

AWAKENED FROM DEPRESSION

God's Dealings With Elijah

By Steve Zeisler

In this series of messages, we have focused on times in Scripture where God personally encountered and changed a man's or woman's life. In one of the most famous and dramatic passages in the Old Testament, drought, commanded by a prophet, is one of the salvos in a spiritual battle between the forces of light and darkness, and truth and error. I Kings 18 and 19 portrays an epic combat between the forces of good and evil, displaying God's supremacy as first, lightning, and then rain, fall miraculously from the sky. At the conclusion, however, we find God's warrior depressed, discouraged, and alone. ultimately, it is the still, small voice of God which met the needs of a man who had lost the way in his ministry and fallen into depression.

The main human players in the drama are the woman Jezebel and the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a fascinating individual, reminiscent of the character Clint Eastwood often portrayed in the so-called "spaghetti" Westerns of his heyday. With ethereal music playing in the background, Clint would ride into town wearing a dirty poncho, two weeks growth of beard, and a cigar sticking out of his mouth. Incredibly confident, dramatically powerful, strange, and lonely, he never spoke, but overwhelmed all opposition in sight.

ELIJAH AND JEZEBEL

Likewise, Elijah was as a loner. It was one of the things that made him who he was, and in the end it was one of the things God had to change for him.

He is introduced in I Kings 17 as the instigator of the drought:

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

Picture Clint Eastwood striding into the king's palace and saying, "It ain't gonna rain no more 'till I say it does." Riding out of the king's court, he isn't seen for three years. It does not rain.

Elijah is described as the Tishbite of Gilead, but unlike most figures in the Old Testament he had no chronology. Almost every figure of importance had a lineage that helps us identify who he is. Elijah, however, was alone historically. Without parents, a wife, or children it was as if he was dropped into history from obscurity.

Another thing characteristic of Elijah was the miraculous power he displayed in virtually all of his encounters. He dealt with the weather, commanding the rain to come or not by the word of God. In I Kings 18, the prophet displayed extraordinary power by calling on God to send fire from heaven to consume an offering. Moreover, he never went hungry because God would miraculously provide for him. Angels and ravens were sent to feed him. There is an account in which Elijah sojourns in Jezebel's homeland, Sidon, staying with a destitute widow and her son. The two were about to starve until Elijah arrived. His presence insured that the jar of oil and pot of flour in her home would never be empty, providing food for all three of them.

Although Elijah was a man of power, he did not seem to fit anywhere. He didn't fit in the king's court because his clothes were rough-hewn; his belt was leather; his beard was long and unkempt. Although he lived in the widow's home for two years, he was not domestic. He was at home in the wilderness, by streams, on

hilltops, and in caves. He was a man whose personal authority was unrivaled, yet he had no close relationships through most of his ministry. While he had the ability to command his physical circumstances, in the end he was unable to fix his own broken heart. Elijah required the gentle voice of God to bring him back to life and health.

The other figure in the great drama was a woman, Jezebel. We meet her in I Kings 16, v.29:

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa, King of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri became the king of Israel and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab the son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord, more than any who were before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and he began to serve Baal and worship him.

Jezebel was the daughter of a neighboring king. It was, therefore, politically astute of Ahab as king of the northern tribes to marry her. In her own right, the queen was a figure of extraordinary power. Aggressive and domineering, she was committed to the worship of idols. With her 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (a female idol), she introduced the Israelites to the dark side of human spirituality. Her husband Ahab, who was something of a wimp, was dominated by her and won away from the Lord through her powerful influence. In contrast to Elijah, Jezebel was the personification evil, and it was her influence on God's people which forced the prophet's hand in I Kings 18.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE TODAY

We must recognize that spiritual battle is not confined to any particular time in history. Jezebel's religion is present in every age. In our day, we stand as warriors called into service to live and declare the truth, combating the lies that enslave people who might otherwise live in freedom through Christ. Satanism is growing, as are all the more subtle notions of New Age spirituality. As a result, our contemporaries are descending into approval of the dark spiritual world and worship of spirits. We live, in fact, in a world that is more Canaanite than Western civilization has been at any other time.

