

THE STORY OF ELIJAH

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1 Kings 18: 1-2, 17-41

It is one of the most glorious, awe-inspiring, comforting and encouraging of truths that God always has a man to match the hour. The Almighty never leaves himself without a witness. He never fails to provide the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

Whenever the circumstances are such that ordinary gifts and abilities will not suffice, whenever greatness is the need of the hour, whenever it is obvious that some special leadership is called for, God raises up a man who is big enough, broad enough, tall enough and strong enough to fill the breach.

When the tides of history were just right for the creation of Christ=s church and the soil of man=s soul was such that it could receive the seeds of God=s Kingdom, the Lord raised up a man called Peter and a thunderbolt named John.

Later on, when the powers of hell had grasped that church in their treacherous tentacles and were about to squeeze out its life and there was an urgent need for even one faint glimmer of light, God raised up a man called Luther.

And then in the 18th century, when the winter of moral decay had fastened its icy fist upon England and that nation longed for a new spiritual springtime, God matched the hour with a man called Wesley and a nation was turned back to the Faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

And what has been true throughout modern history was also true in the day of Elijah. For more than forty years the land of Israel had been in a state of moral and spiritual deterioration. Beginning with Jeroboam, and continuing on through six equally wicked kings, the people whom God had chosen for his own, slipped further from him.

And, when it seemed as if things couldn't possibly get any worse, morally flabby, spiritually corrupt and emotionally weak-willed Ahab came to power. And the Bible says of him, *He did evil above all that were before him.*@

Under the shrewd and sinister influence of Jezebel, his handsome, evil-hearted, heathen wife, Ahab sought to stamp out the religion of Jehovah once and for all. The altars of God were cast down and the prophets of God were murdered. In their place groves of false gods were erected. Hundreds of heathen priests took over and were sustained from the revenue of the royal purse. Temples of Baalim were built in Jezreel and Samaria. All in all, the darkest hour in the spiritual history of Israel descended on that land.

Then, just in the nick of time, God's champion arose. The times were such that only a man of undaunted courage, fiery zeal and dramatic boldness could equal them. As J. Sidlow Baxter points out,

The times were crying for an Elijah; and in the providence of God, Elijah appeared.@

There is no escaping the fact that Elijah is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of Israel. There is something awesome about the solitary magnificence of this shaggy-bearded, long-haired, weather-tanned son of the desert@ bursting into the king's court, Alifting a sinewy arm to heaven,@denouncing the weak-willed king and pronouncing vengeance upon a wicked and wayward people.

Here was the first great protestant. Here was the Martin Luther of Old Testament times crying out in a voice that had the sound of thunder in it against the apostasy, anarchy and immorality of his day. With the ringing authority of a man who knew God, Elijah cried,

As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain for three years but according to my word.@

The prophecy had hardly died on his lips when the heavens became as brass, the sun as a withering fire, and famine, the scourge of a desert people, descended on Israel.

The Jews had known drought before. This was nothing new. In times past there had been days, even weeks, when they had gone without moisture. So, they were ready. Their bins were full. But as the weary days wore into weeks, and the weeks into months, and months into years, their brimming bins soon emptied. Their once fertile fields became parched and brown. Their laughing, robust children grew sadly silent, and life reduced itself to a grim struggle for survival against the scorching scourge of the sun.

Still the people would not repent. They would not turn from their wicked and wretched ways. To be sure they cried out for help -- as so many of us do when life comes tumbling in and all we hold dear is torn from our grasp -- but they would not repent. Proud, arrogant, people that they were, their prayer was *AHelp, Lord!* But their concern was with what God could do for *them*, not what they should do for *him*.

I suppose there are some who would say it wasn't fair for Elijah to call down such calamity. Too many innocent people were made to suffer. But however dreadful the drought was, worse still was the fact that the drought was needed.

More than any other people who ever lived, the Israelites had been blessed of God. Chosen by Him. Protected by Him. Beloved to Him. The Jewish people had been singularly blessed. And yet, time without number, they turned their backs upon the God of their fathers, and Elijah knew that physical suffering, however great, was a far smaller calamity than moral decay and spiritual death. Even a drought and a famine, with the consequent physical suffering that these inevitably bring, would be a kindness if it brought the people back to God and saved their souls and purified their hearts.

So the drought continued. The once fertile fields became desert. The once hearty children became weak and frail. The only sound to be heard above the murmuring of the people was the wail of the wind as it wandered aimlessly across the plains now made parched and barren by the fury of the sun. Indeed, the way of the transgressor is hard!

Once, during these years of yeasting and torment, the voice of Obadiah is heard like the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Calling the people from their idols. Urging them to turn once again to the one true God. Reminding them, that if with all their hearts they would truly seek God, they would surely find him, but there were few who heard and heeded

Well, the three years of which Elijah had spoken, passed. The tempo of the story quickens as Elijah, the prophet, seeks out Ahab, the king, and confronts him with his guilt. Ahab, of course, tries to escape any involvement and seeks to place the blame upon Elijah. But Elijah persists. It is the worship of Baal which has been the source of Israel's strife, and he challenges the prophets of Baal to the test by fire.

One of the striking things about Elijah's story is that he doesn't waste any time in debate. He is not interested in establishing the truth of God by argument. He has no intention whatsoever of comparing word for word, sentence for sentence, paragraph for paragraph, the respective creeds of Baal and Jehovah to see which is superior.

