

GOD WITH US

Part 6: *Israel's Unfaithfulness and God's Ridiculous Love* Kings & Prophets thru 722 B.C.

Message 4 – Standing against the tide

Elijah the prophet

(1Kgs. 17-19, 21:17-29; 2Kgs. 1:1-2:12; 2Chr. 21:12-15)

Introduction

Elijah was called as a prophet by God to confront Ahab, Jezebel and the Baal-movement. He was used mightily in the confrontation between Yahweh and Baal (1Kings 18); but he faltered when it came to facing Jezebel. In the Elijah, we meet a normal human-being with a very stressful calling. He was bold with great authority and power, and yet experienced great fear and discouragement at other times. The N.T. says, "*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours . . .*" (James 5:17). We can gain comfort and courage as we study Elijah. Elijah PRAYED to God about everything. He prayed about his opponents, and his desire to glorify God, needing God's power. Through prayer and God's power he stopped and started the rain, brought down fire from heaven and raised a son from the dead! He also prayed about his own thoughts and emotions and was very honest with God. His relationship with God was very personal. Most of all, in Elijah we learn the spiritual principle: **Courage is found in the cave.**

Jesus and others in the New Testament refer to Elijah more than any other O.T. prophet. In fact, Elijah is called an O.T. forerunner of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, ministering to the masses and calling the nation back to God. Elijah prepared the way for Elisha, who like Jesus did more miracles and cared for individuals. Elijah was chosen as one of the 2 people, Moses as the other, to meet with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration before His week of suffering (Luke 9:28-31).

Elijah's Preparation: Ch.17

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (17:1).

Elijah's calling was to dismantle Ahab and Jezebel's campaign to

make Baal the god of Israel. The 3-1/2 year drought showed that Yahweh, not Baal, was in charge of the rain. Calling an entire nation back to the worship of Yahweh was a big mission for Elijah's life. So, God did what He always does: He took His servant through a period of preparation. While the nation suffered a 3-1/2 year drought, Elijah's faith was being nurtured by God.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there" (17:2-4).

His first stop was the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. This was FAR from Ahab and Jezebel in Samaria, and CLOSE to Elijah's home in Tishbe. It was safe and it was familiar.



Elijah experienced God's divine protection and personalized detailed provision of meat and bread a.m. and p.m. as ravens brought food to him daily. He remained there until the drought dried up the Brook Kerith (perhaps a year or so.)

God often changes things up on us when He's preparing us for service. He wants us to experience His power and provision in a variety of ways, and learn deeper lessons of dependence on Him. So, God let the Kerith Brook dry up and sent Elijah to a different and unlikely place for provision and protection. Sometimes it is really hard to understand God's ways. They don't really make sense at the time. This is often the way that God grows our faith!

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath (17:7-10).

Ironically, Zarephath of Sidon was in *the very region of Jezebel's family*. Elijah's location went from the safe and familiar to the *unsafe*. This was such a great hiding place for Elijah. Jezebel would NEVER think that Elijah was actually hiding in her home region and under the leadership of her father who was King and the high priest of Baal. That was brilliant!



When Elijah arrived at the city gate and spoke to the woman, he must have been a bit surprised that she initially said to him, “*As surely as the LORD your God lives, I don't have any bread*” (v.12). This woman knew that he was a holy man and that Elijah's God was alive and well. She was willing to take a risk to help him.

While at Zarephath, Elijah's personal faith as a believer and man in ministry grew right alongside the faith of the widow. 1Kings 17:7-24 is a beautiful story of this courageous younger widow (a single mom) who through her obedience to Elijah's requests and God's word, came to her own profession of faith in Yahweh. She might have fed him and concealed him for as long as 2 years! God was faithful to provide flour and oil that she could bake into bread as long as the drought continued even in Sidon. He learned to trust God every day; that his prayers could unleash God's power; that he *was* a powerful instrument for God's purposes in that time period of Israel's history. He learned to trust God when the unforeseeable and unbelievable happened – the death of the widow's young son. Why would God keep them from starving, to then allow her son to become ill and die? But he learned to trust God for the impossible; the first resurrection from the dead in the whole Bible! After the crisis of her young son dying, and being brought back to life, she finally declared: “*Now I know that you are a man of God and the Word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth*” (v.24). How encouraging for Elijah to experience two women from Sidon –

Jezebel who hated Yahweh and Elijah, and this sweet widow, who took small steps of faith in God and Elijah. They were opposite in every way, yet both initially followers of Baal. Elijah experienced another huge lesson of faith, that God was willing to use a Sidonian woman to protect him from the other Sidonian woman!

What do we take from this period of Elijah's preparation? This is a pattern with God. God trains His servants privately before He deploys them publicly. He trained Moses on the back side of the desert for 40 years, before He used Him as the leader over Israel. He trained David for 15 years running from Saul and hiding in caves, before He installed him as king over Israel. He let the convert Paul spend more than a decade in Arabia before calling him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus spent 30 years in obscurity before He began His ministry. Don't be discouraged if you find yourself on the back side of some desert right now, or in some strange Zarephath. Don't run from God's training ground. He's developing you right there, right now, for something later.