A woman from Santa Rosa wrote to the San Francisco Chronicle in response to the terrible mass murders in the Napa Valley last week:

"Death upon death, ritual killings near Matamoros, the street gang slaughters, the murder of Stockton children, the bombing of the Pan Am jet over Scotland, and now the unspeakable slayings in Sonoma County. That a man could kill his family, slitting the throats of his three little children, and murder his coworker as well as his mother-in-law and her daughters is just too hard for me to comprehend. Because this obscene event happened near me it seems doubly hard to take. Somehow our county, once so innocent and bucolic, is stained with blood and horror. I don't know what the answer is."

There is more senseless and perverted violence in our land today than in any time in memory. There is increasing openness to sexual perversion, and unabashed promotion of lifestyles that are degrading. Men like Ramon Salcido explode because they feel hopeless when they look at a world in which they are powerless to deal with their own self-hatred. To them, there is no Savior that exists who can change the awful volcano inside. Because we have lived in a world that has loved humanity and worshiped itself, committed to the growth of the unfettered human spirit as the answer to spiritual needs, there are shells of frustrated, purposeless, and dangerous people surrounding us who finally go over the edge.

The same answers that were offered to the Canaanites are being offered to our contemporaries, and thus I say spiritual battle is a necessity. We must be willing to stand for the truth, bringing our influence to bear in the way we live and in what we say, as God gives us opportunity. The consequences for ignoring the responsibility are too dreadful to tolerate.

THE BATTLE IS JOINED

In I Kings 18:16 we see another lesson on the other side of the war. After three years of drought, Ahab went

to persuade Elijah to bring rain. Interestingly enough, Baal was the god with the lightning bolt in his hand who rode storms in from the Mediterranean Sea and gave rain to the people. Therefore, Elijah's declaration that it would no longer rain was a direct affront to Baal who was supposedly in control of that element. When Ahab saw Elijah he said:

"'Is that you, you troubler of Israel?' 'I have not made trouble for Israel,' Elijah replied, 'but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's command and followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel and bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent word all throughout Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, if Yahweh is God, then follow him. But if Baal is God follow him.' But the people said nothing."

With everyone gathered on the mountaintop, Elijah addressed his people and said, "You have to choose today. We will find out today whether Yahweh is God or Baal is God. A line is drawn and you have to stand on one side." Elijah arranged a competition between himself and the prophets of Baal in which each placed a sacrifice on an altar, ready to be lit. Both sides were allowed to do anything except light the fire themselves. The prophet or prophets who could call down fire from his God was indeed the legitimate servant of God ("the god who answers by fire--he is God"; 18:24).

The 450 prophets of Baal proceeded to dash around the altar, jumping and shouting as they slashed themselves with knives and pleaded for their god's intervention. Elijah stood and taunted them, "Where is your God? Why isn't anything happening?" He even suggested at one point that maybe their god was in the bathroom and could not be bothered. In 18:26 and 29, we see a repeated refrain:

"'O Baal, answer us,' they called. But there was no voice and no one answered."..And it came about when midday was past, that they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

ANSWERING BY FIRE

They raved on, but nothing happened. Elijah stepped forward with all eyes focused on his commanding image, and said: "We're going to make it as hard as we can make it. Baal is supposed to be the god of the lightning bolt. I'm going to call on my God, but not until I make the test even more demanding." So they poured precious water from a drought-stricken land until it drenched the sacrifice and poured over into a trench. Verse 36:

At the time of the sacrifice the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed. [He didn't jump up and down, he didn't rant and rave, he didn't yell, he prayed:] Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me so that these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.' Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the soil, and licked up the water in the trench. And when the people saw this they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord (Yahweh), he is God. The Lord, He is God."

The people were astonished at what happened. They cried out in emotional enthusiasm, proclaiming their allegiance to Yahweh, and Elijah called for the execution of the prophets of Baal.

Elijah turned to Ahab and said, "It's about to rain. It hasn't rained for three years, and now it's going to rain. You'd better get home quickly or your chariot's going to get caught in the mud." He then ran seventeen miles, outracing Ahab's chariot back to the king's residence in Jezreel.

