

***ELIJAH,
PROPHET OF GOD***

Lessons from his life

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ELIJAH, PROPHET OF GOD

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1. ELIJAH STANDING FOR THE LORD

1 Kings 16.29-17.1

Introduction

At the time of Elijah the wickedness of Israel had reached new peaks of depravity. The route to such wickedness went back over sixty years when Judah and Israel were divided. The ten tribes of Israel rebelled against the authority and unreasonable demands of King Rehoboam of Judah. At the same time the Israelites appointed Jeroboam, thus recognising his leadership as king. However, the first step King Jeroboam took after the rebellion was to introduce idolatrous worship. He appointed priests who had not been called by God.

‘And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.” Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan’
1 Kings 12.26-29.

So the worship of Jehovah immediately became corrupted with an idolatrous type of praise. Such compromise was the start of a slippery slope and resulted in the nation embracing the worship of Baal. Elijah ministered at the time of King Ahab, who was responsible for leading Israel into national Baal worship. It was because of this idolatrous worship that Elijah was called by God to confront Ahab and the nation of Israel.

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Ahab had been reared in a totally ungodly home

The Bible tells us that his father Omri *'did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him'* (1 Kings 16.25). Omri's great evil was to legalise anti-God behaviour and make it the normal national code of practice.

'For the statutes of Omri are kept; all the works of Ahab's house are done; and you walk in their counsels' Micah 6.16.

When Ahab came to the throne he continued in the terrible and evil ways of his father. He cast aside all restraint and gave himself over to the ways of Satan.

'Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshipped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him' 1 Kings 16.30-33.

Ahab married Jezebel, a satanic princess, the daughter of King Ethbaal, a Baal priest

Actually, Ahab married Jezebel for pragmatic reasons. He was desperate to maintain the material prosperity of the Children of Israel and protect his power base. Marriage to Jezebel opened new avenues for trade. The wealthy king of the Sidonians would invest in Israel. But such a step also meant selling himself and the nation to the devil. Ahab fully embraced Jezebel's god, Baal. It was Ahab with his wife Jezebel who opened the door for Baal worship to become the nation's religion.

Why was Baal worship so attractive to Ahab and the Children of

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Israel? Baal was portrayed to the people as a fertility god. He was, they claimed, the god who took care of their daily needs, flocks and crops, families, and the weather. Invest in the Baal god then all your desires will be met. But this Baal god was also popular because he made no demands upon morality. The Baal god allowed freedom of choice. Baal worship allowed a pragmatic approach to life. Baal worship was totally unrestrained; led by the immoral and ungodly priests and priestesses emotions and lusts were let loose.

But then there was a terrible and sadistic side to Baal worship, which was one of the reasons Ahab was such an evil king in God's sight. The ultimate act of Baal worship was to sacrifice your firstborn child to gain special favour and material wealth. When all moral standards go then life is meaningless and cheap, and the vulnerable suffer.

To formalise his allegiance to the Baal god, Ahab built a temple in its honour and set up an altar. This was an arrogant step, giving credence and national respectability to an evil religion.

Ahab continued in his arrogant rebellion by rebuilding the city of Jericho. Even though there had been a number of ungodly monarchs before Ahab, none had dared to provoke God in such a manner. Why was rebuilding Jericho such an act of rebellion towards God? After its destruction the Lord said through Joshua:

'Cursed be the man before the Lord who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates' Joshua 6.26.

An arrogant man named Hiel took it upon himself, with Ahab's approval, to rebuild the cursed city Jericho. In doing so he came under the prophesied judgment of the Lord. His firstborn died at the outset and his youngest at the completion.

'In [Ahab's] days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation with Abiram his firstborn, and with his youngest son

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Segub he set up its gates, according to the word of the Lord, which He had spoken through Joshua the son of Nun' 1 Kings 16.34.

For all his evil, Ahab's conscience still troubled him. In a futile attempt to keep his options open he hypocritically named three of his children after God: Jehoram – God is high; Ahaziah – God has taken hold; and Athaliah – God is exalted.

Assessment of those days

In reality the Holy God, Who had been so faithful to the Children of Israel, was openly cast aside. God was seen as old-fashioned, not suitable for the modern and sophisticated man. The Holy God Who had done such mighty works needed to be replaced with a more up-to-date, relevant, consumer-friendly god. The God Who set pure standards was replaced by a no-standards god. Does this state of affairs sound familiar to this day and age?

While things got worse and worse, it must have seemed for the little remnant of believers in Israel that maybe God had now totally forsaken Israel. Why was God allowing this awful sin? Why did God not do something? The prophets of the Lord, at the command of Jezebel, were being hunted down and slain by the sword. As the Bible records:

'They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented' Hebrews 11.37.

So, while the wicked prospered, the remnant of God's people were suffering, refusing to bow down to Baal.

But God's timing is perfect and, behind the scenes in Gilead, God had prepared a man called Elijah, a man brought up in the poverty-stricken area of Gilead, used to living in a tent. Elijah was not a cultured city man like Ahab – he was a rugged, unfashionable, country dweller. But God took this uncultured man, anointed him with the power of the Holy Spirit, and made him a renowned prophet. Ahab had a privileged upbringing in terms of material wealth; Elijah had

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an unprivileged background as regards material wealth. However, it appears that Elijah may have had God-fearing parents, as his name means ‘My God is Jehovah.’

So these two men came head-to-head: Ahab the powerful, proud, unbelieving king, the man of the world, the king of the humanistic society, and Elijah the humble servant of God, who spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is solemn to consider the final outcome of these two lives. How we live determines how we die. This is dramatically portrayed when these two men came to the end of their lives here on earth. Wicked Ahab was wounded in battle and died a terrible death propped up in a chariot. Godly Elijah, when he came to end of his days here on earth, was taken directly up to Heaven in a chariot. The two chariots speak of eternal death and eternal life. These two men represented two philosophies of life: Ahab – compromise with the world, Elijah – courage in the Lord.

So Elijah comes in the power of the Holy Spirit to confront Ahab. He walks into the palace, straight up to Ahab sitting on his throne surrounded by all his dignitaries. He boldly makes a statement in the name of the Lord. He proceeds to give Ahab an awesome weather forecast – no dew or rain for three years.

When referring to this event, Jesus described this incredible statement of Elijah. The heaven would be ‘shut up’ (see *Luke 4.25*). Elijah was stating a providential and spiritual reality. God was turning off the tap providentially and spiritually. The land would be devoid of natural and spiritual showers. Heaven would be shut up under God’s judgment!

How was it that Elijah could stand so courageously for the Lord in front of Ahab? These are some of the reasons why Elijah stood like he did. I trust these reasons will help us also to stand for the Lord in

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our day and generation, a generation which is similar in many ways to that of Elijah's.

1. Elijah prayed earnestly

'Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months' James 5.17.

James reminds us that Elijah was a man who had emotions and fears just like we do. He understood how tough it was to stand for the Lord in evil days. Elijah did not launch forth without prayer. He knew how to pray beforehand in such a situation according to the Word of the Lord. Elijah studied the Scriptures to find out what God said about such a situation. He studied the words of Moses, the man of God, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God.

'And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled. Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you' Deuteronomy 11.13-17.

'And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron' Deuteronomy 28.23.

The drought would last long enough for the earth to become as hard as iron, the heaven above as solid as brass. Elijah prayed earnestly

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according to the Word of the Lord. Therefore his confidence before Ahab was in the Word of God.

First Step: Earnest prayer in harmony with the Word of God.

2. Elijah was jealous for the honour of God

‘So he said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life” 1 Kings 19.10.

Elijah reminds us of a crucial element in standing for the Lord. It is not about personalities, not about winning arguments; we are not to be motivated by confidence in our own presentation strength. The only right motive is to be inspired by a sincere desire for the name of the Lord to be honoured. When David the Psalmist wrote about the overthrow of the wicked it was because of his passion for the honour of the name of the Lord. God’s honour was the burning issue.

Second Step: Check our motives are for God’s glory.

3. Elijah trusted in the living God

‘As the Lord God of Israel lives’ 1 Kings 17.1.

The majority of the Children of Israel thought Jehovah the Lord was no longer relevant to their lives. They considered Him as another god like Baal who could be picked up or dropped at a whim to suit themselves. King Ahab certainly hoped that this was the case. But here comes a man who tells Ahab with words of great power, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jehovah, the great and almighty Lord, is not dead but very much alive. Elijah is saying, ‘Your god Baal is nothing more than a statue, a figment of your imagination. He is dead! I come before you in the name of the living God.’ *‘As the Lord God of Israel lives.’* Fear not; be strong for Lord God lives!

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*The Saviour lives, no more to die;
He lives, the Lord enthroned on high;
He lives triumphant o'er the grave;
He lives, eternally to save.*

*He lives, to still His people's fears;
He lives, to wipe away their tears;
He lives, to calm their troubled heart;
He lives, all blessings to impart.*

*He lives, all glory to His name,
He lives unchangeably the same,
He lives, their mansions to prepare;
He lives to bring them safely there.*

Samuel Medley, 1738-99

This was the great burden of Elijah's ministry: the Lord God lives! This was the issue later on Mount Carmel. Baal was dead, lifeless, unable to hear and answer real prayer, but God is alive. This is the great hope of the Christian believer: Christ is risen! He is alive forevermore! So with Elijah we must stand on this Rock – when we face difficult meetings with those are opposed to God and His ways, always remember, *'As the Lord God of Israel lives.'*

With this one statement Elijah blew aside Ahab's assured confidence in Baal. It was Jehovah God, the living God, Who was in control. It was Jehovah God Who controlled the weather, not Baal. This fact was going to be proved in a devastating manner. Elijah spoiled Ahab's ungodly party by reminding him that God was not dead but alive.

Third Step: Remember God lives.

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4. Elijah trusted in the authority of God

'Before whom I stand' 1 Kings 17.1.

Here stands Elijah, the man of God, before the evil king Ahab. Elijah confronts the enemy of God head on. There were times in history when God raised up men who were gifted in this way. Having a clear understanding of truth they confronted error head on rather than risk compromise by silence.

Elijah's name helps us to understand this man's deep conviction that he was right and Ahab was wrong. It means 'My God is Jehovah'. Here is one of the great secrets behind Elijah's strength, a belief in a living God, a God with Whom he had a personal relationship and in Whom he believed wholeheartedly.

Elijah was standing before the presence of proud Ahab but Elijah was conscious of a greater Presence than any earthly monarch. *'The Lord God of Israel...before whom I stand.'* Here is another reason for his strength. Elijah at this time remembered the greatness of Jehovah God, the God Who had delivered Israel from Egypt, and Who had raised up a great leader in King David. This God, the only God, was infinitely more powerful than the proud, rebellious King Ahab.

Consider the testimony of Elijah here. *'Before whom I stand'*, submissive to His will, praising and adoring Him as the living God; proclaiming His name to Ahab in the fear of God, not of man; understanding he was responsible to God, that God was his Master and he was His servant; conscious of the presence of the Lord. He was strong because his God was present with him wherever he was. Here he was standing before Ahab, but Elijah saw this situation in its far greater light. He was physically standing before Ahab, but spiritually he was standing before the Lord as His servant. He was responsible to God. God knows I am here, God is here with me and I will proclaim the truth. Not swayed by public opinion he was willing to stand alone for God, looking forward by faith.

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One of the great secrets of Elijah's confidence was his understanding by faith of his personal interest in the coming Messiah. He looked forward by faith. Elijah saw the bigger picture here in the world in which he was living. He fellowshiped with Christ.

'And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' Luke 9.30-31.

Elijah was conscious of the Day of Judgment. There is coming a day when we will each have to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be an awesome reality and experience. *'Before whom I stand.'* Elijah's confidence lay in his Saviour. Is that where yours is? Can you sing with the hymnwriter –

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in that great day,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
While through Thy blood absolved I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.*

*Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, 1700-60
tr John Wesley, 1703-91*

Elijah understood his position before God and the value and security of God's presence. In the Lord's name he approached Ahab and on His name he relied. He stood in front of Ahab, conscious of the bigger picture – the honour of God, with faith in the coming Messiah.

Fourth Step: Live your life conscious of the bigger picture.

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5. Elijah trusted in the sovereign power of God

*‘There shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word’
1 Kings 17.1.*

It is acknowledged that man is responsible for the climate change that is affecting the whole world. The speed at which the ice is melting in the Artic Circle has shocked scientists. Man-made pollution is considered to be one of the great contributors to this problem. God’s wonderful creation is groaning under the curse because of sin. Because of the Fall sinful humanity is not caring for God’s creation properly. Here in this account, because of man’s sin, God’s wonderful creation was going to suffer terribly. The plants and the animals were going to suffer with mankind because of sin.

Elijah had faith in the Almighty God. Elijah believed that God was the God of creation, therefore God had the weather under His control. But why did Elijah say the drought would be according to *his* word? He spoke here with his God-given authority as a prophet. This was going to be one of the key issues at Mount Carmel: who had real God-given authority to speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? As a God-sent prophet Elijah knew that his prophecy accorded with the will and Word of God.

Fifth Step: Trust in the sovereign power of God to always fulfil His Word.

2. ELIJAH LIVING ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF GOD

1 Kings 17.1-9

Elijah made two important points to Ahab in his opening statement. Firstly, God is alive! He is the living God Who is working out His sovereign purposes. Elijah made that statement to Ahab by faith in the Messiah, Christ, the Son of God. It was Elijah who was privileged to stand with Moses and converse with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Both Moses and Elijah had clear views by faith of the coming Messiah, just like Job who said, *'I know that my Redeemer lives'* (Job 19.25).

Secondly, Elijah reminded Ahab of his pride. He was not the greatest king, neither was he nor Baal lord over his life. The Lord God of Israel is sovereign. In fact Elijah was before Ahab as an ambassador sent to him by this Almighty God. Elijah was the ambassador who prayed earnestly to this Lord God before his meeting with Ahab. He was jealous for the honour of the Lord God; he trusted in the living God; he believed in the power and authority of the Lord God of Israel.

Ahab had experienced many visits from ambassadors representing other countries, but Elijah was an ambassador sent from God. He came on a clear mission with a message of judgment upon the nation because of its idolatry. Elijah was God's man in God's time, who stood boldly for the Lord. He stood for the Lord in the midst of a compromised nation and before the compromised King Ahab.

Having made his bold statement before Ahab, Elijah is commanded by the Lord to go and hide by the Brook Cherith and live according to the Word of the Lord:

'Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying...' 1 Kings 17.2.

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‘So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan’ 1 Kings 17. 5.

‘Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying..’ 1 Kings 17.8.

The experience for Elijah on his own at Cherith was a unique one for him. Elijah was a prophet under the special provision of God with a special work to do at a special time. Most believers have to live out their everyday lives proving the goodness of God through ordinary means. We are more like the very small remnant left of the believing Children of Israel, those who had to prove the Lord to be faithful whilst living alongside unbelievers in the drought.

I want to add a note of caution. We do need to guard against presumptuously using Elijah’s miraculous experience as a providential model for us. So some might say, ‘I am going to separate myself and sit by my “Cherith” in solitude and the Lord will provide!’ Elijah was a mighty prophet of the Lord, His representative and ambassador before nations, kings, and queens – we are not! Nevertheless there are some valuable spiritual lessons to be learned for believers from Elijah’s time at the Brook Cherith.

