

YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

SERIES: ELIJAH: AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD'S GRACE

by Ron R. Ritchie

We who have lived in California for the last seven years are familiar with drought. We know firsthand what it means to experience the absence of yearly rainfall and to miss the benefits of fruits, vegetables, flowers, shrubs and lawns. We have personally experienced lifelessness in our communities because of the lack of rain and dew. But after seven years of drought the Lord has graciously returned rain to our state, and we are once again enjoying the wonderful physical and emotional benefits of seeing the land come back to life.

Yet in the midst of this physical blessing in California, we realize that in our Western world we are experiencing a serious "spiritual drought," as we hear of more and more Christians who once were committed to loving the Lord God with their whole heart now following after other gods. Some are trying to serve both the Jesus of the Bible and a Jesus they have created in their minds who will accommodate their present sin. Others who once followed the Lord have now forsaken him and gone after the gods of this age. The most popular god was recently expressed by Katharine Hepburn in one word, when she entitled her autobiography simply, *Me*.

This spiritual drought caused by serving other gods was very evident to me and my wife on a recent trip we took to France, Germany, Italy and Corsica. As we walked, talked and shared meals with several European families and friends, we soon discovered that most of them had come into contact with God in their youth, but now find him irrelevant in this modern age except in an occasional baby baptism, wedding or funeral. Our hearts were grieved as we saw them struggling to live in a fallen world and clinging to gods to which they were ascribing honor and power. We found them worshipping at the feet of several idols: self, family, jobs, money, the European common market, nature and sports heroes. But in moments of crisis they were finding out that the gods they depended on could not save their marriages, their wayward children, their jobs, their economy, or their physical lives. These gods could not deliver them from daily stress or an uncertain future. We found that many of their hearts were as hollow and empty as the churches we visited. Originally designed for the glory of God, these cathedrals now have souvenir shops just to the left of the altar. Jesus Christ has been replaced by postcards and T-shirts.

The spiritual drought that is deeply affecting Europe is quickly spreading to the Christian churches in America, as we find ourselves surrounded by so-called believers who are trying to love the Lord Jesus and the current gods of this world at the same time. But the word of the Lord is clear: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other." (Matthew 6:24).

In 1 and 2 Kings we now begin a study about our loving and gracious God, his faithful prophet Elijah, and some seven thousand believers living in Israel during a severe spiritual and physical drought.

In this study we will see that God had chosen Israel to be a holy people, set aside to love and serve him, so that the Gentile nations in great darkness could find the light of the world whose name is Jesus. But they failed the day they put their innocent Messiah on the cross in Jerusalem. Because of their unbelief in Jesus as Messiah, Israel has been set aside as a nation of spiritual blessing until the end times (see Romans 11). But our risen Lord Jesus is still the light of the world and, for a time, Israel has been replaced with what Jesus calls his body-the church, Jews and Gentiles who have placed their faith in him. In each generation since the day of Pentecost in 33 A.D., we have been called to be a holy people until he comes again in power and glory (see Matthew 5:14; 1 Peter 2:9-12).

When the church turns from serving the Lord God to other gods, the resulting spiritual drought has tragic effects not only in our own lives but also in the lives of those in surrounding communities. This study is

offered to Christians as an encouragement to remain faithful to our loving and gracious God. It challenges us to become "radical" Christians like Elijah who, in spite of his own weaknesses, chose to be used by God as an instrument of grace, truth and hope among the disobedient Israelites as well as some Gentiles.

A lawyer asked Jesus one day, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said, "What is written in the Law [of God]?" The lawyer answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28).

Why are we to love the Lord our God with our whole heart?

He is the one and only living God.

1 Kings 16: 29-17:1

Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. And it came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him. In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his first-born, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

Now, in 926 B.C. the united kingdom of David and his son Solomon had been divided by civil war. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin had set up their kingdom in the south of the Promised Land and made Jerusalem their capital. The remaining ten tribes had called themselves Israel and established their kingdom in the north and, under King Omri, named Samaria as their capital.

First Kings 16:25-26 gives us a list of sinners and their sins that gave rise to the events of the drama that will unfold in 1 Kings 16-2 Kings 2:

"...Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, and acted more wickedly than all who were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam [the first king of the northern tribes whose reign began some forty-four years earlier (926-882 B.C.)] the son of Nebat and in his sins which he made Israel sin, provoking the LORD God of Israel with their idols [the worship of golden calves].

Who are the players in this drama? First, Ahab was a victim of his father Omri, who did many evil things, following in the footsteps of his father Jeroboam. Upon his father Omri's death, Ahab became the seventh king of Israel and began his twenty-two-year reign in 871 B.C. with his pagan queen, Jezebel. He was selfish, sullen, cruel, morally weak, materialistic and compromising; and sold himself to do "evil in the sight of the LORD" (1 Kings 16:30). He increased in evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him, and it was a trivial matter to him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, violating the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Though forbidden to take a Canaanite wife (Exodus 34:12-17), he married Jezebel, who influenced him to serve and worship Baal, violating the first and second commandments. He built a temple to Baal in Samaria, hoping for a fortified city against the Moabites on the

east side of the Jordan River.