Elijah's Victory: Ch.18

Elijah was now ready for the greatest battle of his life – the day of confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The nation was also ready for a decisive day, having suffered through the long drought. At the end of the 3-1/2 years, Elijah met Ahab and challenged him to a contest between Yahweh and Baal.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?" He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (18:17-19).

At Ahab's command the entire nation assembled at Mt. Carmel, where Elijah announced the purpose of the gathering:

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

The Baal prophets prepared their offering and then called upon their god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. They

cried out to Baal from morning until evening, but nothing happened. In turn, Elijah prepared his offering, soaking it first and then calling upon Yahweh to send fire from heaven:

At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again.” Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God” (18:36-39).

It was a tremendous victory for Yahweh and Elijah. The nation acknowledged Yahweh on that day. Ahab and Jezebel’s campaign to make Baal the god of Israel was over. The prophets of Baal were destroyed. And the drought ended when Elijah prayed and it started to rain. It truly was a “mountain top experience” for Elijah.

<p><i>There is no indication that the Israelites truly repented of their rebellion against God after they acknowledged Him as the true God. True belief involves taking Christ as your Savior (in our day), and a sincere desire to follow Him. This takes courage to go against the culture and beliefs of others, as it did in Elijah’s day.</i></p>
--

But that scene from his life is not the one that makes him a *beloved character* in the Bible. The reason Elijah is described as “*a man with a nature like ours*” (James 5:17) is because of the next scene.

Elijah’s Despair and Restoration: Ch.19

After Elijah’s mountaintop victory came his valley of despair. It so often happens like this in life: One minute we’re on top of the world; the next minute we are in a valley of discouragement.

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life . . . (19:1-3).

He ran roughly 125 miles south to escape from Jezebel. Then he sat down and prayed that God would let him die!

He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there. Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors who have already died.”

He literally asked God to end his life. Instead, God restored his physical strength for the next leg of his journey.

He lay down and slept under the broom tree. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him, “Get up and eat!” He looked around and there beside his head was some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water! So he ate and drank and lay down again. Then the angel of the LORD came again and touched him and said, “Get up and eat some more, or the journey ahead will be too much for you.”

He slept, he ate, he slept, he ate. God ministered first to his *physical needs* for sleep and food. Elijah had become physically exhausted after the long confrontation with Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal.

We should never underestimate the impact of our physical health upon our emotional, mental and spiritual health. We are whole beings, and we cannot neglect one part of our being without impacting the other parts. Someone has wisely said: “Often, the difference between hope and despair is a nap.” This is shown to be true by the way God allowed Elijah to sleep and eat before moving on to deal with the prophet’s spiritual and emotional condition. How are you caring for your body? Are you getting proper rest, nourishment and exercise? Is God trying to tell you that your physical exhaustion is at the root of much of your spiritual and/or emotional discouragement or despair?

The last leg of Elijah’s long journey outward was to Mt. Sinai (also called Mt. Horeb) at the very base of the Arabian Peninsula – an additional 200 miles beyond what he had already travelled.

So he got up and ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to travel forty days and forty nights to Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. There he came to a cave, where he spent the night” (19:3-8).

In total, Elijah travelled roughly 325 miles trying to get as far away from Jezebel as possible. He came to Mt. Sinai, where Moses had received the 10 commandments; the very mountain where it all started for the nation Israel 500 years before Elijah. There, God met Elijah in a very personal way. God began with a question:

The LORD said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

God was exploring Elijah’s heart; reaching into the hidden places to force Elijah to face the deep things that were causing his despair. Elijah’s response was filled with strong emotions.

Elijah replied, “I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.”

He *felt* that he had expended his zeal with no effect (defeat); that the people were successfully rejecting the rule of God over their lives (hopelessness); that he was the only one left that had a heart for God (isolation); and that Jezebel would be successful in tracking him down and killing him (fear).

You can't heal what you don't allow yourself to feel. God helped Elijah to name his painful emotions before He set about providing remedies. We so often try to bury our painful emotions of grief, sadness, anger, despair, etc. But burying painful emotions is not the answer. Instead, we should bring our true emotions into the light of God's presence and love. The Scriptures reveal over and over again that even God has painful emotions. He understands feelings like rejection, abandonment, fear and sadness. Jesus personally experienced all these emotions, and many more. “Our High Priest understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most” (Heb. 4:15,16 – NLT).

God had answered Elijah’s bold prayer at Mt. Carmel in front of all the prophets of Baal and Israelites with fire. He took Elijah to heaven in a chariot of fire. But, in this scene we see the tenderness of God who knew what Elijah’s frazzled and anxious spirit needed most. God knows what each of us need. We enjoy Him most when we pay attention to the ways He creatively touches us from heaven.

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the LORD told him. And as Elijah stood there, the LORD passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave (19:11-13).

When the gentle whisper came, God asked Elijah the exact same question a second time, and Elijah gave the exact same reply.

A voice said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied again, “I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.”

Surely God did not *need* to hear Elijah’s lament a second time; so we must assume that Elijah needed to express it a second time. God pointed the way forward for His servant, and in doing so He addressed every one of Elijah’s deepest needs.