He knows the best defense is an offense, so he proposes that *both* God and Baal be put to the test of fire. Let an altar be set up and a sacrifice arranged. Let the Baalites pray to Baal and Elijah will pray to the Lord God Jehovah. The God who answers by sending a fire which consumes the sacrifice, will be God indeed.

The results of this test are classic. The Baalites pray and plead and cajole their god. They torture themselves with knives and lancets till they are smeared with blood, but their god doesn't answer. So Elijah begins to taunt them. He goads them into frenzied fury by suggesting they're not praying loud enough. Their God must be talking, or is on a hunt, or perhaps is sleeping.

A Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is

in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awakened. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. (But) there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded@ (1 Kings 18:27-29).

Then, as the hour of the evening sacrifice approaches, Elijah steps forward and raises his hands for their attention. He instructs them to rebuild the altar of God and dig a trench around it. Firewood is arranged and a sacrifice is put in place. Elijah has them fill four barrels with water and orders that they be poured on the sacrifice and the wood. This is done a second time, and a third time. The sacrifice and wood are thoroughly drenched and the excess water spills off the the altar filling the trench surrounding it.

As a cataclysmic quiet settles upon the people, Elijah, the prophet, lifts his voice in one of the most poignant prayers ever heard --

¶Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God is Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back again.¶

As the people, now subdued, watch in wonder, Elijah calls down the fire of God, and it descends, consuming the sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, licking up the water that was in the trench. And the people cry, ¶The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God!¶

It is a truism that we are most susceptible to a great defeat just after we have gained a great victory. Such was the case with Elijah. Having routed the prophets of Baal, having broken the hold of Queen Jezebel upon the souls of the Israelites, having revealed King Ahab for the weak-willed rascal he was, Elijah, the man who had single-handedly turned an entire nation away from idolatry back to the worship of the one true God, suddenly becomes the captive of despondency and discouragement.

And my! How familiar such feelings are to us! How often we, too, have found ourselves on this journey with Elijah into the wilderness. And what a terrible thing discouragement is. It blinds us to all that is good, and exposes us to all that is bad. That's what it did to Elijah.

Perhaps this indigo mood was a reaction from the strain of the mountaintop experience throughout which he had just passed. Perhaps his allies had deserted him. More than likely he was in the doldrums because of physical fatigue. But, for whatever reason, his world suddenly collapsed around him.

Nothing seemed worth fighting for anymore. The meaning had gone out of life. The sun had gone down on his hopes and ideals. A gray shadow of despair had crept over his spirit, and squatting down under a juniper tree, Elijah cries out for God to take away his life.

I think most, if not all of us, have felt like that at times. None of us is free from the temptation to throw in the sponge. None of us is exempt from the dark and heavy weight of a juniper mood.

Sometimes these periods of discouragement are the result of some sad and shattering set of circumstances which have captured us.

Sometimes despondency is the result of nothing more significant than a Monday morning drizzle. Sometimes this juniper disease seems to come from nowhere, and for no reason, as we are caught in the pull of an emotional downdraft.

But most of the time these indigo moods are the result of sheer emotional and physical fatigue. Having burned the candle at both ends, as it were, we suddenly come to the end of our tether. A heavy pall of meaningless drops down over our spirit and we seem unable to escape it. We fear we have lost our faith, when in reality we've just lost a little sleep!

Such was the case with Elijah. As he lay exhausted under the juniper tree, pleading for God to take away his life, he fell asleep, and, as he slept, the angel of encouragement came and ministered to him.

¶Get up and eat, the angel said. Elijah rubbed the sleep from his eyes, looked around, and the Bible says there was a cake baking on a bed of hot coals, and a cruse of water at his head. Elijah ate and drank, and went back to sleep. The next morning the angel came a second time, shook him and said, ¶Get up and eat. There's a long journey ahead of you.¶

It's wonderful what a good night's sleep and a couple of good meals will do for one's spirit, isn't it? Yes! We're told that after Elijah had rested and taken on some nourishment, ¶he went on in strength.¶

That doesn't mean the warfare within him was ended. The Bible tells us that after travelling forty days and forty nights he came to Mt. Horeb where he found a cave and crept inside. As he cowered over in a corner of the cave, he was met by the Lord who said, ¶What doest thou here, Elijah?¶

You see, dear heart, a cave is no place for a prophet. In fact, it's no place for any child of God. Yet many of us have been in the caves of despondency, worry, hopelessness and fretfulness. If there are any ¶cave-dwellers¶ here this morning, Elijah's God is saying, ¶What doest thou here?¶ A cave is no place for a child of God. You belong on the mountaintop. You belong in the surging stream of life, not in a cave.

As Elijah listened to the voice of God he was directed to,

¶Go forth and stand upon the mountain that the Lord might pass by.¶

Dear friend, hear me, if you are going to conquer your juniper moods and your cave diseases, you must get up and get out on the mountain. You will never see the Lord as long as you remain in the cave. For God is not a God of the caves, but of the mountaintops.

Crawl out of your cave. Climb to the top of God=s mountain. There you'll see what Elijah saw. The glory of God! And you will hear what Elijah heard --

¶For behold, the Lord passed by. A great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, the 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.®

And the Bible says that when God had revealed himself to Elijah, ¶he arose and went on in strength.®

The same will be true of you if you will crawl out of your cave onto God=s mountaintop. You, too, will go on in strength until, at last, you are swept up into heaven to join the glad band of those, who through faith in the one true God have learned with Elijah, to be more than conquerors.