1. God’s judgment

‘Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan”’ 1 Kings 17.2-3.

For a man full of courage and vigour for the Lord, hiding by the Brook Cherith may have seemed at first to be a humiliating experience. Having made the stand, why not go on a preaching tour full of zeal for the honour of the Lord? Why not be exhorting the people to repent? However, God knew that the anger of Ahab was kindled against Elijah so God protected him at Cherith.

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As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to hunt for you; and when they said, "He is not here," he took an oath from the kingdom or nation that they could not find you' 1 Kings 18.10.

However much Ahab searched for Elijah to kill him, he could not find him. Elijah was hidden from his presence, being under the sovereign care of God. But there is another and far deeper purpose intended by God in an absent and hidden Elijah. The withholding of the rain would not only bring about a famine of food, but it would also be a reminder of the spiritual famine in the land.

The land of Israel was not only being judged by God practically but also spiritually. The symbolism of Elijah hidden at Cherith is speaking about the way in which God sent a spiritual famine. There would be a famine of the Word of God as a way of judgment. Ahab had mixed Baal worship with Jehovah God worship. God is a jealous God and will never share His authority with another.

For another three years the land of Israel would be deprived of faithful servants of God to proclaim the truth. Elijah was first at Cherith and then at Zarephath, a town outside of the land of Israel. The other prophets were hiding in caves and dens of the earth. There was a famine of food and of the preached Word of God, a famine of material bread and also of spiritual bread. Both were the judgment of God.

This was the national significance of Elijah at Cherith. The word 'hide' in the original has the meaning of 'being absent from another place'. Elijah was purposely being distanced from the people of Israel. Absent Elijah spoke to the nation of an absent God. God was purposely distancing Himself from the nation as a means of judgment. In the end the land of Israel got what they wanted. They were left with false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear rather than God's prophets who told them what they needed to hear!

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We live in a similar day. We are experiencing a famine of the Word of God. We might say, 'How can this be so? There have never been so many Bibles in the world. There has never been such ready access to the Bible.' But it is not that there is a famine of Bibles; there are millions and millions of Bibles available. The problem is that, as in Elijah's day, the people do not respect the Bible as the Word of God. There is a famine of the Bible being preached as the Word of God in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (*1 Corinthians 2.4*). In this way the nation comes under the judgment of God. Today there is no shortage of motivational speakers who can entertain their congregations. Such make sure the congregations leave the Church building as they came in, confirmed that their worldly way of life is acceptable and no real problem with God. As in Elijah's day, speakers refuse to challenge people to face up to the absolute truth of the Word of God. They refuse to speak about the depths of man's sin before a holy God. They refuse to speak about the need of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. They preach a social, non-challenging 'gospel' with little or no reference to man's greatest need. But this actually belittles the love of God those speakers are claiming to promote. Salvation without the Cross is no salvation.

Elijah hidden away at Cherith is a very searching symbol of an absent God upon a nation and a church. There can be a famine of the Word of God in a church that has access like never before to the Bible, a famine of the Lord's presence, His unction, His power on the Word, and a grieved, departed Holy Spirit. This is God's judgment on the nation and the professing Church.

2. God's particular and personal care bodily and spiritually

“And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought

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him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook' 1 Kings 17.4-6.

There are lessons we can learn from this account in the way in which God cared for Elijah, and his response.

a. The command, and the faith and obedience

I would like us to notice here the significance of Elijah's life of faith and obedience. There was no question – he went. We see this in verses 4-5 and also verses 9-10. The Lord had answered Elijah's prayer for judgment in the context of His servant's faith and obedience.

'And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight'
1 John 3.22.

b. God's care for him physically

Elijah was called to a way of life which totally depended upon God to provide. It was a way of life which tested his faith each and every day. Going to Brook Cherith was not a scenic 'breakaway' for Elijah; it was a desolate place in difficult terrain miles away from the nearest town. Probably Ahab and his soldiers seeking Elijah did not think anyone would be living in such a place where it was impossible to obtain food. No one could survive for long at Cherith! This is not the place Elijah would have chosen himself.

At Cherith Elijah was not given a stockpile of grain which he could store and apportion over a three-year period to ensure his personal survival. By contrast he was given just enough in the morning and just enough in the evening. But by living in this way of faith, twice a day he was assured of God's special and personal care. It was God's will that Elijah should live at this time in this manner. Later we will see that Elijah had the comfort of looking each day at a full bin of flour and full jar of oil, but here and now Elijah must live dependent upon the ravens for breakfast and for evening dinner.

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Sometimes God calls His people to remember they live a day at a time. Sometimes God brings us into this incredible state of dependence, perhaps an hourly dependence for strength, an hourly dependence for wisdom, or even a daily dependence for material provision. There are times when God uses His 'just-in-time' system of operation. So He reminds us of our dependence and His personal care.

'I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' I am the Creator God and can command even the ravens! I know where you are, Elijah, the exact place where you are sitting by the brook. To that point will the ravens come. They will not drop the food off at another place for you to search and find – they will come exactly where you are! Each visit, Elijah, will be a token of My special love and care for you. Elijah, you are under My protection and care. Twice a day I am going to remind you that I know your state, I know your condition, I know exactly where you are.

Under judgment the mercy of God continues to His people, but God often surprises His people in the manner in which He provides. Ravens were considered to be unclean in the law of Moses. Ravens are not naturally given to sharing their food with others. Would not doves be more appropriate? When I stayed in India some time ago, the ravens would regularly line up along the verandah where I ate breakfast. Once I turned round to look at something, and when I turned back, my toast had gone! In using the ravens God shows His sovereign power to use what He will.

God surprises us sometimes whom He uses to help us. There is a story of two ministers who had a disagreement. A few days later the car of the wife of one of the ministers broke down. She prayed that the Lord would send someone to help her. After a little while who should walk down the street but the other minister who had fallen out with her husband. 'No Lord', she said to herself. 'Anyone but this man!' However this man stopped and, being a mechanic by trade, got the

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car going for the lady and continued on his way. This event was the means of reconciling the two men.

c. God's care for him spiritually

God also had a particular care for Elijah spiritually. Here was an opportunity to '*come aside...and rest a while*' (Mark 6.31) after going through a tremendous test. Satan could so easily have destroyed Elijah by lifting him up with pride and telling him how courageous he was. Instead here was Elijah, a lone figure, hiding under the care of God. He was in God's will for him at that time. God was all the while preparing Elijah for his future ministry but Elijah had to learn that there are times when we have to be on our own with God. Every Christian needs to learn this lesson if they are to be effective witnesses for the Lord. We need our 'Cherith' times, we need our quiet times with the Lord.

'Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat' Mark 6.30-31.

We cannot go out and serve profitably unless we have taken in first spiritually. Before Elijah could eventually go to Mount Carmel he had to go to Brook Cherith. Preparation is one of the most important elements of ministry. As David said,

'You are my hiding place and my shield: I hope in your word'
Psalm 119.114.

3. GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

1 Kings 17.8-24

Elijah, God's servant, had proved His lovingkindness and faithfulness in love towards him in a particular and unique way at the Brook Cherith. Now we come to the account of Elijah's departure from there.

All around him Elijah observed the landscape getting drier and drier. The sound of the rippling brook got fainter and fainter. What should he do? Here Elijah patiently waited until God told him what to do next.

'Whoever believes will not act hastily' Isaiah 28.16.

From this we are reminded that we live our Christian lives a step at a time. Each step has to be walked in obedience before we are given our next instruction. Elijah believed and worshipped as the water dried up before his eyes. There are times in our life when God allows the brook to dry up all around us. He does this to remind us not to trust in the provision but in the God of the provision, and not to worship the gift but the Giver of the gift. Remember that while the providential brook may dry up in one place, the spiritual brook in Christ keeps running wherever the Lord's people are.

God is sovereign in the way He directs to certain places and people. God's ways for His people can be very challenging both culturally and socially. God most certainly moves in a mysterious way to demonstrate His power at times. Here He was sending Elijah to Queen Jezebel's land! This was a journey across desert wilderness of seventy-five miles into a foreign land. Elijah was called to go to the birthplace of his greatest enemy and be a witness in her homeland.

'And it came to pass, as if it had been a trivial thing for him to

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walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him' 1 Kings 16.31.

Zarephath in Sidon was Jezebel's hometown. Matthew Henry says:

'To show Jezebel's impotency in her malicious attitude, God will find a hiding place for His servant Elijah even in her country.'

The name Zarephath means 'refining'; a place where metals were heated up to get rid of the dross. Here Elijah's faith was being refined in a most unexpected place and manner.

We see the significance of obedient faith. Samuel told the wayward Saul, '*To obey is better than sacrifice*' (1 Samuel 15.22). The prayer of saved Paul was: '*Lord, what do you want me to do?*' (Acts 9.6). For Elijah this meant to go from the peace of Gilead to confrontation with Ahab; from the evil throne of Ahab to the calm of Cherith; and then to the challenge of Zarephath. Yet Elijah went obediently by faith to Zarephath. '*I have commanded*' (1 Kings 17.9). So he went according to God's Word, however mysterious.

Elijah was sent to a widow who was in total poverty and almost ready to die. She was the last person in town, humanly speaking, that Elijah should go to for help. This widow woman was not a Jew, she was a foreigner, one of society's 'nobodys'. In many ways this step of faith was humbling for Elijah. He was to call upon the kindness and hospitality of this poverty-stricken woman.

This is a remarkable picture of the amazing providence and power of God. The Lord was going to provide in a miraculous manner in the heartland of Baal. Man's extremity is God's opportunity. Sending Elijah to this widow woman was a way of demonstrating God's sovereign grace and purposes.

"But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months,

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and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow' Luke 4.25-26.

The Word of the Lord to Elijah sent him to an unexpected location and person. In the midst of the evil city of Zarephath God had a purpose of grace to a Gentile widow. So Elijah came from the relative security of Cherith, where he lived by faith under the provision of God, to Zarephath, a town steeped in Baal worship. He was sent as God's messenger of the Gospel to her. So with us, God sometimes calls us away from a place of relative quiet like Cherith. He calls us into the heartland and source of idolatry to be a witness for Him. From the place of quiet meditation we have to go to the battlefield of witness. These two aspects of the believer's life are pictured by Cherith and Zarephath. The great thing is to be in the place of God's appointment, to be wherever God wants us to be a witness.

But we can see another reason why Elijah had to go to Zarephath. It was important that Elijah was not completely cut off from the reality of living with a famine-stricken people. Elijah had to witness for himself, with his own his eyes, the reality of this famine and the suffering that it was bring upon humanity. Elijah had to see the way in which God's honour was being maintained by His judgment upon idolatry. Elijah had to experience first-hand what it was like to be a believer living in a city under God's judgment.

Having made the long, weary journey he arrives in the town, physically exhausted and in need of water and food. Remember, he has come to this town in obedience to God.

'The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord' Psalm 37.23.

In this town God had commanded a widow to provide for Elijah. As he entered the city he saw the woman gathering sticks. So we see that the remarkable, sovereign hand of God had guided them both to this point.

Elijah, Prophet of God

At the end of our resources

Elijah asked her to fetch him a little water in a vessel.

‘And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” So she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die”’ 1 Kings 17.11-12.

Here was this woman gathering sticks for her last meal to have with her son. She was facing certain death. She was preparing this final meal amidst the horrors of famine, simply prolonging the agony of the inevitable. We are given a vivid and solemn picture of the awful effects of this famine under the judgment of God. She was at the end of everything with only enough food for one more meal. There was God’s answer to Elijah before his eyes. Yet Elijah, like Abraham before him, *‘did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief’ (Romans 4.20).*

Here was a woman who had next-to-nothing on the very brink of starvation. We have not experienced such a desperate situation providentially in this land, but we do experience in different ways what it is like to get to the end of our resources physically and mentally. This lady was at her lowest point when Elijah met her. No doubt over the past few months she had used many innovative ways of providing for herself and her son. Each day she had struggled on, but finally she was totally drained with her fight for survival and had reached the end of the road.

From a purely humanitarian point of view it seems selfish and cruel for Elijah to ask for food of this woman. She was, humanly speaking, the weakest in the city, so weak she could only carry a couple of sticks to fire the oven to bake a last cake. She was, no doubt, physically and mentally exhausted, at the end of her tether, ready to die. It seemed

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she had nothing more to give, yet it was this woman God had chosen to serve Him in taking care of His servant Elijah. But remember that Elijah's request for food was accompanied with a promise: 'Do not fear'. This is the key assurance for the woman.

'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand' Isaiah 41.10.

'Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt' John 12.15.

Here, humble Elijah, as a type of Christ, is coming to where the Gentile widow woman was in order to save her.

God's amazing way

'And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel: "The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth"'" 1 Kings 17.13-14.

The Lord had promised Elijah He would provide and on this promise Elijah relied. He looked beyond the circumstances to the God over the circumstances.

God's unfailing goodness

'So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah' 1 Kings 17.15-16.

The woman was being asked by Elijah to give up her last resource on the promise that the Lord would provide until the rain came again. She had to take that step of faith believing in the Word of God. She

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had to walk by faith and not by sight. Without taking this step of faith she could not enter into the provision of the Lord, but to take this step, humanly speaking, meant giving up her last meal. She was being asked to give up something visible and tangible before her eyes in the hope of receiving something which as yet was nothing more than a promise. Yet this widow woman took this step of faith and trusted in the promise of the Lord. Faith for the widow woman meant staking everything on the Word of God.

This is like following Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We give up all dependence upon the world, upon ourselves, upon anything visible. Instead we rely by faith upon the unseen Saviour, Jesus Christ, and depend upon the promises of God in His Word. We have to surrender all to receive all.

With precious faith the widow woman obeyed the Word of God given to her through the prophet Elijah. She entered into the providential blessing. Rather than depriving her household, trusting in God was the means of providing for her household. There was daily provision for daily needs.

'No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly'
Psalm 84.11.

There is a condition: it must be God first, obedience before blessing.

The provision

'The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah'
1 Kings 17.16.

This verse reminds us of the unfailing faithfulness of the Lord in fulfilling His Word. Think of the words of Solomon at the inauguration of the Temple:

'Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to His people Israel,

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according to all that He promised. There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised through His servant Moses' 1 Kings 8.56.

The verse is full of encouraging symbolism for us:

- the unfailing spiritual blessings because of Christ, the Bread of Life, symbolised in the flour to make bread;
- the unfailing spiritual blessings through the Holy Spirit, symbolised by the oil.

Christ, the Bread of Life for us and the oil of the Holy Spirit within us – both are vital for the believer.

Living out our beliefs

'So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah' 1 Kings 17.15-16.

Twice the phrase 'many days' is used with reference to Elijah's time at Zarephath. God's faithfulness and plan to use and teach Elijah for future ministry is seen here. Elijah was now residing in the family home, living out his beliefs as a witness for the living God. Elijah had come from Cherith, having experienced and enjoyed God on his own, but now he had to witness and share his faith in the hustle and bustle of a family home.