He allowed a man named Hiel to build in the ruined city of Jericho, ignoring God's warning to Joshua five hundred years earlier after God destroyed the city: "Cursed before the LORD is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his first-born he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates" (Joshua 6:26). God's word is not lost over time, and this curse was still in effect in Ahab's day. As a result of this disobedience, Hiel lost his two sons, either because of an accident during construction, or because he offered his sons as a sacrifice and buried them in the foundation of the gates and the wall, a common practice in the Near East at that time.

The apostle Paul would write to the church of Galatia some nine hundred years later, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life." (Galatians 6:7-8).

Another player is Jezebel (whose name means Where is the Prince? Where is Baal the Mighty? Where is the Lord of the earth?). Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, the Canaanite king of Tyre and Sidon and a priest of Astarte, a goddess of sensual love and fertility. She was supervisor of Baal worship in those cities. Baal was the chief male god of Phoenicia. He was the son of El, the father of gods and the head of the Canaanite pantheon. He was a farm god who supposedly gave increase to family, field, flocks and herds, and was also identified with the storm god, Hadad. Baal worship was held in high places and included animal and child sacrifice, ritualistic meals and licentious dances performed by male and female Baal prostitutes. Alongside Baal was the female Canaanite idol, Asherah, the chief goddess of the city of Tyre. Her cult object, whatever it was, was utterly detestable to the faithful worshipers of Jehovah (1 Kings 15:13). Jezebel was dedicated and energetic, and soon gained complete control over her husband Ahab, establishing her religion in Samaria and ordering Ahab to build a temple to Baal in the city. She then killed most of the prophets of God and replaced them with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. At the end of her life she was known in Israel as a harlot who gave herself over to witchcraft and the doctrine of demons (2 Kings 9:22).

Finally, in the midst of this moral decline in Israel, the prophet Elijah appears. Elijah (whose name means My God is Jehovah) was born in the small village of Tishbeh in the tribe of Naphtali, but had been living in Gilead in what is now modern Jordan. According to 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.

(Some eight hundred years later John the Baptist would appear on the scene in the spirit of Elijah clothed with camel's hair; he would be wearing "a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). He would fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 as the forerunner of Messiah Jesus.)

Elijah appeared during the eighteenth year of Ahab's reign, at a time in Israel's history when most of the prophets of Jehovah had already been killed by Jezebel, and the faithful remnant of seven thousand had been scattered for fear of their lives.

Elijah was a radical prophet in light of the spiritual darkness of his day, because he declared Jehovah as the one and only living God of Israel. Ahab and Jezebel had tried to embalm God, but there standing before Ahab was a man who was filled with God's Spirit and power. Ahab had sold out to evil; Elijah had sold out to the living God of Israel.

Elijah was radical because he chose to be available as a representative of and accountable to God. And he was radical because he was aware of the resources available to him from the God he served. The apostle James would write, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). Elijah knew he could ask God for all the resources of the kingdom in order to accomplish whatever task his King wanted him to accomplish.

So God, hearing the prayers of Elijah over the sins of his people, brought him to the very courts of Ahab and Jezebel to announce impending judgment, in the hope that they would repent of their sins and return to the one and only living God.

Why did God send the prophet Elijah to King Ahab at this time in Israel's history? God leaves no generation or nation without a witness of grace and truth (see Acts 14:17). Some 530 years earlier, God had made a loving covenant with Israel just before the Israelites under Joshua were to step into the land of promise. The covenant reviewed by Moses came in the form of blessings and curses. God reminded the Israelites that they were his people, and that he had called them out of Egypt to be a holy people for his name's sake. They were to keep his commandments and walk in his ways, and all the peoples of the earth would see that they were called by the name of the Lord.

The Lord told of his blessings for obedience. "The LORD will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand...do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them...[or] all these curses shall come upon you." (Deuteronomy 28:12-15.) Then the Lord told of his curses for disobedience: "...the heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed." (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). When Elijah arrived in the courts of the king the covenant of God was still in effect, and Ahab was about to suffer the full consequences of his sin for forsaking the living God and worshipping other gods.

Elijah said to King Ahab, "You are worshipping Baal, the rain and storm god, and the living God is about to show you that Baal has no power over rain. Only Jehovah has power over the rains, and he will prove his power by bringing upon the nation a drought, in the hope that you and his people will come back to him. Therefore there will be no rain until God speaks again." James reminds us, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months" (James 5:17).

I was delighted recently to talk to some of the people who are planning to minister in Romania soon. They realize that they are going into a land in which Christianity has been replaced by a deadly religious system, a crumbling political system, and a hunger for materialism. Yet in the midst of this spiritual darkness a small "remnant" of Christians has asked Gary Marchetti and his wife Amy to bring to them some teachers so they can be taught the word of God. And who is God sending? Just a handful of available men and women filled with the spirit of Elijah, from all walks of life, who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, who are trusting in his presence and power to use them to encourage faithful believers and to challenge the wayward ones to return to God and love him with their whole heart.