It is hard to overstate the amount of physical energy that Elijah expended on this day at Mount Carmel (which Dave Roper once boldly termed "Super Baal I"). I'm sure Elijah was as exultant as a person could feel. God had answered his prayer, the land was drenched with rain, and the prophets had been defeated. Those who had

seduced Israel from the true God were put to death. In the wake of this resounding victory, Elijah eagerly awaited the next day.

NOTHING CHANGED

What happened next must have cut Elijah like a knife. Chapter 19, verse 1:

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 and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and requested for himself that he might die.

Verse 3 is misleading in most English translations. The Hebrew word there is not the word "afraid." It merely says, "He saw, he arose, and he ran for his soul." I don't believe that Elijah ran because he was afraid of what Jezebel could do to him. He had spent his whole life under God's protective hand. In addition, he was a man of extraordinary physical prowess that must have given him confidence in his own abilities. There was a tragedy that descended upon him, however. He did not fear for his own life, but perceived that the people would not turn from their wickedness even though he had won a formidable victory in the direct view of everyone. I am certain that he expected to wake up to the singing masses of Israel on their knees before God, cleansed from their evil, and genuine in their response. So astonishing was the victory that Jezebel would either be dead or converted, and praise to God would well up in everyone's heart. He had expended himself thoroughly in service to God, and therefore God would honor his efforts by bringing about revival.

Despite the people's cheers, the next day they were no different. Yes, they had cheered Yahweh as God, but they were as likely to worship Baal as the day before. Jezebel's statement characterized the people's response; she was hardened and she was going to have his head on a plate. He realized, "My nation will not change. There is no revival coming. Their hearts are as stony as they've ever been." We know from subsequent history that the northern ten tribes did not change, and their final judgment was to be carted off to exile and dismissed from existence as a people.

At this point Elijah experienced the crushing disappointment that God seemed not to keep his part of the bargain. The prophet assumed that if they won the victory on Mount Carmel that God would therefore act to bring about a change in the people, but it didn't happen. Resentment against God began to descend on Elijah's heart so that in despair he finally said, "Let me die. It's not worth living. God, you've disappointed me too deeply. If I can give as much of my life and my heart as I have to you and have it turn out like this, I don't want to live anymore."

SPIRITUAL DEPRESSION

Human depression is complex and is caused by many different things. Apart from negative choices they have made, people are occasionally thrust into depression as a result of chemical reactions in the brain. Such experiences can lead to growth and deeper trust in the God who will not forsake us. There are times, however, when human discouragement and depression come because we are angry at God, and we turn that anger on ourselves. That is precisely what Elijah was facing here. There are helpful lessons to be learned from seeing what God does with his servant who has grown angry, resentful, discouraged, and depressed.

The first thing God did as Elijah was under the juniper tree was put him to sleep. After he had slept awhile, the Lord sent an angel to give him a meal, and then put him back to sleep again. The angel let Elijah sleep for another extended period of time, woke him up, and fed him again. We should pay close attention to the fact that God thought it was important that Elijah renew himself physically from the events of Mt. Carmel in order to prepare him to recover from his depression.

GETTING GOD'S HELP

Elijah then wandered for 40 days in the same wilderness in which Israel wandered for 40 years. He ended up on Mount Horeb, also known in Scripture as Sinai. Elijah was taken back to his own people's history, wandering where his nation had wandered. He ended up in the same cave where Moses met God in a period of his own discouragement. Wandering and looking for God, he realized that his primary need was for the Lord to meet him. In v.11 we read of God's response:

So God said, 'Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.' And behold, the Lord was passing by and a great, strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks 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 sound of a gentle blowing." And it came about when Elijah heard that, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars, and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Before the storm, the fire, and the earthquake God had asked this question and received this answer. The first time the question was asked and the answer was given Elijah remained petulant: "I'm the only one left. I've done everything I can. It's not fair." This time, after God passed by in dramatic power and then finally spoke in tenderness, Elijah confessed his sin. "Why are you here, Elijah?" He has to say it again: I'm here because I'm angry. I'm here because I was zealous. I'm here because I'm disappointed. I'm here because I think I'm alone. I'm here because I think you let me down." In effect he was saying, "I repent. I don't know what else to do." A marvelous, gentle dialogue ensued. God was not issuing judgment from heaven like he did with Nebuchadnezzar. He did not speak in a whirlwind like he did to Job. He was not riding the storm chariot like he did to see Ezekiel. God met with his man and said in the tenderest of tones, "I care for you and what you've been through. I'm committed to meeting your needs. I want you to understand my purposes. I have not failed to act. I am not unconcerned about you or the people, but I am going to act differently than you expect."