Elijah had to live in this family home many days. He had to witness family stress times, the challenges of bringing up a child, and the daily tasks of family life. For many days life went on in the home, Elijah was cared for, the barrel of flour and jar of oil remained constant. There was a daily supply for daily needs, according to God's miraculous faithfulness. Life was not luxurious but it was certainly better for them than for thousands of others.

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Elijah no doubt read and prayed in the home together with the widow and her son. The widow woman was under the influence of a man of God who taught her God's Word.

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God' 2 Corinthians 1.3-4.

Under Elijah's ministry, and under his influence in the home, she was no doubt growing in her faith. We are what we are when we are at home: this is the test of the reality of our faith. Our witness in the world is important, but equally important is our private life in the family home.

4. FAITH DEEPENED THROUGH TRIAL

1 Kings 17.17-24

Each day was a reminder to all those living in the home at Zarephath of two particular characteristics of God: His divine power and His divine faithfulness. Each day in that home there was also a reminder that God had a purpose of grace, a purpose which crossed the barriers of race and culture. In those days the widow woman of Zarephath grew spiritually under the pastoral care of God's servant Elijah, while her son no doubt was also simply instructed in the ways and Word of God. Under Elijah's ministry there was a godly atmosphere in the home in Baal country.

'But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow' Luke 4.25-26.

The widow woman by faith obeyed God's Word through Elijah and entered into blessing. She opened her home and gave the man of God hospitality and in doing so brought blessing to her home. So it is that when, according to God's grace, we open our heart to the Lord Jesus, He comes and dwells with us.

'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me' Revelation 3.20.

When God seems to fail us

'Now it happened after these things that the son of the woman

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who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?" And he said to her, "Give me your son." So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. Then he cried out to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?" 1 Kings 17.17-20.

Each day there was food in the pantry. Each day they could eat wholesomely even though the widow was penniless. Each day was a reminder of God's providential goodness towards her and her son, but we are also reminded that we live in a world where nothing is stable. Instability is one of the signs of living in a fallen world.

'Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward' Job 5.7.

Believers themselves understand that they live under the sovereign, permissive will of the Lord. There are times of gain and times of loss. However, 'through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy' (Nahum Tate, 1652-1715, and Nicholas Brady, 1659-1726), God remains the same. His love is undiminished, and His Word remains sure and certain.

In the midst of the truth of an unchanging God there is always change in our lives here on Earth. We are a 'phone call or text message away from news that can change our lives forever. Here the widow woman, whose hopes had been raised providentially, had them dashed by death. We worship a God Who provides, and yet allows events in our life that perplex us.

Someone might say here the theological answer is obvious. Do we not say with Job, *'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1.21)?* At that point in his spiritual

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experience Job by faith made this wonderful statement, but it was not always like that for Job. At other times he struggled to comprehend the perplexity of his situation. In fact, Job had all sorts of questions, and at one point felt terrified of God, but finally the latter end of Job was better than the beginning. His faith shone and he was delivered. Along the pathway of deliverance Job had to humble himself. He had to acknowledge that God's ways are past finding out. Only God can turn despair into hope and that leads in our experience to assurance of faith. Only God can take the crisis times in our life and turn them, beyond our understanding, to spiritual blessing.

Here God, in His permissive will, allows a great test of faith for the widow woman. There comes a time when the son falls sick and gradually gets worse. Here God in His sovereignty and in His perfect wisdom determined to test this woman's faith to its limits. The boy's sickness is so serious he dies. Humanly speaking we might ask the question, 'What is God doing here?' There are times when God's dealings go beyond human comprehension! Is God not crushing a new convert? Dale Ralph Davis writes¹:

'We may think we would have been kinder than God. Here is a widow having just escaped Baal worship, who had only begun to taste and see that God is good. And He crushed her. Why didn't He wait until she was more mature in her faith? Why shatter a new convert with the mysteries of His ways. We cannot answer such queries. We can only say this woman discovered early on that God both sustains and bewilders. Both delights and devastates. And as you watch and hear in the text you know that you have been there: just as perplexed, as much in a maze, in just such darkness before God, in knots about what sin God was punishing. Why, you have lamented, did He

1 *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly*, Dale Ralph Davis, Christian Focus

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light my way with tokens of favour and then crush me with such grievous distress?’

The point the commentator is making is that the Bible is totally honest about the way. It warns us that there are times when God blesses and times when He baffles His servants, but all the while we are under His divine care as our heavenly and wise Father.

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.*

William Cowper, 1731-1800

Here the distressed mother reacted in her despair.

- She reacted against Elijah in distress and fear and distanced herself from him, while at the same time recognizing and respecting him as the man of God.
- She reacted against herself in conviction of sin – was God judging her for past sins? Here we see an element of humility in recognising past sin – far removed from the most common response today of, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’
- She also reacted against God, as she thought He had killed her son because of her sin.

The widow woman’s mind was tremendously agitated. When trouble comes into our lives, our thoughts and emotions go into overdrive. We sometimes rush to conclusions which are unwise and unjust. The most common is to misunderstand our relationship with God. In this instance the woman reacted against the one who has shown her the most care. Elijah who, up to this point of time, had been a blessing to the home, was now accused of being the cause of death. Suddenly it was all Elijah’s fault. Because the widow was perplexed with what God had allowed, the man of God got the blame. It is often the case that when tragedy strikes we rush to blame God. The loving God, Who had provided so faithfully for the widow and her son was now

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viewed as a God of judgment, punishing her for past sins. The God Who had promised to sustain them, Who had maintained their lives in the midst of famine, had seemingly failed. Was God unable to keep His Word?

When we face the reality of suffering all manner of questions stream into our mind. The Word of God is the most truthful book in the whole world: it tells it as it is. In the widow's house the atmosphere had totally changed. We often have this romantic vision of how we may patiently and graciously behave in suffering, but the reality is sometimes different. Circumstances seem to have undermined the security, reliability, and truth of God's Word.

Here we read of an event which perplexed the widow woman and even the experienced man of God, Elijah. There is a danger of entering into speculation (when speaking to those suffering tragedy), attempting to reason things out philosophically, theologically, and mentally. It is vital not to measure God's love by events and circumstances alone. It is better to leave the unknown with the Lord and focus on the known and fixed truths of God's Word, the surest way, in harmony with the Holy Spirit, to bring comfort to grieving souls in the jolt of providence.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says 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. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it”
Isaiah 55.8-11.

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The surest way to move from the pain of the ‘why?’, is to find comfort in the known. Read *1 John* for many references to things ‘We know’.

God’s test of pastoral care

‘Then he cried out to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?” And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, I pray, let this child’s soul come back to him.” Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives!”’ 1 Kings 17.20-23.

Notice how Elijah handled the situation with compassion. He was undoubtedly hurt but not fazed or offended by her reaction. Here we see grace working. He did not lecture the widow woman for her outburst, or on her theology. Even though stung by her words he responded with loving compassion and understanding. Elijah was showing forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit – gentleness, meekness, tenderness, and compassion. He was a type of Christ.

‘...who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously’ 1 Peter 2.23.

Here Elijah was suffering as a man of God for Christ’s sake. Elijah, as a type of Christ, interceded in his compassion and sought to sit where the widow woman sat.

‘Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ’ Galations 6.2.

Elijah did not formulate a response but resorted to the throne of the sovereign God. Prayer is God’s appointed means of grace. Do

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not distress an already distressed person more by platitudes and emotional wisdom – go the Throne of Grace. Elijah did not sit down with the woman and explain how her theology was wrong. He prayed!

Notice how he prayed fervently. His prayer was motivated by compassion and care. Elijah agonised in prayer. He sat where the woman sat in intercessory prayer. This was wrestling prayer.

*Wrestling prayer can wonders do,
Bring relief in deepest straits;
Prayer can force a passage through
Iron bars and brazen gates.*

John Newton, 1725-1807

Here again, Elijah, in his agonising prayer, was a type of Christ praying in Gethsemane, praying to God with Whom he had a personal relationship. Twice he cried out, ‘O Lord my God’. He knew that God brought him to the place of ‘nothing but prayer’. There are times in our life when God brings us to the ‘nothing but prayer’ experience. We come to the end of ourselves and our own resources. We realize the situation is beyond us and others around us. Prayer and the promises of God in Christ become our only comfort.

‘From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I’ Psalm 61.2.

Elijah did not understand, so he cried with reverence to God as his Father in Heaven. Elijah prayed to God in faith even though he did not understand the reason why this had happened. He pleaded for the little boy’s life and God heard his prayer.

‘Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us’ 1 John 5.14.

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Faith in the furnace coming forth as gold

‘Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth”’ 1 Kings 17.24.

Now we know from the account in *Hebrews 11* that this woman received her son back to life again by faith.

‘Through faith...women received their dead raised to life again’ Hebrews 11.33-35.

Therefore we know that faith was at work in both Elijah and the widow. As Elijah prayed by faith alone in his upper room with the boy, so his mother, with all her questions and anguish, cried out to God by faith in the room below. God used this awesome experience to bring forth the fruit of living faith in Himself. It is true the faith of the widow was not as yet perfected, but it was faith nevertheless. Notice in *Hebrews* how positively God speaks of men and women of faith. This widow is included, despite her outburst and accusations; under deep sorrow, her faith was real. Notice how the New Testament records her faith in a positive and gracious manner. Nothing is mentioned about her hasty words, only her faith. This is an account recorded under the blood of Christ. We see the same principle applied to Sarah’s faith. God does not give up on us when we do not react as we should, but He does work in such a way as to bring us to fruitful faith, knowing exactly how to get us to that point.

The fruit of faith

‘Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth”’ 1 Kings 17.24.

The little boy was the first person recorded in the Word to have been actually brought back to life by God. This is a sign that proves and assures that God has the victory and power over the last enemy,

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death. This was a foretaste, a sign, of God's resurrection power. Like Lazarus in the New Testament, Elijah, the pioneer of faith, followed in the footsteps of Abraham in his belief that God could raise from the dead.

'By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense' Hebrews 11.17-19.

The resurrection power of God that gives us glorified bodies is one of the great hopes of the believer. It is fully and perfectly manifested to us in all its power and glory in Christ Jesus the Lord.

'Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord' 1 Corinthians 15.54-58.

So from this account we learn what to do when it seems that God has failed us; through desperate times, through disaster times and in deliverance times – wait on God, trust in His Word and pray with faith.

'For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives' Hebrews 12.6.

'Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but

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painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' Hebrews 12.11.

'Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you' 1 Peter 4.12.

God was working and finally we have the testimony of this widow woman: she believed in God personally for herself. *'Now I know.'* This statement sums up the purposes of God in allowing times of trial and tribulation for the believer. Through these trials God strengthens faith; He brings us to the *'Now I know'* statement of faith.

Notice how the widow woman was taken up with the power and authority of God and His Word. This surpassed even her natural joy at having her son restored to life again. In the end she came to see the one thing needful – faith in God and His Word. Remember, God is at both ends of the trial.

Conclusion

When we consider the dealings of the Lord with His people it is good to remember their ultimate purpose is for the glory of God.

5. WHOLEHEARTED, FAINT-HEARTED, HARDHEARTED

1 Kings 18.1-20

Elijah had lodged many days with the widow woman and her son in the city of Zarephath. But now God told Elijah he must leave Zarephath as He intended to use His servant mightily for good elsewhere.

We will consider the three men in the passage of Scripture before us: wholehearted Elijah, fainthearted Obadiah, and hardhearted Ahab.

Wholehearted Elijah

a. Elijah's consistent obedience to God's Word

'And it came to pass after many days that the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth." So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab; and there was a severe famine in Samaria' 1 Kings 18.1-2.

Three years before this God had instructed Elijah to hide himself from the wicked King Ahab. Now God told him to show himself to that same wicked king. God has everything under His divine control. He can hide and He can reveal.

Elijah was a man under the divine hand of God, being one of God's great ambassadors. It was now time for God's ambassador to represent God publicly before Ahab. The king, all Israel and the prophets of Baal must confront the real problem behind the famine. So Elijah went according to God's Word to present himself first to Ahab.

Here is one of the great evidences of faith: a willingness to serve God within the boundaries of His will whatever the danger, whatever the cost. Faith learns to serve God with flexibility; to obey God's perfect

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purposes and sovereign will. This is evidenced powerfully in the life of Elijah. When God commanded him to hide himself from Ahab, he obeyed. When God commanded him to show himself to Ahab, he obeyed.

When Elijah went forth as God's ambassador and prophet, he had two main elements to his message. His message would reveal both the justice and mercy of God. God was going to demonstrate His justice against the prophets of Baal while at the same time demonstrate His sovereign mercy in sending the rain.

As Elijah walked out of Zarephath to meet Ahab he witnessed the awful and deathly devastation of the famine in the parched countryside around. How poignant and powerful at such a time were the words, *'I am sending rain on the earth'*! In a way this is like the message of the Gospel, which is as water on the parched land of wickedness. When it rains on the desert, flowers spring up in the most unlikely places. Note also *Ezekiel 37*, where God's Word makes the dead bones live.

b. Wholehearted Elijah's consistent confidence in the living God

Elijah realized his great responsibility to carry out God's will. He was ready to meet the wicked king Ahab again. The Lord had told him to present himself to Ahab, and therefore this was what he would do. Elijah had an assured confidence in the Word and will of the living Lord. This was the reason behind his effectiveness. Elijah was a forerunner of preachers in the New Testament age like Paul who said:

'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation' Romans 1.16.

Their confidence was in the Word of God working in an ungodly world.

*I'm not ashamed to own my Lord
Or to defend His cause.*

Isaac Watts, 1674-1748

Wholehearted, Fainthearted, Hardhearted

The message of Elijah is to trust in the living God before Whom you stand, and to trust and obey His Word.

Fainthearted Obadiah

a. Obadiah feared the Lord greatly

‘And Ahab had called Obadiah, who was in charge of his house. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly. For so it was, while Jezebel massacred the prophets of the Lord, that Obadiah had taken one hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty to a cave, and had fed them with bread and water)’ 1 Kings 18.3-4.

Now you will notice that when the Word of God speaks about an individual or a particular church it often brings out the strengths before it deals with the weakness. Examples are:

‘Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus...God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ 1 Corinthians 1.1-4, 9

‘And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first”’ Revelation 2.18-19.

It is important that when we discern a situation we always remember to recall the positive aspects. Here the Word of God leaves us in no

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doubt that Obadiah was a man of God. He knew the truth and greatly feared the Lord. This was a high commendation from God Who cannot lie. This must govern our positive interpretation of Obadiah as a believer. The Word of God assuredly reveals to us that Obadiah was a sincere and real believer in the Lord. He demonstrated his faith by secretly hiding and feeding one hundred servants of the Lord, so protecting them from Jezebel's sword. Obadiah's testimony reminds us each of the importance of caring for God's people, caring for those who are being persecuted, when we ourselves are living in comfort.

However, the same God Who commends also accurately recounts times of great testing for Obadiah. There were certain problems with Obadiah's testimony at such a time as this. Time and time again in Scripture we see how the lives of the Lord's servants are faithfully recorded – their triumphs and failures, their strengths and weaknesses. So we must follow the record accurately about Obadiah.

b. Obadiah feared man

‘And Ahab had said to Obadiah, “Go into the land to all the springs of water and to all the brooks; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, so that we will not have to kill any livestock.” So they divided the land between them to explore it; Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself’ 1 Kings 18.5-6.