We are to love the Lord our God with our whole heart because he is the one and only living God and because...

The living God is full of grace and truth.

1 Kings 17: 2-24

And the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. And it shall be that you shall drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. And it happened after a while, that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a

handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first, and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke through Elijah.

Now it came about after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe, that there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance, and to put my son to death!" And he said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. And he called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, hast Thou also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD, and said, "O LORD my God, I pray Thee, let this child's life return to him." And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned 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 is alive." Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

No sooner had Elijah spoken to Ahab on behalf of God than God told his prophet to get out of town. He was to go down near Jericho about forty-five miles to the south and to wait on the east side of the Jordan river by the brook called Cherith.

There are two reasons for this departure: First, it was to fulfill the prophecy of God in the lives of the king and the people of Israel. Second, God sent his prophet to the desert not only to save his life from the sword of Ahab and Jezebel, but also to strengthen his faith in God. In the midst of the drought the Lord led Elijah to a small stream in the rough hills of ancient Moab now known as Jordan. God then provided food by a most unnatural means, sending ravens who flew to his hiding place to drop bread and meat at his feet twice a day for almost a year. You can hear the words of our wonderful Lord as he taught his disciples years later: "...seek first [the kingdom of God] and His righteousness; and all these things [food, shelter and clothing] shall be added to you." (Matthew 6:33.)

After a year, the brook dried up because of the severe drought, and again the word of the Lord came to Elijah. God told him to go to Zarephath north of Jericho, a coastal city between Tyre and Sidon (modern Lebanon), which was also suffering from the drought. This city was the home territory of Jezebel and her father, King Ethbaal.

God said, "I have commanded a (Gentile) widow to provide for you." In this phrase we see once again the consistent, loving character of God, for in Deuteronomy 10:16-18 Moses told the Israelites, "Circumcise then your heart, and stiffen your neck no more. For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing."

God had already prepared this widow's heart to have faith in him before Elijah appeared. Jesus would use this story at the beginning of his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth where the Jewish people rejected him as their Messiah. He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow." (Luke 4:24-26.) Jesus was clearly suggesting to the Jews that if they rejected him as their Messiah, he would go to the Gentiles, just as God had

sent Elijah to the Gentile widow because of Israel's idolatry.

So Elijah obeyed and went north to the pagan city of Zarephath and saw the widow gathering sticks to make a fire. When she heard Elijah ask for water and bread, she immediately recognized him as a servant of God and let him know of her plight. She had no bread, and only a handful of flour and a little oil that she was using to prepare what she thought would be their last meal on earth. Elijah informed her that this would not be their last meal, but that if she would trust him as God's prophet and provide for him first, then God would provide for her and her son all the days of the drought.

Jesus said to the crowds who were looking for a sign that he was the Messiah, " 'For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.' They said therefore to him, 'Lord, evermore give us this bread.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.' " (John 6:33-35.)

During the drought in Lebanon the faithful widow's son became sick and died. She became angry and frustrated, and lashed out at Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me not to provide food but to bring my iniquity to remembrance, and then to put my son to death!" Her theology was that now that Elijah was in her house, God had remembered some old sin and finally was punishing her with the death of her son.

Elijah saw her fear, and though perplexed himself, he took the dead boy to his room, laid him on his bed and then prayed in his confusion, "O LORD my God, hast Thou also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die? Lord, I am perplexed; I really don't understand what you are doing, for she has served me these many days, and she is one of yours. What is going on here?" Then this righteous man of prayer stretched himself upon the child three times and called to the Lord, "O LORD my God, I pray Thee, let this child's life return to him."

God is always placing men and women in situations in which to show them they have no resources to deal with crises. God will allow us to come face-to-face with deadly situations "...in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). God answered Elijah's prayer, and life was restored to the boy. He was returned to the widow and she responded, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." This is the first recorded resurrection in Scripture. Both the prophet's and the widow's faith needed to be strengthened in an idolatrous age.

Jesus accomplished the same miracle when he raised the widow's son from the dead in John 7. Later in Jesus' ministry Mary's and Martha's faith needed to be strengthened at the grave side of their brother, Lazarus, when Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). Then Jesus prayed as Elijah prayed, asking the Father to raise Lazarus so that the people standing around might believe that God had sent him.

As God was able to bring life back to this widow's son, so he was able to restore life to the spiritually dead Israelites if only they would place their faith in him.

The church of Jesus Christ, like the nation of Israel in the days of King Ahab, is in a spiritual drought, and there is little rain in sight. Out of a heart of love and grace, Jesus wants us to forsake our idolatry and return to him and love him with a full heart, so that we can once again enjoy life as he defines it: filled with wholeness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. To those who have come into the body of Christ, I encourage you to ask God to give you a heart of faith, to love him with your whole heart, and to become a radical Christian in the spirit of Elijah.

Do you want life as God intended life to be lived? Choose to love the Lord God with all your heart because he is the one and only living God, full of grace, truth and life. And his name is Jesus, the risen Son of God and only Savior of mankind.

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