- Return to Damascus of Syria, the very region he had fled from.
- Anoint Hazael the next king over Syria.
- Anoint Jehu as the future king over Israel.
- Anoint Elisha the prophet as his own successor.
- Rest assured that the house of Ahab and Jezebel would be judged.
- Know that 7,000 others were true worshippers of Yahweh.

God met Elijah’s *physical* needs by giving him rest and food. He met Elijah’s *emotional* needs by letting him vent his true feelings, then gently whispering to him in response. He met Elijah’s *spiritual* needs by assuring him that He was in complete control of the destiny of men and nations. He met Elijah’s *relational* needs by awakening him to the fact that there were 7,000 kindred spirits in the nation Israel, and most importantly by giving Elijah a disciple named Elisha, to do the rest of the journey alongside him.

F. B. Meyer wrote: “The acquisition of spiritual power is impossible, unless we can hide ourselves from men and from ourselves in some deep gorge where we may absorb the power of the eternal God.” If your tank is empty, take time to get alone with God. Only He can fill your life with the power you need to go on.

Elijah calls Elisha to follow him: 19:19-21

As instructed, Elijah found Elisha and invited him to be his special follower, disciple and successor. (We will devote a future lesson to the life of Elisha.) The call of Elisha looks very similar to the call of the 12 disciples by Jesus (compare Matthew 4:18-22).

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him (19:19-21).

Elijah announces the end of Ahab's dynasty: 12:17-24

In the previous study we saw how Ahab and Jezebel conspired to kill Naboth and acquire his vineyard for themselves. Elijah boldly confronted Ahab and announced the complete end of his regime and the future destruction of all his descendants (pp.655-656).

Elijah announces the death of Ahaziah: 2Kings 1:1-16

Ahab's son, Ahaziah succeeded Ahab as king over Israel. When he suffered a crippling fall, he sent messengers to the Philistine city of Ekron to inquire of Baal if he would recover. (Recall that Baal worship had been eradicated from the Northern Kingdom of Israel; thus, Ahaziah had to reach out to Philistia to find a Baal prophet.) God told Elijah to intercept Ahaziah's messengers and give them this message:

"Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron?" Now therefore thus says the LORD, "You shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but you shall surely die." Then Elijah departed (2Kgs.1:3,4).

Ahaziah sent 50 soldiers with their captain to arrest Elijah and bring him to Samaria; but the soldiers were consumed by fire at Elijah's word. This happened again a second time. The third captain of 50 came with a humble disposition toward Elijah and his

God, and their lives were spared. Elijah accompanied them to Ahaziah, where he announced that the king would surely die.

Elijah taken up to heaven: 2Kings 2:1-14

The narrative does not give a detailed account as to how long Elijah and Elisha ministered together. It's clear that after Ahaziah's death in the north, and Jehoshaphat's death in the south, Elijah was still speaking with authority. He wrote a letter of rebuke to the southern king Jehoram, who was not walking in the ways of his father (2Chronicles 21:12-15). But when it was time for Elijah to pass the prophetic responsibility to Elisha, and leave this life, Elijah did not die, rather, he was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. The important issue in his departure was the way that he transferred his power and authority to Elisha, his successor.

Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." He said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over (2:9-14).

The "double portion" of the inheritance was always given to the first-born son (see Deut.21:17). Thus, it is clear that Elisha had come to regard Elijah as his 'spiritual father,' and Elijah had accepted him as his 'spiritual son.'

Like Elijah and Elisha, you may not be married or have biological children of your own. But this is a beautiful example of a 'spiritual father and son.' Discipleship and companionship is the best way to stay encouraged and strong. Who are you in spiritual community with? Who do you consider your 'spiritual father or mother' or 'spiritual son or daughter?'

Summary: Elijah is prophet that is referred to most in the New Testament (29 times). Just as Elijah was the forerunner for Elisha, so he is compared to John the Baptist as the forerunner for Jesus. It was Elijah who appeared with Moses when Jesus went up to a mountain and was transfigured before the eyes of Peter, James and John. They were privileged to discuss Jesus' departure from this world, which would soon happen through His death, resurrection and ascension in Jerusalem. And it was Elijah that James referred to as an example of faith-filled prayer.

“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:16,17).

Discussion Questions

1. Elijah was used of God, yet he was an ordinary man with many lessons of his own to learn along his journey. Some were in the 3-1/2 yr preparation phase, in the ministry phase (Baal contest, flight in fear to meet with God), and some were in his mentoring phase with Elisha. Which ones do you identify with?
2. How does the story of Elijah being sent to the widow in Zarephath of Sidon (1Kings 17) impact you? If you are a woman, what did you see in her feminine strength that inspired you?
3. What did you learn about God and His dealings with the different people in this section? (Elijah, the widow, Ahab, Jezebel)
4. Prayer: What inspired you from Elijah's personal conversations with God, but also his huge faith prayers?
5. Why do you think Jesus made a big deal about Elijah being sent to Zarephath rather than to widows in Israel? (Luke 4)
6. **Courage is found in the cave.** How does this principle challenge the way you are spending time alone with God?