Obadiah has been described as a man who was faithful but nevertheless fainthearted. Obadiah's situation in Ahab's court was similar to the modern day challenges facing Christians working in important positions serving under unbelieving bosses. That God intends some people to be in high positions of leadership is undoubtedly proven in Scripture. Joseph and Daniel are just two examples. It is important for us to understand some of the pressures and difficulties God's people face in such positions. They are often challenged in a far deeper and constant manner over matters of conscience than a

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Christian working in a less pressurized environment. This is one of the honest lessons that comes from this account. Obadiah was a believer in God, a person in whom Ahab could trust. It is incredible to see the positions given to God-fearing believers by evil kings. I remember being told at a conference about a dictator who insisted on having Christian bodyguards because they could be trusted.

Obadiah was such a man of integrity but he was working for an extremely weak and morally evil person, a person who was driven by his equally wicked wife Jezebel. Ahab was in the business of arrogantly disobeying God. This included sanctioning the evil instructions of his wife to seek out and murder some of God's prophets. While Obadiah was in the business of saving the prophets' lives, Ahab was in the business of destroying them.

Undoubtedly, as the situation became more stressful because of the famine, Obadiah's position as chief of staff to Ahab became more difficult and tense. So it is in business in recession times. Christians are sometimes placed in difficult moral dilemmas which cause anguish to the soul. Obadiah had to make moral decisions which no doubt challenged daily his belief in God.

At such a time Obadiah had worked out a way of successfully serving Ahab without antagonizing him. As a civil servant he understood diplomacy and politics. It would appear, therefore, that for the most part Obadiah was a secret believer. We have no record, for example, of Obadiah telling Ahab to repent or telling him the reason why the famine was there in the first place. Working for Ahab obviously meant compromise in certain areas.

The reason I mention this is because of the miserable task Obadiah was involved in. In the palace of Ahab and Jezebel there was enough food and water, yet Ahab had a major worry, something which troubled him deeply. So he asked Obadiah for help. Were not his precious horses and mules, his pride and joy, suffering? All around him the

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poor people were suffering because of starvation. In wicked Ahab's cruel and hardhearted philosophy of life they were expendable; they could die, but not his horses. One could understand it if he was concerned to save the cows and the sheep for prudent nourishment, yet here thousands of people were starving. The country was in a dreadful mess – there was distress everywhere, yet Ahab was more concerned for his show horses than for people. He would rather allow people to die than allow the horses to be killed to provide meat for the starving people. Here we see the terrible evidence of a person depraved by sin.

The Word of God faithfully reveals how challenging it was for Obadiah, the man who feared God greatly, to serve such an evil man, whose heart was as hard as a rock. God, in His sovereign will, called Obadiah to serve Him at such a time even at the throne room of Satan. The Church at Pergamos had the same experience – see *Revelation 2.12-17*.

Ahab in his ungodliness made a god of his possessions. The faithful account of God finds Obadiah on this miserable errand, not seeking water for humans, not ministering to humans made in God's image, but seeking water for Ahab's horses, his master's idols. How much of our time can be wasted on other issues, while the lost are perishing?

c. Obadiah feared for his life

'Now as Obadiah was on his way, suddenly Elijah met him; and he recognised him, and fell on his face, and said, "Is that you, my lord Elijah?" And he answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'" So he said, "How have I sinned, that you are delivering your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to hunt for you; and when they said, 'He is not here,' he took an oath from the kingdom or nation that they could not find you. And now you say, 'Go, tell your master, "Elijah is here"'! And it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone

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from you, that the Spirit of the Lord will carry you to a place I do not know; so when I go and tell Ahab, and he cannot find you, he will kill me. But I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth. Was it not reported to my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid one hundred men of the Lord's prophets, fifty to a cave, and fed them with bread and water? And now you say, 'Go, tell your master, "Elijah is here."' He will kill me!' Then Elijah said, "As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely present myself to him today."
1 Kings 18.7-15.

As Obadiah went about his wretched business Elijah suddenly met him. Obadiah fell at his feet showing great respect. However, the way Elijah spoke to Obadiah seems to indicate that he knew his current attitude and relationship to Ahab. Notice how Elijah responded to Obadiah falling on his face and saying, 'Is that you, my lord Elijah?' Elijah did not say, 'Go and tell Ahab,' but '*Go, tell your master.*'

This meeting of two brothers in the Lord found them in two different spiritual conditions, one full of faith and one full of fear. While Elijah stood before him full of faith and courage for the cause of the Lord, Obadiah responded to Elijah's announcement with great fear and defence. 'Have I not hidden and taken care of prophets? Why am I having to bring the news of your appearance?' Did not Elijah realize the anger of Ahab over the hidden Elijah? Obadiah had been in tolerable relations with Ahab; now he fears for his life. He knew how Elijah had been hidden by the power of God from Ahab. 'Surely', he reasoned in his mind, 'the same thing is going to happen again. I will go and tell Ahab that "Elijah is here", but while I am gone Elijah will escape and I will have to take the punishment.'

In verse 12 Obadiah doubted Elijah's word and misapplied the work of the Holy Spirit to this situation. The Holy Spirit never contradicts

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the Word of the Lord. Elijah is here. Obadiah was no doubt concerned but did not want to get openly involved, knowing the dangers. He feared the wrath of Ahab; he knew what a wicked master he served but found himself in a position in which diplomacy – keeping quiet – before Ahab was no longer an option. He had secretly helped God's servants by hiding them in a cave, but now Obadiah was called to publicly help God's servant! While God is not unmindful of the pressures of believers in high positions there are undoubtedly times when He calls them to make a stand. We could think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, for example.

When Obadiah questioned whether Elijah would disappear again and so put Obadiah's life in danger, Elijah said: *'As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to Ahab today.'* Note that this is exactly the same statement as that made to King Ahab over three years ago. Elijah had absolute confidence in the living God. Which Lord we serve is the issue. Here is a man, a forerunner of Jesus Christ, who set his face steadfastly to accomplish the will of the living God. Note the link with Christ.

'For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me' John 6.38.

d. Obadiah's overwhelming fear of the Lord

'So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah' 1 Kings 18.16.

Obadiah had arrived at a crisis in his spiritual life. He had succeeded in holding down his position thus far, keeping in step with Ahab, but now he was being asked to publicly show his loyalty to Elijah. The Word of the Lord through Elijah was pressing him into service. He must publicly acknowledge his loyalty to Elijah. Obadiah would have preferred for the Word of the Lord to work without his personal involvement, but God has chosen to use human instrumentality

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according to His sovereign wisdom. Personal witness is an important partner to the Word.

So Obadiah had two major fears working in his life at the same time: the fear of the Lord and the fear of Ahab. Which one was going to come out on top? The Word of God tells us that Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, so eventually his new nature, which had at its heart the fear of the Lord, overwhelmed and conquered his fear of Ahab. By God's grace Obadiah obeyed the Lord and showed great courage. He went to meet Ahab, telling him that Elijah waited to see him. Obadiah, the fearful man of God, came through as the man of courage inspired greatly by the fear of the Lord.

Hardhearted Ahab

‘Then it happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, “Is that you, O troubler of Israel?” And he answered, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed the Baals. Now therefore, send and gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel’ 1 Kings 18.17-20.

There were five believers in particular that had dealings with Ahab during his life. Two Ahab tolerated and three he hated. Obadiah and King Jehoshaphat were two men Ahab could tolerate. He knew they were believers, but nevertheless they did not make him feel uncomfortable. Ahab could tolerate Obadiah because until this point it does not appear he had rebuked Ahab or publicly shown his loyalty to Elijah. King Jehoshaphat of Judah, a professing believer, was willing later, at the end of Ahab's wicked life, to ally himself and his army with him in battle.

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Jehoshaphat had riches and honour in abundance; and by marriage he allied himself with Ahab. After some years he went down to visit Ahab in Samaria; and Ahab killed sheep and oxen in abundance for him and the people who were with him, and persuaded him to go up with him to Ramoth Gilead. So Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, "Will you go with me against Ramoth Gilead?" And he answered him, "I am as you are, and my people as your people; we will be with you in the war" 2 Chronicles 18.1-3.

"Then Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned safely to his house in Jerusalem. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to King Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Therefore the wrath of the Lord is upon you. Nevertheless good things are found in you, in that you have removed the wooden images from the land, and have prepared your heart to seek God." So Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem; and he went out again among the people from Beersheba to the mountains of Ephraim, and brought them back to the Lord God of their fathers' 2 Chronicles 19.1-4.

The three believers Ahab could not do business with were Elijah, Naboth, and Micaiah. Ahab called Elijah his enemy; Naboth was killed by Ahab's wicked wife; and of the prophet Micaiah Ahab said, 'I hate him.' Why was this? It was because all three men stood up to Ahab, confronted him, and told him the truth. They told Ahab what he needed to hear rather than what he wanted to hear.

Christian believers have to accept that they may be hated because of what they stand for. Jesus said,

'Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets' Luke 6.26.

'Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake' Matthew 5.11.

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Ahab accused Elijah of being the cause of the nation's problems and in so doing was really blaming God. He refused to face up to the reality of the situation, which was staring him in the face. We have a proverb which runs: 'There are none so blind as those who will not see.' Baal was meant to be the god of prosperity and nourishment but there was famine. Yet Ahab accused Elijah of being the 'troubler of Israel'. This charge was also levelled at Paul and Silas in Phillippi.

'And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city"' Acts 16.20.

a. Wholehearted Elijah's courage to speak God's Word

Elijah courageously defended the honour of the Lord and pointed his finger at the problem. The reason for the destruction on the land was that Ahab had deserted the living God and worshipped Baal: '*You have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed the Baals.*' These two words 'forsaken' and 'followed' are key to every person. When a person is converted these two words are reversed he forsakes idols and follows God. This was Elijah's testimony. The honour of the Lord's name was very dear to Elijah, more important than his life!

Notice how it was Elijah telling Ahab what to do. Ahab made his accusations and Elijah gave the direction. Elijah was not afraid to point the finger and confront the enemy. The secret behind Elijah's strength was his wholehearted devotion to Jehovah God. He lived with reverence for and reference to His Word.

In the end Ahab had to come under the authority of the Word of the Lord spoken to him by Elijah. He went off to gather all Israel and the false prophets to Carmel. Even in the hardness of his heart Ahab still had a conscience which responded to the Word of the Lord through Elijah, causing him to at least obey the practical instruction.

Elijah, Prophet of God

Conclusion

We have described the spiritual condition of three men. Which one is true of you or me?

- Elijah the wholehearted believer – ‘*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*’ (Philippians 4.13).
- Obadiah the fainthearted believer – better to start fainthearted and become wholehearted than to remain fainthearted and compromise.
- Ahab the hardhearted unbeliever – Ahab was consumed with himself in the evil of pride.

6. IF THE LORD IS GOD, FOLLOW HIM

1 Kings 18.15-39

Elijah was not afraid to point the finger and confront the enemy. For many years the Israelite nation had rejected God and given themselves over to the worship of Baal god. Baal was the god of the Canaanites. The Israelites intermingled with the Canaanites, imbibing their ways and adopting their god. Baal idolatry was now led by Israelite King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Baalism was the popular religion of the day. Why?

Baal was a manufactured, user-friendly god who made no demands upon morality; he was ok with worldliness. Baal was a god who encouraged materialism, an easy-going god who let you be as you wanted to be, who allowed you to express yourself fully. He was ok about a life governed by felt needs.

Baal worship offered the appeal of relevance. Baal looked after your self-interest like no other god did. Baal worship pandered to lustful, sexual gratification. In fact at Baal's temple all your needs could be met. Baal was the god of weather, grain, oil, and water. He was the god of the prosperous birthrate – a 'win-win' god.

Everything about this period in history was compromise – idolatry, materialism, worldliness, and gratification. For a while in the land there was material prosperity. Baal was praised as the giver and source of blessing. God Who reigned in Heaven was silent. The Israelite nation would only occasionally refer to Him. However, in His perfect timing, God had intervened in His judgment and sent a severe famine in the land, with a very solemn message given through Elijah the Lord's servant. It was all about judgment.

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God spoiled the idolatrous party. God affected what they loved most. Baal, the fertility god, was shown for all that it was: totally impotent, a sham, and a big lie. God brought judgment on the land and affected their material prosperity. In a similar way a financial crisis today serves to bring reality to bear. We cannot keep stacking up huge debts.

Here, the real reason for the judgment on the land of Israel was their idolatry. God sent the famine as judgment because of their own sin, yet in this famine it is still God who gets the blame by King Ahab. God, Who had been rejected and despised, is now accused. When wicked King Ahab came to meet God's servant Elijah he accused him of being the cause of the trouble. In Ahab's pride Elijah is viewed as the troubler of Israel, in effect blaming God through Elijah. But Elijah clearly points out to Ahab that he, the king, was actually the cause of the trouble. You are the problem, Ahab! He and the nation were living in idolatry. Do not blame Elijah and God, but simply stop and take a look at your life Ahab! Look where your beliefs, your attitude, and your actions have finally brought you and the nation.

So it is today. Whenever disaster hits, God – Who has been ridiculed, despised, rejected, and blasphemed – is blamed. The disaster is not seen as a reason to repent but the thinking is rather how to get out of the crisis and carry on as before.

Now, in God's unfailing, longsuffering mercy the famine is going to end, according to God's prophesied time. But just before the rain came Israel had to face up to the real problem. The prophets of Baal had to be called to account and the Children of Israel realise what their problem really was. So it was that Elijah met Ahab again. It was now God's time for truth confrontation, God's time to make the nation think and make a decision. It was God's time to demonstrate His power. and to vindicate the stand of Elijah – one man with God.

If the Lord is God, Follow Him

Elijah commanded Ahab to gather Israel and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. As they did so, they came as an exhausted, downhearted, misled, and enslaved people. They had come under the judgment of God because of their idolatry and had suffered greatly through the famine. But as they gathered at Mount Carmel what a sight met their eyes! The 450 prophets of Baal, having been summoned by Elijah to Mount Carmel, appeared in all their regalia. These were the false religious leaders, the deceivers, the arch-enemies of God who symbolised the cruelty of Satan. These prophets of Baal were not undernourished; they had been fed from the table of Jezebel, the wicked wife of Ahab. There they stood, well-fed, before a starving people, vividly portraying the real cruelty of their evil religion. We may think of the contrast today, where a poverty-stricken area is overlooked by an ornate church building with an expensive interior.

But one man they saw was different – Elijah was before them, dressed simply in plain clothing. Here was Elijah, one man with his God, daring to be different and not ashamed to be in the minority of one. Elijah began his confrontation with an appeal to all the congregation:

‘How long will you falter between two opinions’ 1 Kings 18.21.

This means that the people were behaving like a person who does not know what direction in which to walk. He lurches from one side to another like a drunken man. The Children of Israel really loved Baal worship. However, just in case Jehovah God was right after all, they had continued in some way to worship Him. Jesus once said,

‘No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon’ Matthew 6.24.