GENTLE TRUTH

Through gentle discussion God made a critical point that we need to see. Because he loves us, he does not only speak from the heavens in dramatic terms. There are times when he comes near to us, draws out our confession of anger through his gentleness, and then begins to minister.

God told Elijah three things. First, he declared that history would bring judgment to Israel. Elijah was told that he (actually, his successor) was going to anoint two men, kings who would begin the judgment upon the northern tribes. Remembering their hard-heartedness, God used political events and the nations of the day to bring judgment to his people.

The second thing he did was to give Elijah a son, a disciple who would share in the joys and sorrows of his ministry. A big part of Elijah's heartbreak was that he was alone; there was no one to confide in or help him. God said, "You will find and anoint the man Elisha. You will disciple him, walk alongside him, and he will be your successor." The last thing God said to him was "You say you're alone, but you're wrong. There are 7,000 that you don't know about. You can't see everything I'm doing, You have to trust me that your view is not the great view, that I have 7,000 of my servants throughout the nation doing my will. I am accomplishing what I intended, and I don't need to report to you. I am at work in ways that you can't see." That must have been restorative to Elijah too. He realized that God was at work among others as well.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can draw some principles from this story. First, the unbelieving human heart is incredibly resistant to truth. If the people experienced the dramatic display of God's authority on the mountaintop and yet were as hard-hearted as ever the next day, then we must not be surprised when we encounter the same reactions. We are not to be concerned with success in Christ's service from a worldly perspective, but to be

faithful in taking up the battle where he calls us, leaving the results to him.

Secondly, God's ways are not our ways. Unconsciously, we might expect God to respond in a certain way if we fulfill our duty. We perhaps find ourselves giving God a list of expectations that he's required to meet. Nevertheless, God's ways are not our ways. The surest help we can receive in living with a God who is different than we expect is to have a brother or sister to walk along with us. When we live isolated lives as Elijah did it is too easy for us to assume that what we think is what God thinks. When we have a companion beside us we can hear that our thoughts are our thoughts, and not necessarily those of the Almighty.

Lastly, spiritual depression, that which is caused by resentment towards God, can be ministered to. We must not underestimate the importance of physically resting in order to take the first step back to God's word. We must allow the servants of God, the Body, to put us to bed sometimes, give us a meal, allow us to sleep. Secondly, when our depression has this spiritual basis, God will meet us by telling the truth gently. We may need to walk a long way back through our spiritual history, but what we are asking is "Lord, teach me about myself. Draw my anger out of me. I may not even be able to see it. Ask me the questions I need to be asked. Tell me the truth." Our loving, gentle, soft-spoken heavenly Father will eventually allow us to say what's inside of us, and then minister to us as he calls it forth from us.

THE MANTLE TAKEN UP

At the end of Elijah's life, this man who was characterized by loneliness was given a son, Elisha, in whom he poured his life. Elijah was then taken up into heaven right before Elisha. It is a great testimony to the importance of giving our lives to others in the discipleship process. When we're caught up believing that God is failing us, ever more ought we to give our lives to someone else, building up another in order to leave behind a godly generation.

As they, Elijah and Elisha, were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them. And Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind Elisha saw this and cried out, 'My father, my father, the chariots and the horsemen of Israel.' And Elisha saw him no more. And then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. And he picked up the mantle that had fallen from Elijah and he went back and stood off the bank of the Jordan. And he took the mantle that had fallen from him and he struck the water with it. 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' he asked. And when he struck the water, it divided to the right and the left and he crossed over.

He crossed back into Israel, back to where he would serve.

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