in Christ, the Word and the Holy Spirit) that changes us. This negative aspect is accomplished in two ways:

(a) **When out of fellowship with the Lord:** Suffering becomes discipline from our heavenly Father (Heb. 5:5-11; 1 Cor. 11:28-32; 5:1-5). This involves **known sin**, rebellion and indifference to God.

(b) **When in fellowship with the Lord:** Suffering becomes the loving and skillful handy work of the Vine Dresser to make us more productive. It involves *unknown sin*, areas we may not be aware of, but that are

nevertheless hindering our growth and fruitfulness. In this case, suffering often constitutes mirrors of re-proof (John 15:1-7).

- **Positive:** When believers live under suffering joyfully (i.e., they endure and keep on applying the promises and principles of the faith), Christ's life or character will be more and more manifested as they grow through the suffering (2 Cor. 4:9-10; 3:18). This means trust, peace, joy, stability, biblical values, faithfulness and obedience in contrast to sinful mental attitudes, blaming, running, complaining, and reactions against God and people.

(7) We suffer to manifest the evil nature of evil men and the righteousness of the justice of God when it falls in judgment (1 Thess. 2:14-16). Suffering at the hands of people (persecution, violent treatments) is used of God to "fill up the measure of their sins." It shows the evil character of those who persecute others and the justice of God's judgment when it falls.

(8) We suffer to broaden our ministries (cf. Philippians 1:12-14 with 4:5-9). In the process of producing Christian character and enhancing our testimony to others, suffering often opens up doors for ministry we could never have imagined. Paul's imprisonment (chained daily to Roman soldiers in his own house) resulted in the spread of the gospel within the elite imperial praetorian guard. The Apostle was undoubtedly continuing to rejoice in the Lord, but if he had been complaining, sulking, and bitter, his witness would have been zero.

Appendix B: Hindrances to Prayer

- (1) Sin in the life. Not walking in fellowship (John 4:22-23; Jude 20; Eph. 6:18; Ps. 66:18; Eph. 4:30; 1 John 1:9)
- (2) Failure to spend time in the Word of God (Prov. 28:9; John 15:7; Ps. 119)
- (3) Failure to pray in faith (Matt. 21:22; 1 John 5:14-15; James 1:5-7; Heb. 11:6)
- (4) Failure to ask because of a spirit of self-dependence (James 4:2)
- (5) Failure to ask from the right motives, without concern for God's will (James 4:3, 15; 1 Cor. 4:19; Matt. 6:10; 26:42).
- (6) Failure to endure, fainting under pressure (Luke 18:1; cf. 1 Sam. 27:1-3 with Isa. 40:31)
- (7) Wrong relations with people, an unforgiving spirit (Mark 11:25-26)
- (8) Pretentious praying, praying to impress people (Matt. 6:5-8)
- (9) Religious zeal in the form of vain repetitions and cultic ritual (Matt. 6:7; 1 Kings 18:26-29; Rom. 10:2-3)
- (10) Domestic breakdown in the home (1 Pet. 5:7)

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