Elijah was teaching here that believing in God should bring commitment. He was not just saying, ‘Believe in God’: he was saying,

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‘Show that belief by following Him. Alternatively, if Baal is proven to be the real god, then believe him and follow him.’ Now this challenge did not make Elijah very popular – there was silence! Nobody, by nature, likes to be put in such a position, to make such a decision. Most people prefer to keep their options open. I was talking with an agnostic recently and this was his view of life. The type of question given by Elijah is considered offensive, dogmatic, unloving, and inconsiderate of people’s differing views.

However, notice now Elijah did not leave his congregation at such a point. He moved to a position which would enable his congregation to see for themselves Who is the true God.

“Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord; and the God who answers by fire, He is God.” So all the people answered and said, “It is well spoken” 1 Kings 18.23-24.

For too long the evil prophets of Baal had had things all their own way. They had deceived the people into believing Baal was a powerful god on the side of the people. Elijah had got these prophets in front of the king and the country to the point of accountability. Now their deceit and deception could be proved without doubt.

‘The God who answers by fire, He is God’ 1 Kings 18.24.

Elijah threw down the challenge in accordance with God’s command. The Children of Israel would have been familiar with the sign of fire. If they remembered their history they would recall that Jehovah God had at times answered and spoken by fire.

- The holiness of God was shown to Moses in the wilderness by the burning bush.

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- The Children of Israel were guided in the wilderness at night by a pillar of fire.
- The fire of God was evident at Mount Sinai when God gave the Ten Commandments.
- The fire of God fell on the sacrifice at the opening of the newly-built Temple in Jerusalem.

So all the Children of Israel responded and said to Elijah, *'It is well spoken.'* They could relate to this approach. Now, finally, Elijah had got King Ahab and the prophets and the people at the point of no return. They had no alternative but to address the issue; no more compromise, no more deceit.

So the false prophets prepared the bull chosen by themselves. Then they commenced their so-called worship to bring fire down upon the sacrifice to Baal. It was an amazing spectacle to behold. It was undoubtedly very impressive. There was shouting, singing, dancing, so-called praying and prophesying, and even physical abuse. No doubt there was great emotion and frenzy, and it was all very entertaining for the people to watch, but all that effort failed to bring the fire. These men no doubt had a tremendous time emotionally. They were beside themselves in their party, but it was all a false charade and empty.

'But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention'
1 Kings 18.29.

It was an excitement that led to a dark room of emptiness and silence. This is the sad testimony of false worship, or a sinful party of excess: after the emotion – emptiness.

Notice how Elijah responded to false worship. He did not give it any house room or respect. He mocked the Baal priests, encouraging them to shout louder.

'Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is

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busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened' 1 Kings 18.27.

What is Elijah saying here? 'Baal is not infinite (not without limit), not omnipresent (not everywhere), and not omnipotent (not all-powerful). Baal is nothing like the God Whom I worship!' He wanted the congregation to know for sure the vanity of this false Baal worship.

'But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention' is ultimately the epitaph upon all false religion, all false worship; worldliness is empty.

'Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him' 1 Kings 18.30a.

The prophets of Baal were not really interested in the people, only that fire would come down from Heaven; but in stark contrast we see Elijah, bold as a lion, and yet with a tender heart for the people. Before he did anything he invited these rebellious, hardhearted Children of Israel to come near. So it is with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ; we are invited to come just as we are with our sin, unbelief, hardness, our backsliding, uncertainty, weakness, and our failures. We are invited to come near just as we are and prove Who is the true God of holiness, grace and mercy.

'And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down' 1 Kings 18.30b.

Elijah went about it in a very orderly manner. First he did it in the name of the Lord, showing reverence. Then he put the wood in order. There was nothing done haphazardly or casually. This was honour brought to God through order. Elijah commanded that four barrels of water, probably from the sea, be poured three times on the sacrifice. On twelve occasions water was poured out, symbolizing the cleansing needed for the twelve tribes of Israel.

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The prophets of Baal must have looked on with amazement. What was this man doing? However, Elijah is proving a point; he is proving beyond all doubt the power of God. Elijah had confidence in God. He was determined that His power should be clearly seen without doubt. This was not to be confused with a manufactured miracle common to false prophets.

‘And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.” Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench’ 1 Kings 18.36-38.

At the heart of Elijah’s prayer was the honour of the Lord’s name; this was his real burden. When Elijah prayed:

- he understood clearly his position before Almighty God: *‘I am Your servant.’*
- his desire was for the glory of God; his desire was that God would be vindicated: *‘You are God in Israel’.*
- his desire for Israel was not judgment but restoration: *‘You have turned their hearts back to You again.’*

God demonstrated His power by sending fire with perfect accuracy directly upon this sacrifice. Nobody was hurt by the fire, only the sacrifice was burnt and the altar consumed. The fire represented both God’s judgment and God’s acceptance of the sacrifice. The acknowledgement of the people was, *‘The Lord, He is God!’ (1 Kings 18.39).* By

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faith Elijah had proved to the people the deceitfulness of Baal worship. God alone was the true God to be worshipped.

Conclusion

The Jewish sacrificial system was built on the premise that man stands guilty before a holy God; that he has broken God's holy law and commandment; that man cannot enjoy fellowship and communion with God until that sin has been dealt with. In making a sacrifice the sinner was symbolically owning his guilt and transferring it to the animal. He was acknowledging he was worthy of death himself. The animal became the substitute for the sinner. Hundreds of years later on Calvary's cross Christ was positioned between two thieves. God's wrath was poured down with absolute accuracy upon His only beloved Son. There at Calvary God told the world this Sacrifice was accepted, His justice satisfied. It was a once-for-all Sacrifice, Christ Jesus receiving the penalty of God's broken law so that repenting sinners might be spared, and have their guilt transferred to Christ.

The event at Mount Carmel was a picture to remind us of Calvary. The fact that the altar was consumed reminds us there is no more need for sacrifices in the Gospel age. There is no need to build other altars of our own, but to simply trust in the altar which God has ordained, this being the cross of Christ. Do we trust in this Sacrifice? *'If the Lord is God, follow Him.'*

7. ELIJAH – THE MAN OF GOD IN PRAYER

1 Kings 18.41-46

We have been considering the awesome event at Mount Carmel, where God is proven by fire to be the great and living God. The Baal god is proven to be a cruel deception, a figment of the sinful imagination, unable to hear or respond to the cries of his followers. So it was that the prophets of this false god Baal met their just judgment.

Now Elijah resorted once again to prayer. Depending upon the one and only living God, he once again climbed Mount Carmel. Meanwhile he told Ahab to eat and drink because rain was coming. Elijah knew that Ahab was convinced but not converted. Therefore, although Ahab was impressed by the day's events, he was still more concerned about his physical wellbeing than his spiritual wellbeing. So Ahab went to eat and drink and Elijah went back on his knees. Ahab dined and Elijah prayed.

What an example! Exhausted emotionally from the tremendous ordeal he had passed through with the prophets of Baal, surely now was the time to take a break. But here was Elijah turning back to walk up again to the top of Mount Carmel, the practical needs of the nation on his heart. Here was a man who understood the value of prayer. He had already clearly evidenced this on previous occasions, praying for life to restore the widow's son and the fire to consume the sacrifice. So Elijah, who had prayed to God for life and fire, now prayed by faith for rain, believing in the sovereign God with Whom nothing is impossible.

This second event involving Elijah at the top of Mount Carmel is one of the great examples of prayer found in the Word of God.

Elijah, Prophet of God

Privacy in prayer

'So Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel' 1 Kings 18.42a.

There are times when it is essential for us to be alone with God. Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel, away from the crowds and distractions. He could have stayed at the foot of the mountain to talk to the crowds about the events of the day but instead he went to private prayer. We are instructed by our Lord and Master Jesus Christ about the need of private prayer.

'But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly' Matthew 6.6.

Now obviously there was no physical door to shut on top of the mountain, but Elijah certainly recognised the need for privacy. He had, as the Bible says, to *'Be still, and know that I am God' (Psalm 46.10a)*. How often we forget to shut the door in prayer and so are easily distracted! Put the answer phone on; put the phone on engaged or turn it off. You are engaged in conversation with the Almighty! As Jesus says, shut the door. This is your time with God.

Reverence in prayer

'...then he bowed down on the ground, and put his face between his knees' 1 Kings 18.42b.

A few hours before Elijah was standing in authority before the prophets of Baal. He stood before them as an ambassador for God, bold as a lion! But now, as he came pleading before Almighty God, he recognised his nothingness before Him, rather like Abraham.

'Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord"' Genesis 18.27.

Elijah – the Man of God in Prayer

Although Elijah had had great answers to prayer, he did not become irreverently familiar with God. The more Elijah experienced of the gracious and mighty hand of God, the more he felt his own unworthiness. Boldness at the Throne of Grace is not because of our merits, but because of the merits and intercession of Christ. Elijah was bold in prayer, but not irreverent.

‘...casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you’ 1 Peter 5.7.

If we are to obtain the ear of God we must take our proper place before Him. Elijah curled himself up as small as he could, symbolising his smallness before Almighty God.

Petition in prayer

God had previously said to Elijah, *‘Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth’ (1 Kings 18.1)*. Elijah had said to Ahab, *‘There is the sound of abundance of rain’ (1 Kings 18.41)*. His prayer was based upon God’s promise. His words to Ahab demonstrated his faith in the God of the promise. When Elijah said there was the sound of abundance of rain, he could not hear the rain physically. He may well have heard and felt a breeze of wind getting up which may have indicated a change in the weather. However, his words to Ahab were a definite statement of faith in God promises. Is not God He that is faithful in His promises? Elijah’s statement meant that according to his faith in God, it was not a question of whether it would rain but when it would rain.

‘Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’ Hebrews 11.1.

‘But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him’ Hebrews 11.6.

Elijah, Prophet of God

God loves to hear His people plead what He has promised to them. His promises are there to encourage us to pray. We are to pray God's promises in order that those promises come to pass according to God's timing and will. See King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem:

'When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance' 1 Kings 8.35-36.

God's will is certain but He nevertheless delights to see fulfilment of His promises evidenced as answers to His people's prayer. In this we see God's amazing condescension.

Particular in prayer

Elijah was on his knees for rain. It is very easy to generalise even in our private prayer, to have catch-all phrases which take up less time. It is good for us to appreciate the need to ask God for certain things specifically. Here Elijah was praying especially for rain; this was the chief matter, the big issue. on his heart at the time.

A New Testament example of specific prayer is the desire of the Greeks to see Jesus.

'Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus"' John 12.21.

Watchful in prayer

'...and said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea"' 1 Kings 18.43a.

Here is one of the great lessons from this account. Elijah sent his

Elijah – the Man of God in Prayer

servant to look towards the sea for the first evidence of answered prayer.

‘My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him’ Psalm 62.5.

The fact that Elijah sent his servant to look for the answer spoke of his faith in prayer. Elijah really expected God to keep His Word. He waited and watched for God.

Perseverance in prayer

‘So he went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.” And seven times he said, “Go again”’ 1 Kings 18.43b.

Here is another of the great lessons coming from this chapter. Note the two words ‘*go again*’ which encourage us to keep persevering. How often we become disheartened in prayer; it is so easy to give up. There are times when prayer hurts, when it seems as if God does not care, does not hear. So Elijah, on his knees, heard his servant running back to him and saying the discouraging words, ‘*There is nothing*’.

How do we cope with the nothing? Satan says, ‘Give up.’ Human reason says, ‘Give up.’ But God encourages us in His Word to seek earnestly to find. Think of the parable of the friend calling at midnight, which the Lord Jesus told in *Luke 11.5-13*, or the more recent example of George Müller praying for a supporter’s son for over thirty years until his prayers were answered.

Elijah recognised the sovereignty of God in His perfect timing. Earlier in the day at the top of the same mountain, God had answered his prayer immediately when sending the fire. Now Elijah, with his face to the ground in dependent humility before the same God, persevered in prayer, trusting in the timing of God. Elijah understood that the servant’s reply, ‘*There is nothing*,’ was not God’s denial. The pain of the nothing was not the time to give up but rather the moment to persevere!

Elijah, Prophet of God

‘Then it came to pass the seventh time, that he said, “There is a cloud, as small as a man’s hand, rising out of the sea.” So he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot, and go down before the rain stops you’” 1 Kings 18.44.

Elijah recognised the first signs of answered prayer. This was enough for Elijah to tell Ahab to go before the rain would stop him from getting back to Jezreel. If we are looking diligently for answers we will be alert for the first signs. When we plant seeds we know the first shoots are a promise of what is to come.

Conclusion

We have seen the need for privacy, reverence, particular petition, expectation, and perseverance in prayer, and recognition of the answer.

His prayer answered, Elijah came down Mount Carmel and was empowered by God to run before Ahab back to Jezreel. Behind Ahab were the gathering clouds bringing rain to the land, a reminder of God’s longsuffering mercy.

Running in front of him was God’s servant Elijah, who had spoken and acted and prayed in the power of God, a reminder to Ahab that God’s sovereign power is over all. God, according to His grace, gave Ahab this last opportunity to repent of his sin, turn to the Lord, to unite with Elijah to bring reforms into the land. He had to make a decision. Was he going to go back into the palace at Jezreel with Elijah at his side? Was he going to bring authority to bear, as head of the home and nation, over his wicked wife Jezebel? Or was he going to part company with Elijah at the close of this remarkable day of God’s grace and judgment? Would he go back into the arms of the waiting Jezebel and succumb again to her evil designs?

This final action of God at the close of such a remarkable day demonstrates to us the amazing grace of God in Christ Jesus. Here was

Elijah – the Man of God in Prayer

Ahab, a man who stood by as his wife killed many of God's servants the prophets. He allowed his subjects to wreck the altars of the Lord in the land. He was the one who showed such seething hatred to Elijah. Yet here he was with this gracious, God-given opportunity to respond to the Gospel of God's grace. As Dale Ralph Davis describes the scene:

'Ahab has an offer of grace in his hand but his feet will soon stand in the devil's bedroom.'²

When Ahab came to Jezebel it is evident the truth behind the whole event was totally lost on him. He simply told Jezebel all that Elijah had done. The point was not what Elijah had done; the point was what God had done through Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel, in attacking Elijah, were rebelling against the almighty God. Such a response to the power of God is totally futile.

² *1 Kings, The Wisdom and the Folly*, Dale Ralph Davis, Christian Focus

8. ELIJAH – A BROKEN MAN RESTORED

1 Kings 19.1-18

By faith Elijah had a great victory on Mount Carmel, where the Lord Jehovah was shown to be the true God. The people of Israel had shouted in unison, *‘The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!’* (1 Kings 18.39). The evil prophets of Baal were slain according to God’s just and perfect judgment. In God’s mercy the famine was now over and rain was descending.

For Ahab the next period was a great test, but he wilfully rejected Elijah and the Lord, submitting to Jezebel’s anger, rebellion, and revenge.

Revenge

‘And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time”’ 1 Kings 19.1-2.

The judgment of God either hardens or softens us. There is no neutrality when God speaks like He did at Carmel. This was the point Elijah had made to the children of Israel when he challenged them: *‘How long will you falter between two opinions?’* (1 Kings 18.21). For Jezebel the revelation of the Lord’s judgment upon the prophets of Baal hardened her heart. She was now undoubtedly a person bent on revenge. Filled with hatred she sought to slay Elijah.

Reality

‘And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there’ 1 Kings 19.3.

Elijah, Prophet of God

Now let us see the situation from Elijah's perspective. Elijah had known the wonderful experience of God's power, hearing and answering prayer. He had run before Ahab to Jezreel and was no doubt now exhausted, both mentally and physically. But as he rested a knock came at the door. It was a messenger from Jezebel with a death threat!

Now Elijah considered this threat and understood the real and dangerous significance behind it. It meant that Ahab and Jezebel together had totally rejected the message of the Lord to the nation. Elijah feared that the leaders and the people were really still hell-bent on apostasy. Despite the awesome evidence of God, this was the reality of the situation Elijah had to accept. So he ran for his life, not so much in a panic, but in an accurate realisation of the situation.

The Word says, '*when he saw*'. Elijah saw his life was obviously in danger from Jezebel. Rather than allow her the satisfaction of evil revenge he departed with his servant to Beersheba. Elijah also saw the true reality of the situation nationally. After all God's mercy the nation under the leadership of Ahab and Jezebel would continue in the evil ways of Baal. The faithfulness and justice of God demonstrated at Carmel would be lost on the nation of Israel. The rebellion remained, despite the longsuffering mercy and demonstration of God's power. The reality of the situation crushed his spirit, and therefore he left Jezreel for Beersheba in Judah.

Now it is true that it would have been better for Elijah at this point to look by faith beyond the problem to the Lord. We do not have a record of this happening. When we focus on the problem, rather than God over the problem, then fear does take over. So it would seem Elijah left in despondency, turning in on himself, overwhelmed by a sense of failure. However, I understand this as Elijah going for his life as a broken man, but not as a bitter man.

A number of commentators are devastating in their criticism of Elijah. Elijah is accused of being unfaithful, of panicking, being

Elijah – A Broken Man Restored

cowardly and unbelieving, of running away, and being weak. This interpretation is apparently supported by the Lord later saying to him at Horeb, *‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’* (1 Kings 19.9). But we need to be careful in making such an assessment of the situation. Note that David ran for his life from Saul; Paul was let down over a wall in a basket and escaped for his life. Even our Lord passed through the crowd when threatened to be thrown off the edge of a cliff. When they took up stones to throw at Him, He hid Himself and went out of the Temple (*John 8.59*).

Before coming to a quick and definite conclusion, criticising Elijah for weakness and fear, thinking this all we can learn from the account, it is better to consider the event before us as a whole. This helps us to understand in a deeper way what the Lord is teaching us through this event. Here we see the amazing lovingkindness of God to His broken-hearted servant, even in the context of an apparent failure, running away from Jezebel and his ministry at Jezreel. This, I believe, is one of the central points of the account. It prefigures the compassion and wisdom of Christ the Messiah to brokenhearted people.

‘And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed”’ Luke 4.17-18.

Rejection

‘But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”’ 1 Kings 19.4.

Elijah, Prophet of God

Elijah travelled to Beersheba and there he left his servant. He then went on his own into the wilderness. Why go off into the wilderness? Beersheba was at least a safer place to be, in the land of Judah, out of reach of Jezebel. As a broken man he may have wanted to be on his own, no longer able to face people. He may have felt his ministry was at an end. As a broken man he went back to familiar wilderness territory. Remember the Brook Cherith. John the Baptist, the New Testament Elijah, was also a wilderness man.

As a broken man we know he set out on the long journey into the wilderness to go to Horeb, the place where God first gave the Covenant to Moses. But within a day's journey into the wilderness his mental fatigue and physical weakness proved too much. As he walked through the wilderness in the heat of the day, he was perhaps consumed by doubt. As he walked, he went further in his mind into the dark tunnel of despair and felt rejection. In his desperate loneliness and physical and mental weakness he turned in on himself. Here is clear evidence of a man suffering from depression and despair.

He eventually sat down under a juniper tree and asked for himself that God would take his life. He realised that actually he was not stronger, better, or more faithful than his fathers before him. He was rather a man subject to like passions as they were. Here Elijah was at the bottom of the valley and totally helpless. In total dejection and at the end of everything Elijah lay down to sleep.

Would it not have been kind for God to take him there and then and answer his desperate cry? But remember that Elijah's desire to die was not at this stage a positive desire to be with the Lord. It was a cry of depression, a cry of weariness, and the cry of wanting to be taken out of the ministry. The motive behind the cry did not accord with God's will at this time. The Lord responded to Elijah's cry, but not in the way that Elijah requested.

Elijah – A Broken Man Restored

Restoration

‘Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God’ 1 Kings 19.5-8.

Elijah was going to learn an amazing lesson about God’s love and grace shown to a broken man. Perhaps as he lay down to sleep, he thought God was angry with him, or was not listening to him. Perhaps he thought God’s love was dependent upon his actions, or that God only loved him as long as he was strong and courageous. Perhaps he thought that in his weakness God had given up on him and no longer loved or cared for him. But, like Elijah, we must remember that God’s love is not earned by us. Elijah had to learn about grace. God’s love is freely bestowed upon us because of His grace, not because of good works or efforts. We are loved by God in Christ despite our weakness and fear. God’s love for Elijah had not diminished, despite his condition!

Elijah was on his own in the wilderness, dehydrated, passing out with exhaustion, and life drifting away. But God is love and He intervened in the situation, preserving his life and showing His compassionate love. This intervention of God teaches us important lessons about the mercy of God to His broken people. God did not crush Elijah but comforted him. He did not forsake him but ministered to him. He first sent an angel to show care for him physically in this experience under the Juniper tree. Elijah learned that God’s love is wise, understanding, tender, and unwearied.

Elijah, Prophet of God

But notice there was a divine purpose not only to give Elijah food for the present but also to use this nourishment in a miraculous manner to sustain him for another forty days. By the words of the angel to Elijah it is evident that God was preparing Elijah for a long journey. Here was divine authorisation for the journey. Now Elijah was to continue, not in his own strength, but in God's strength.

This is one of the great lessons to be learnt from this account, for Elijah and also for us. Elijah was what he was with God's help alone. Left to himself he was subject to like passions as we are. The journey had already proved too great for him in his own strength. Remember, the journey is too great for you in your own strength.

But notice how, after the intervention of God, the same man went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb the mountain of God. Such a length of time brings a solemn significance to this journey of Elijah in the wilderness. It rained for forty days and forty nights in the great Flood of Noah's day. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Horeb on the two occasions when God gave the covenant law. Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness being tempted of the devil.

The point is that such perfect timing in Elijah's journey should alert us to the fact that there is more to this journey than Elijah running away in a panic and walking without thought into the wilderness. There was a deep significance and meaning to this journey! God was actually in this journey with Elijah. In his despair Elijah was not only concerned for his life; he was also concerned for the honour of the Lord. It is evident by the miraculous way in which God strengthened him that God was overruling this two-hundred-mile journey Elijah was undertaking. God never contradicts Himself! It would seem strange for God to miraculously strengthen a man for a journey He did not approve of! Elijah would not have needed such special treatment to travel between towns in Judah and Israel.

Elijah – A Broken Man Restored

This issue is important to our understanding of the meaning behind God's later question to Elijah. Elijah was walking to Horeb, the place where the Lord first appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

'The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb'
Deuteronomy 5.2.

He later gave the covenant law to Moses, and still later it was the place where Moses was commanded to strike the rock that the waters might flow. God had been pleased to appear in this place before, and so Elijah was returning to historical roots. Elijah was going to the place where God had previously spoken in a mighty way to Moses.

Revelation

'And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice'
1 Kings 19.9-12.

a. God reveals His knowledge

Imagine the scene: Elijah was shivering in a dark, damp, and cold cave. He had made it to Horeb but as yet no word from God! Finally, in the darkness of the cave, God came and spoke. God knew exactly where Elijah was.

Elijah, Prophet of God

b. God reveals His understanding

God knew exactly the way in which to deal with Elijah. ‘*The word of the Lord came to him*’. This is thought to be a theophany, meaning a pre-incarnation appearance of Christ to Elijah. He came as the kind, gracious, wise, understanding Holy One; a foretaste of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us full of grace and truth (ref. *John 1.14*).

The original meaning of the question, ‘*What are you doing here Elijah?*’ was not so much a reproof but rather a loving way to encourage Elijah to pour out his heart towards God. God obviously knew why Elijah was there! There is not a thought which escapes His knowledge. A similar situation was demonstrated when Jesus, the Son of God, was ministering here on Earth. For example, He knew the woman who had touched the hem of his garment in the crowd. When Jesus said to the crowd, ‘Who touched me?’ it was not because He, the Son of God, was unaware. Rather He spoke in this manner to give the woman the opportunity to speak to Him personally. (See *Luke 8.43-48*.)

So here, with Elijah, the question was Elijah’s opportunity to unburden his heart to the Lord. The question was not meant so much as a rebuke but rather as an indication of God’s compassionate concern for His brokenhearted servant. It was an invitation for him to state honestly the real situation before the Lord. At such a holy time Elijah spoke the truth.

c. God reveals His gracious character

Elijah had experienced and witnessed the divine power of God in signs: the ravens; the bin of flour and the jar of oil; fire from Heaven; food and drink in the wilderness. But signs in and of themselves do not reveal the fullness of the character of God. They reveal His power, they reveal His judgment, or His favour, but to know God personally

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we need something more than a sign. This, I believe, is one of the lessons Elijah was learning here. The fire on Mount Carmel impressed the Children of Israel but did not convert them. Now Elijah was reminded of the significance of the power of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God, for without the work of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God the heart remains as hard as a rock. Signs and wonders impress and challenge us, but in and of themselves they do not change us.

Here at Mount Horeb God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. These signs at Horeb are meant to remind us of the awesome terror of the law, yet the power of God's law can only convict; it cannot save us, it cannot comfort us. It is used by God before the medicine of the Gospel, but it can never convert us.

These amazing signs had the effect of keeping Elijah in the cave. It was grace that moved Elijah out of the cave in humble dependence. The word for 'small' is the same as that used to describe the Manna sent from Heaven in the wilderness. The Manna was a symbol of the Word of God. So here the Word of the Lord came to Elijah in the Person of Christ. The revelation of God's love through His Word is what finally encouraged Elijah out of the cave.

Then notice how He came out of the cave! The Word of God inspired humility, reverence, and godly fear. In a quiet way the Lord spoke to Elijah. He learned that God not only speaks through the spectacular, God speaks through His still, small voice, through His Word, gently persuading and teaching. God speaks as effectively in the stillness and quietness of His still, small voice as He does with His mighty signs and wonders.

Elijah needed reassurance. We sometimes look for signs to be assured, but the Lord often chooses to speak gently through His Word. Elijah was being taught here something of the wonders of God's grace. He is truly a terrible, just, and mighty God, demonstrated by

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the wind, earthquake, and fire. But He is also a loving, compassionate, and patient God, revealed to us in Christ and His Word, Who knows exactly how to deliver His people from temptation. He delivered and helped and directed Elijah, not through any merit on Elijah's part, but all according to His loving and compassionate grace.

Conclusion

'So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." Then the Lord said to him: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."' 1 Kings 19.13-18.

Elijah presented the problems before the Lord. He was upset for the Lord's sake – His honour was the issue really! Do you ever get depressed for God's sake? There were two main issues for Elijah:

1. The solemn truth and complaint about the apostasy of Israel
2. Elijah's sense of loneliness.

The Lord responded to Elijah's honest assessment of the situation by providing His answer. The Lord instructed Elijah to appoint Hazael,

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Jehu, and Elisha. Hazael and Jehu were both to be God's instruments of justice. Elisha was to be his partner in the ministry until Elijah's transport to Heaven. The Lord also reminded Elijah that he was not alone – he must get things in perspective.

The Lord dealt with His broken servant sensitively, compassionately, and firmly. May the Lord give us likeminded wisdom to deal with and help broken people. One commentator concludes the account with what I think are wise words of encouragement:

'We need not fear being a brokenhearted, inadequate servant when under the care of such an adequate God.'

9. THE MINISTRY CONTINUES GOD'S WAY

1 Kings 19.15-21

We have considered an example of the way the Lord deals with His people with compassion.

'As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him' Psalm 103.13.

God preserved Elijah's life in the wilderness and spoke in a quiet way to Him at Horeb. Elijah learned that God speaks not only in the spectacular, as at Carmel, but in the quietness of His Word. We may expect that the assurance of God's love to us should come to us in a spectacular manner, through a sign, yet in reality, step-by-step in a gentle but authoritative manner, God is already speaking to us through His Word.

Elijah's experience demonstrated the preciousness of the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. His experience also demonstrated the truth of God's law and grace. Elijah was an expert in understanding the justice of God; he was zealous for God's honour and name. But now he understood in a deeper way the love and grace of God.

Elijah also learned a lesson about fellowship. He had felt to date to be the only one left standing for the Lord. This was evidenced in the words he spoke to the Lord: *'I alone am left'*. He had managed with the help of the Lord as a leading prophet to survive on his own with his God, but now Elijah thought he was the only one left in the land of Israel, the only one left concerned for God's honour. However, God reminded him that there were indeed seven thousand who had not bowed to Baal. As Elijah came to the final phase of his ministry, he

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was to learn the blessing of fellowship. He was to anoint Elisha as a prophet who would serve with him and ultimately take his place. Elijah's work was going to continue for another thirteen years but was nevertheless in its final phase.

In these closing years he was not going to die independent from the fellowship of God's people. Elijah experienced the blessing of feeling part of the Church of the living God, and no longer felt he was the sole representative of the Church of God in Israel.

Elijah was also to learn, in response to his deep burden about the apostasy of Israel, that God was still in total control. Despite the circumstances God was fulfilling His purposes. The work must go on Elijah! Go, return to the work:

- anoint Hazael king of Syria who was to be God's instrument of justice;
- anoint Jehu to replace Ahab as king of Israel. Jehu was to bring about many reforms in the Land of Israel;
- anoint Elisha as prophet in his place. He was to be his right hand man until his departure to Glory. Elijah had to delegate responsibility and then be finally replaced by another man.

At Horeb the Lord had dealt with Elijah according to His loving, compassionate grace. He lovingly corrected, and graciously comforted Elijah, and clearly commanded him as to the way forward.

Approximately thirteen years passed between Elijah's experience at Horeb and his departure to Glory. During these thirteen years we can notice five particular characteristics in his ministry and his personal preparation for Glory. Each one of these characteristics provide helpful direction in our own serving the Lord, so this will be a kind of Bible Study.

1. The call of Elisha – discipleship

'So he departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat,

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who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Then Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle on him' 1 Kings 19.19.

Elijah obeyed the Lord directly and appointed Elisha to full-time ministry. Under Elijah's leadership Elisha was to develop and be prepared to take over. Note how Elisha understood what the call of the Lord into ministry meant for him:

- It meant making a sacrifice, shown in the symbolism of slaughtering the oxen. It meant giving up all to serve the Lord.
- It meant wholehearted commitment in his personal testimony. It was the call of God. It was not like applying for a job. We cannot dictate to the Lord our terms. It means we obey according to God's way.

Note that Elisha was prepared beforehand in his soul. This was recognised by family and friends, and he followed the call. It meant:

- leaving the comfort and security of the family home;
- leaving his secular employment;
- humbling himself to serve Elijah.

The first part of Elisha's ministry was a 'no frills' ministry.

'Then he said, "Which way shall we go up?" And he answered, "By way of the Wilderness of Edom"' 2 Kings 3.8.

Elisha, who was to become one of the greatest prophets, was willing to be known as Elijah's servant. However, the second part of Elisha's ministry was profoundly powerful. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in abundant measure; he was a mighty man of God.

The call of Elisha reminds us of what it really means for a minister to be out-and-out for the Lord.

2. The school of the prophets – teaching

'Now the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to

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Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?”...Now the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho came to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?”...’ 2 Kings 2.3, 5.

There is great blessing in experienced Christians teaching younger Christians. Commentators on these verses see this as Elijah having set up schools in Bethel and Jericho, giving a biblical warrant for the training of young men for the ministry. The term ‘*from over you*’, or ‘*from your head*’ refers to Elijah’s position as teacher. In the schools of that time the teacher would be on a higher seat, with the pupils below the level of his feet. Elisha would have ‘*sat under*’ the ministry of Elijah in his preparation for future teaching ministry. This issue of teaching the younger generation for future ministry is an important one for the Church. On an individual basis older people have a ministry in passing on some of the lessons they have learned. Paul describes Timothy as his ‘*son in the faith*’ (1 Timothy 1.2).

3. The meeting with Ahab – courage in obedience

“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, “Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who lives in Samaria.”...So Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” And he answered, “I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord”” 1 Kings 21.17-18, 20.

Elijah obeyed, even if it meant meeting Ahab again. Elijah was a voice for the oppressed. Ahab, through Jezebel’s influence, had murdered Naboth, a believer. He violently took his vineyard inheritance. The Lord had a message of judgment for cruel Ahab. The king repented of his sin for a while and the Lord stayed further judgment until after his death. We see the incredible mercy and patience of the Lord in His dealings with Ahab.

The Ministry Continues God's Way

But we see Ahab's rejection of God's grace.

'So the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say such things!"' 1 Kings 22.8.

In the battle that followed Ahab died. Both Ahab's and Jezebel's ends were as the Lord said.

'So the king died, and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria. Then someone washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood while the harlots bathed, according to the word of the Lord which He had spoken' 1 Kings 22.37-38.

(See also 2 Kings 9.30-37.)

4. The meeting with Ahaziah – vindicating God's name

'Then he said to him, "Thus says the Lord: 'Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of His word? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die'"' 2 Kings 1.16.

King Ahaziah directly challenged God in his attitude. Note the national state was still idolatrous and treacherous. Previously the Lord had answered Elijah's call for judgment twice on detachments of soldiers sent to bring him to Ahaziah. The third captain showed an attitude of humility, which resulted in Elijah's response to go with him. It would have been better for the first captain to show the same attitude of respect!

Note Ahaziah's end was also as the Lord said.

'So Ahaziah died according to the word of the Lord which Elijah

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had spoken. Because he had no son, Jehoram became king in his place, in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah' 2 Kings 1.17.

5. The letter to Jehoram – writing God's Word

'And a letter came to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, "Thus says the Lord God of your father David: because you have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat your father, or in the ways of Asa king of Judah"...' 2 Chronicles 21.12.

As a prophet he foreknew the end of King Jehoram. Note again, Jehoram's death was as the Lord said. (See *2 Chronicles 21.12-20.*) Here we are reminded of the power of the written Word of God.

10. THE DEPARTURE OF ELIJAH

2 Kings 2.1-15

Elijah carried to Glory

All our times are in His hand

‘And it came to pass, when the Lord was about to take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal’ 2 Kings 2.1.

The time had come for Elijah to depart to Glory, according to God’s perfect timing. This was the fulfilment of Elijah’s ministry. He had fought the good fight of faith. However, we do not read of Elijah being sick or being overcome by old age; rather we simply read that the Lord Himself was about to take Elijah into Heaven. Heaven is the destination of all the Lord’s people however they pass the threshold from time to eternity. Here we see the God of time, the God of Heaven, the God of Creation, ensuring a whirlwind is in the right place and at the right time to carry Elijah up to Heaven. The one sovereign Lord is over all!

When we read a verse like this it behoves us to humble ourselves before the Lord concerning our time. The Lord took Elijah in His time as He takes everyone of His people to Heaven in His time. The Lord, according to His sovereignty, takes up believers to Heaven and sends unbelievers down to hell. Are you heading for the Promised Land?

At Gilgal Joshua, whose name means ‘salvation’, led the people over the Jordan into Canaan Land. Are you following the heavenly Joshua, Jesus Christ? Elijah’s departing from Gilgal on the final day of his time here on Earth is deeply symbolic of his dependence for salvation on the grace of God in Christ Jesus as his Saviour.

All our ways are in His hand

‘Then Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, please, for the Lord has

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sent me on to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you!” So they went down to Bethel. Now the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent!” Then Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here, please, for the Lord has sent me on to Jericho.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you!” So they came to Jericho. Now the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho came to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?” So he answered, “Yes, I know; keep silent!” Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, please, for the Lord has sent me on to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you!” So the two of them went on’ 2 Kings 2.2-6.

The original meaning of the word ‘prophet’ in the Bible is ‘to be boiling or bubbling over’. A prophet was one whose heart was bubbling over with good matter. He was the mouthpiece and spokesman of God. Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. So it was that Elijah, as it were, bubbled over in speaking forth the good things of God’s Word. What an experience it must have been to sit under the ministry and teaching of such a prophet as Elijah! Seven thousand prophets who had not bowed to Baal were blessed in those final years of Elijah’s ministry.

On three occasions, just before being taken up to Heaven, Elijah stated: ‘The Lord has sent me.’ The first two locations were the very places where he could meet for one last time the prophets under his care. The Lord sent him to Bethel, then to Jericho, and finally the Lord sent him back to the River Jordan. Right until the end of his earthly pilgrimage Elijah went where the Lord sent him. Until the end of his life Elijah, who previously had been alone, had Elisha at his side.

The Departure of Elijah

Three times Elijah asked Elisha to stay and leave him to go on alone, but Elisha clung to his master. There is then a blessed picture given to us of the harmony between Elijah and Elisha.

We read in the full account that Elijah went with Elisha:

- they went down to Bethel;
- they came to Jericho;
- the two of them went on;
- the two of them stood by Jordan;
- the two of them crossed over on dry ground;
- they continued on and talked;
- as Elijah was taken to Glory the two of them were separated.

Why was Elisha so concerned to stay alongside his master? He seriously valued godly fellowship and conversation. *‘As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.’* A Christian will know when they are speaking with a godly person. Generally that person will pass on something helpful, wise, significant, and always biblical. It will be apparent their desire is to honour the Lord and not talk about themselves. What a testimony to the helpfulness of Elijah to Elisha, inasmuch as Elisha would not leave him!

All our gifts are from His hand

‘And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood facing them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan. Now Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up, and struck the water; and it was divided this way and that, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground. And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?” Elisha said, “Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.” So he said, “You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken

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from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so”
2 Kings 2.7-10.

Just before his departure Elijah, the experienced man of God, discerned Elisha's deep burden about the future. In a spirit of love and compassion Elijah asked what he could do for Elisha before he was taken away. There is deep significance in what Elisha requests: a double portion of Elijah's spirit. This is a remarkable witness to Elijah's testimony after he had worked closely alongside Elisha through danger and trials for over ten years.

Paul's Christ-centred testimony

We see this same remarkable testimony in the New Testament example of Paul, which we will briefly consider. Paul was in prison in Rome, having been tried, and was awaiting the verdict – deliverance or death. He wrote to an anxious church at Philippi. What is going to happen to Paul? What will happen to the Gospel cause? How can the Lord be glorified in Paul's imprisonment? What is going to happen if we lose Paul?

But in his chains Paul still rejoiced in the Lord and sent a note of optimism. There is absolutely no self pity here! Here is the first point to remember about our own Christian testimony: there is always a place for optimism. He says in *Philippians 1.12*, *'I want you to know'* – not about my suffering, my pain, or my chains. No, I want you to know God is in control. What Satan meant as an obstacle (my imprisonment) is the very thing that has been used for the spread of the Gospel. *'The furtherance of the gospel'* means that God has cut a way through the obstacles to clear the way for Gospel. God used Paul's testimony in prison to cut through the obstacles of Satan to reach people with the Gospel.

In adversity Paul remained optimistic. There was a purpose in all this. Paul could serve God in or out of prison. *'I want you to know'* there is great cause for optimism: the Gospel has had free course and

The Departure of Elijah

has been glorified (ref. 2 *Thessalonians* 3.1). Paul was chained constantly to a Praetorian guard. These were an elite band of soldiers forming the Imperial Guard in Rome. These men were on double pay and special privileges and became the most powerful body in the state. Probably at first they treated Paul just like any other prisoner – rudely, roughly, dispassionately, as just a number. They heard him speak, they watched his demeanour, they observed his polite attitude, and how he even gave thanks for his food. After a while Paul's testimony of Christ began to take effect. Paul became an interesting prisoner to be with. They listened to how he spoke to his visitors – the lawyers and church members. Christ was his topic. They listened as he dictated letters to be written to churches. They observed his gracious manner and polite communication with his captors. They would have noticed how many times he prayed, and noted his constant reference to the Word of God. They themselves became captivated, not by chains but by the Gospel. To be with Paul meant hearing about Christ. Paul and his testimony of Christ became the discussion point of the guards.

'All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household' Philipians 4.22.

They understood there could be only one reason why this gracious, meek, and honest man was in prison. It was not because of any crime he had committed but simply because of his committed belief in Christ.

'It has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ' Philipians 1.13.

Because Paul focused upon Christ in his testimony, Christ in the end was praised. How different it would have been if Paul had been full of self pity in prison, feeling hard-done-by! He used this an an opportunity. The Word of God was not bound in prison. Paul's testimony in captivity proclaimed Christ and the Gospel.

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A double portion

The spirit in which we live is of vital importance to our witness in this world. Would someone ask a double portion of our spirit? Do we witness the meek and gentle spirit of Christ in our life?

‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires’ Galatians 5.22-24.

A double portion of the spirit of Elijah – Elisha asked for a very hard thing. It is not difficult to have the wrong spirit – that is in our fallen nature – but to have the Holy Spirit is impossible in and of ourselves. That is why it is such a hard thing. Only the Lord can give it. This is why in our Gospel outreach we are cast completely upon the Lord. We can have our plans, programmes, and activities organised and run in an excellent fashion, but without the Spirit of God at work our labours are in vain. If it is God’s good pleasure, He will bestow it and attend our labours with blessing. From the very beginning a work of grace is a work of God’s grace.

For Elisha to have a double portion of Elijah’s spirit was indeed a very hard thing. Elisha was already converted, but he needed such a filling of the Spirit as to equip him for the task ahead. He needed to know the power of the Holy Spirit working within. He needed an unction on his ministry. Facing the future, Elisha realised this and sought it above all else.

Elijah carried to Glory

‘Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried out, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” So he saw him no

The Departure of Elijah

more. And he took hold of his own clothes and tore them into two pieces. He also took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood by the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, and said, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the water, it was divided this way and that; and Elisha crossed over. Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him, and bowed to the ground before him' 2 Kings 2.11-15.

Note the fellowship between Elijah and Elisha as they continued on and talked (verse 11). For Elijah fellowship on Earth became fellowship in Heaven. One can be sure they were not talking about the weather. I would suggest it was a Messiah-centred conversation – Elijah was soon to meet His Saviour face-to-face.

But then the perfect time of the Lord arrives and Elijah is carried up. Suddenly a chariot of fire appears, pulled by horses of fire, and accompanied by a whirlwind, and Elijah makes a wonderful entrance into Heaven. God said He would make His angels a flame of fire.

*'Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire'
Psalm 104.4.*

In Scripture cherubim are also called the chariots of God. There was a wonderful appearance of angels who transported Elijah from Earth to Heaven via a God-sent whirlwind. For Elijah there was a glorious change passing over him as he went through the region of the air, releasing him of his mortality and corruption, and fitting him in a miraculous moment for Heaven. Matthew Henry says:

'Elijah must remove to the world of angels, and therefore, to show how desirous they were of his company, some of them would come to fetch him. The chariot and horses appeared like

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fire, not for burning, but brightness, not to torture or consume him, but to render his ascension conspicuous and illustrious in the eyes of those that stood afar off to view it.’

Elijah had burned with holy zeal for God and his honour, and now with a heavenly fire he was refined and translated. For Elijah Heaven on Earth became Heaven in Heaven. A number of years previously Elijah had asked in despondency for the Lord to take his life there and then, but the Lord had something better in mind for him. God’s ways are better than our ways and His ways higher than ours (*Isaiah 55.9*). Elijah’s ascension to Heaven was witnessed by Elisha and fifty prophets as God’s seal on his ministry.

Elijah’s ascension to Heaven reminds us that there is indeed an after-life. It was a figure of the future ascension of Christ to Glory. It reminds us most assuredly there is a reward for the righteous, and serves as an encouragement that for the believer death is a transition upwards to Glory. They go from pain to perfection, tribulation to triumph, and from faith to fulfilment. Elijah’s ascension to Heaven is meant to assure us that God remains in control in a pagan world.

In Roger Elsworth’s *Standing for God* he says:

‘When the horses and chariots of fire swept down from heaven to take up Elijah it was not simply to honour him as a man. It was to demonstrate that what Elijah stood for, the Word of God, was ultimately going to triumph and prevail. The taking of Elijah to Heaven demonstrated that there is more to reality than this world, that there is a Heaven that is real, and that at any time the heavenly world can burst in and invade this Earth.’

Whatever it is that we find so depressing and discouraging today, we must take heart. No matter how bleak this hour is, no matter how heavy the clouds of gloom, God’s cause will ultimately prevail! There is coming a glad and glorious day in which God is going to prevail! We will go from tribulation to triumph, and from fear to fullness.

11. THE LORD GOD OF ELIJAH

2 Kings 2.14

Respect for God and His wonderful character is an absolute essential for spiritual growth, spiritual stability, spiritual strength, and spiritual fruitfulness. Having great respect and reverence for God will show in our witness, walk, and worship. For a Christian, knowing God and being assured of Him is vital in times of adversity and prosperity.

Elisha would have learned so much about the character of God from the teaching of Elijah. Elijah taught Elisha about the character of God, based on his own experience and understanding of the truth. Elisha sought the God of Elijah, Who had proved to be the faithful, true, and living God.

One of the secrets behind Elijah's boldness was his confidence in the character of God. For us to have the spirit of Elijah and stand firm for the truth as Elijah did means we will most certainly have an assured confidence in the character of God. We will now consider some of the characteristics of the God of Elijah by retracing his experience to enable us to see what Elisha meant by his statement, '*Where is the Lord God of Elijah?*' (2 Kings 2.14).

When we ask God to work in our lives and in our church, are we willing by faith to have to do with the God of Elijah? When Elisha asked this great question he did so with mature understanding, asking by faith. He wanted to experience the God of Elijah working in his own life whatever the cost or the commitment.

The God of Elijah: the everlasting God of power

This is the God Who:

- controlled the elements of nature and Creation, withholding the rain, and then sending it again;

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- provided bread and meat via the ravens for Elijah at Cherith;
- provided flour and oil for the widow woman to feed herself, her son, and Elijah;
- restored her son to life;
- sent fire from Heaven at Carmel;
- sent the fire, wind, and the earthquake at Horeb;
- sent a whirlwind to take Elijah to Heaven at Jordan;
- divided the waters of Jordan for both Elijah and Elisha.

The God of Elijah: the God Who lives and reigns

‘And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.”’ 1 Kings 17.1.

The God of Elijah was very much part of his life inasmuch as he lived it as unto Him. He lived his life in the knowledge that he was responsible to the Lord Who lives and reigns. This was part of the great burden of Elijah’s ministry: *‘The Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand.’*

- He was submissive to His will, praising and adoring Him as the living God;
- He proclaimed his God to Ahab, and was in the fear of God, not of man;
- He understood he was responsible to God – God was his Master, he was His servant;
- He was conscious of the presence of the Lord – God knows I am here, God is here with me, and I will proclaim the truth;
- He was not swayed by public opinion – he was willing to stand alone for God;

The Lord God of Elijah

- He looked forward by faith, conscious of the Day of Judgment.

Elijah understood his position before the God Who lives and reigns. Let us live in the knowledge that we stand before the living God Who reigns. Such a step of faith will motivate us to reverence and godly fear in how we live our lives.

The God of Elijah reveals His will and way by His Word

‘Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying...’ 1 Kings 17.2.

The Lord spoke directly to Elijah, and he was ready to listen.

The God of Elijah Whose ways are past finding out

God is sovereign in the way in which He directs to certain places and people. God’s ways for His people can be very challenging, both culturally and socially. God most certainly moves in a mysterious way to demonstrate His power at times. As we have seen, He sent Elijah to Queen Jezebel’s land, a journey across desert wilderness of seventy-five miles into a foreign country. Elijah was called to go to the birth-place of his greatest enemy and be a witness in her homeland.

‘And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshipped him’ 1 Kings 16.31.

Zarephath in Sidon was Jezebel’s home town! In addition, Elijah was sent to a widow who was in total poverty and almost ready to die. Humanly speaking she was the last person in town Elijah should go to for help. This widow woman was not a Jew, she was a foreigner, a ‘nobody’ of society. In many ways this step of faith was humbling for Elijah. He was calling upon the kindness and hospitality of this poverty-stricken woman. This is a remarkable picture of the amazing providence and power of God. The Lord was going to provide in a miraculous manner in the heartland of Baal. Man’s extremity is God’s

Elijah, Prophet of God

opportunity. Sending Elijah to this widow woman was a way of demonstrating His sovereign grace and purposes.

‘But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow’ Luke 4.25-26.

God made her willing to follow the words of Elijah by faith, even though the situation seemed hopeless.

The God of Elijah delights to deal in the impossible to show forth His wisdom. Worshipping and believing in the God of Elijah will sometimes mean being challenged by God’s ways. Sometimes it seems the Lord is not hearing us, not answering our prayers, and yet He is in control. Sometimes the Lord ordains a pathway for us which goes against our natural desires. Sometimes we have to accept there are questions which God is not obliged to answer.

‘How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!’ Romans 11.33b.

‘Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: “Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”’ Job 38.1-2a.

‘Moreover the Lord answered Job and said: “Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?”’ Job 40.1-2.

‘Then Job answered the Lord and said: “I know that you can do everything, and that no purpose of yours can be withheld from you.”’ Job 42.1-2.

Sometimes God uses people in unexpected ways, or purposely brings us into situations where the only direction we can look is to

The Lord God of Elijah

the Lord. Also remember that man looks on the outward appearance when making decisions, but God looks at the heart (*1 Samuel 16.7*).

The God of Elijah commands

We see this in the wording used for the Lord's direction given to Elijah.

‘Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you”’ 1 Kings 17.8-9.

We may ask, ‘How did the Lord command the widow woman to provide for Elijah?’ The Lord so worked in the power of His Spirit in her heart, granting her the gift of faith to obey His Word through Elijah. His commands then became her willing choice. Are we willing to be a commanded person, to be submissive to the will of the Lord in our life? Following the God of Elijah means to bow to Him as Lord with our whole being. Are you willing to obey such a God as the God of Elijah? As a perfect Man Christ obeyed God the Father, even to Calvary.

The God of Elijah overrules tragedy

‘Then he cried out to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have you also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?”’ 1 Kings 17.20.

The God of Elijah absents Himself in judgment

‘As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to hunt for you; and when they said, “He is not here,” he took an oath from the kingdom or nation that they could not find you’ 1 Kings 18.10.

The God of Elijah: all or nothing God

God will not share His glory with another; He is a pure and jealous God.

Elijah, Prophet of God

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word 1 Kings 18.21.

The God of Elijah always keeps His Word

'Then it came to pass the seventh time, that he said, "There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea." So he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot, and go down before the rain stops you'" 1 Kings 18.44.

The God of Elijah: the all-knowing God

'Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who lives in Samaria. There he is, in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone down to take possession of it"' 1 Kings 21.17-18.

The God Who understands

There was a time when Elijah came to the end of all things and asked that he might be taken out of this world. In his despair it was only God who really understood the problems besetting the thinking of Elijah.

'And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed"' Luke 4.17-18.

In His perfect wisdom He did not answer Elijah's request but spoke to Him in a still, small voice. God knew exactly how to get Elijah to pour out his heart to Him at Horeb. It was not by the demonstration of God's might, but by the demonstration of God's understanding.

The Lord God of Elijah

God's question brought forth Elijah's answer. His answer revealed his burden. God answered his burden in a way which revealed His perfect understanding of Elijah's condition and need. The God of Elijah on the one hand can show His mighty power, while on the other His still, small voice. So for us the God of Elijah understands all about us and how to deal with us and minister to us in our need.

'Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need' Hebrews 4.14-16.

'And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever' John 14.16.

'These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. 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, neither let it be afraid' John 14.25-27.

Many times in the life of a Christian the Lord shows His wise understanding, to meet us at our point of need. This can be through His Word, through the preaching, through answered prayer, or through fellowship. He can send a person into our life, who is used to support and encourage just at the right time. Each time the God of Elijah is telling us He understands and He cares.

Conclusion

'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?'

The God of Elijah, the only true and living God, is wonderful in all His ways. Believe this by faith!

12. THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

2 Kings 2.9

In the last chapter we traced some aspects of the character of Elijah's God. In this final chapter we will spend time in considering the spirit of Elijah. If we worship the Lord God of Elijah it will have an effect spiritually within our own lives. It was this spirit of Elijah, working within his life, of which Elisha sought a double portion. The spirit of Elijah was not a commendation of his natural temperament; we are told Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours (*James 5.17*). It was rather a commendation of the Spirit of God, working in the person of Elijah, bringing forth blessed fruit. It was actually the effective unction of the Holy Spirit upon Elijah that made him the man he was. It was the Spirit of God working through Elijah that enabled him in ministry and miracles.

Elisha was undoubtedly deeply burdened about the future. Just before his departure Elijah, the experienced man of God, discerned Elisha's deep burden about the future. In a spirit of love and compassion Elijah asked what he could do for Elisha before he was taken away. There is deep significance in what Elisha requests: a double portion of Elijah's spirit. This is remarkable. Elisha had witnessed Elijah during over ten years of working closely alongside him, through danger and trials. The spirit in which we live is of vital importance to our witness in this world. Would someone ask a double portion of our spirit? Do we witness the meek and gentle spirit of Christ in our life? It is the work of the Holy Spirit we need, that same Spirit Who was working in Elijah.

A double portion of the spirit of Elijah – Elisha asked for a very hard thing! It is not difficult to have the wrong spirit: that is in our fallen nature. But to have the Holy Spirit is impossible in and of ourselves.

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That is why it is such a hard thing – only the Lord can give it. Elisha was already converted, but he needed such a filling of the Spirit as to equip him for the task ahead. He needed to know the power of the Holy Spirit working within. He needed an unction on his ministry. As he faced the future Elisha realised this and sought it above all else. He knew that his ministry meant far more than relying on his natural gifts. He knew that for his ministry to be effective God must work through him. To be used of the Lord as Elijah had been, he needed the same Spirit that Elijah had depended upon.

The Spirit working in Elijah is perfectly summarised by Paul:

‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law’ Galatians 5.22-23.

But how do these fruits manifest themselves in real life in a way that affects our manner of life and attitude? How do these fruits manifest themselves in ministry for the Lord? It is this aspect I would like to focus upon as we conclude our study of Elijah’s life. How did Elijah’s Christ-centred character manifest itself in his ministry? What did it mean for Elisha’s ministry? What will it mean for us if we have the same desire for a Spirit-filled ministry in our own lives?

1. We know from the New Testament that having the spirit of Elijah meant looking forward to Christ. The whole desire of John the Baptist, the New Testament Elijah, was to prepare the way for Christ.

‘[John] will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,” and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ Luke 1.17.

2. To have the spirit of Elijah will mean our constant focus will be to magnify the name of the Lord. John the Baptist said of Christ, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3.30). To have the spirit

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of Elijah will mean having an understanding of our smallness and Christ's greatness. John the Baptist, who came in the power of the spirit of Elijah, said, 'I am not worthy even to unfasten the sandals of my Lord and Master Jesus Christ.'

This is the humble, Christ-centred spirit of Elijah that we today, as children of God, can seek in our lives. Many people misunderstand having the spirit of Elijah to mean only having courage to stand for the truth, but having the spirit of Elijah means we will understand that the way we stand for the truth is also vital. So we see John the Baptist, the New Testament Elijah, had Christ-centred courage, humility, and purpose.

3. To have the spirit of Elijah will mean to pray earnestly with expectation and anticipation and faith.

'Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly' James 5.17a.

4. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have fervency in prayer. Elijah really believed in the purpose and privilege of prayer. He understood his position before God in prayer. Although Elijah had great answers to prayer, he did not become irreverently familiar with God. The more Elijah experienced of the gracious and mighty hand of God, the more he felt his own unworthiness. Boldness at the Throne of Grace is not because of our merits, but because of the merits and intercession of Christ.

Elijah demonstrated how much prayer meant to him by persevering in prayer. Here is one of the great lessons coming from his Mount Carmel prayer, as he tells his servant to go again and look for the answer to prayer, to keep persevering. How often we become disheartened in prayer, and find it so easy to give up. There are times when prayer hurts, when it seems as if God does not care, and does not hear. So Elijah on his knees hears his servant running back to him

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and saying the discouraging words, *'There is nothing'* (1 Kings 18.43). How do we cope with the nothing? Satan and human reason urge us to give up, but God encourages us in His Word to seek earnestly and to find.

5. To have the spirit of Elijah means to intercede in prayer.

'Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again' 1 Kings 18.37.

6. To have the spirit of Elijah means to experience and show God-given courage. How did Elijah stand before King Ahab? Elijah spoke to Ahab and made it clear that he did so as an ambassador of the Lord. When Elijah stood before the prophets of Baal, he stood as before the Lord against them. That is the secret here.

7. To have the spirit of Elijah means to minister with commitment to the cause. Most of the time Elijah was willing to be as clay in the hands of his heavenly Potter. The Lord sent him – he went; the Lord told him to speak – he spoke; the Lord told him to write – he wrote. He was not a robot but he was a man totally committed to the cause of the Lord.

8. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have a real concern for the building up of believers. In the final phase of Elijah's life we read of his ministry with the School of the Prophets. He was evidently known and respected by them as their leader who cared for them. They would never forget that Elijah the prophet visited them at Bethel and Jericho before he departed to Glory. Under the guidance of the Lord, Elijah made a statement of care and concern for the up-and-coming generation.

9. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have a real concern and compassion for those enslaved in sin. On Mount Carmel his approach was totally different to that of the prophets of Baal. They had abso-

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lutely no concern for the spiritual wellbeing of their followers. They were deceivers of the deceived. The first thing Elijah did when he was leading the true worship of God was to call the people closer.

‘Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” So all the people came near to him’ 1 Kings 18.30.

The prophets of Baal were not really interested in the people, only that fire would come down from Heaven. But in stark contrast we see Elijah, bold as a lion and yet with a tender heart for the people. Before he does anything he invites these rebellious, hardhearted Children of Israel to come near. So it is with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ; we are invited to come just as we are, with our sin, unbelief, hardness, our backsliding, our uncertainty, our weakness, and our failures. We are invited to come near, just as we are, and prove Who is the true God of holiness, grace, and mercy.

10. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have a real concern for cross-bearing submission. When we ask for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, do we really know what we are asking for? Elisha, like his master Elijah, would suffer for the sake of the truth – he would know persecution. To know the deepening work of the Holy Spirit means entering into deeper fellowship with Christ, but in entering into deeper fellowship with Christ we are also entering into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. The opposition of Satan is greater and the persecution grows as we take up our cross and follow Him. When you are opposed for Christ’s sake, or make a stand for Christ’s sake and suffer, always remember the person is not so much attacking you as the Person, the God you represent. When Saul was converted the Lord said to him, *‘Why are you persecuting Me?’ (Acts 9.4).*

11. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have Calvary-based conversation.

‘And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and

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Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' Luke 9.30-31.

This Calvary-based thinking finds great encouragement in what it accomplishes, to take unworthy, hell-deserving sinners and make them right with God through the Person and work of Christ. To have the spirit of Elijah means to be motivated by the power of God to salvation to everyone that believes (*Romans 1.16*).

12. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have a great respect for the name of the Lord.

'So he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life"' 1 Kings 19.10.

As we have already said, respect for God and His wonderful character is an absolute essential for spiritual growth, stability, strength, and fruitfulness, and it will show in our witness, walk, and worship.

13. To have the spirit of Elijah means to have celestial-based aspirations.

'And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection' Hebrews 11.32-35.

Conclusion

Do take encouragement from the way the Lord took Elijah, a man subject to like passions as we are, and mightily used him, preserved him, renewed him when despondent, and enabled him to continue. May the Lord so work in our lives that we ourselves may bear some marks of the spirit of Elijah.

To have the spirit of Elijah will mean:

- our constant focus will be to magnify the name of the Lord;
- to pray earnestly with expectation and anticipation and faith;
- to have fervency in prayer;
- to intercede in prayer;
- to experience and show God-given courage;
- to minister with commitment to the cause;
- to have a real concern for the building up of believers;
- to have a real concern and compassion for those enslaved in sin;
- to have a real concern for cross-bearing submission;
- to have Calvary-based conversation; and
- to have celestial-based aspirations.

For Elisha to be granted the double portion he had to see Elijah depart into Heaven. This reminds us that for us to be filled with the Spirit of God we must see Jesus by faith. We must see that every spiritual blessing which we receive comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ’ Ephesians 1.3.