

GOD'S SUPER HEROES - ELIJAH

Fighting God's battles- part 3-Elijah

There is a story about a little boy named Johnny who was having a dispute with his mother about green beans. Johnny's mother was trying her best to persuade the boy to eat his green beans, but he wouldn't budge. Finally, in desperation, she said, "Johnny, if you don't eat your green beans, God will punish you." Still, Johnny refused, and his mother sent him to bed. Before long, a great storm arose. Lightning flashed, great claps of thunder shook the house, and torrents of rain fell. Johnny's mother rushed upstairs to comfort her son. "Johnny, are you okay?" she asked. "I guess so," he replied, "but this sure is an awful fuss to make about a few green beans."

The lighting, thunder claps and rain are very much like the kind of judgment God sometimes promised to send when people violated His commands. And He spoke that message through men He raised up called prophets. When you speak of prophets, Elijah rises to the top as one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. Moses was a prophet, but he was also the leader of his the nation. If you want to talk about a pure prophet who wasn't involved in running the government, it's hard to argue against Elijah as the greatest.

We know almost nothing about his background. He's a Tishbite, which means he's from Tishbe in Gilead, a small village up in the mountains. Elijah was not a refined polished kind of man, and he would not have had the same quality of education as someone in the city. He was a mountain man. In that day people from the city tended to look down their noses at men from the mountains the same way people today sometimes look down at folks who come from the hills.

We also know that Elijah was called to serve in a day of moral apostasy when wicked king Ahab sat on the throne of Israel. Ahab is said to be the worst of all the kings because he had married that wicked woman Jezebel who was a Baal worshiper and who brought her Baal worship into Israel. In fact, Ahab built a temple to Baal that promoted idolatry, and God sent Elijah to confront him. The story before us, however, goes much further than just the historical confrontation Elijah had with Ahab. In this story we see God's direction for Elijah, and through it we learn lessons as to what to expect in our own faith journeys as God leads us.

1. FOLLOWING GOD'S WILL OFTEN REQUIRES COURAGE

I said last week that God normally does not ask us to do things that are easy for us to do. God asks us to do things that we cannot do unless he does them through us. Such was the case when Elijah confronted king Ahab. Kings in those days were not tolerant people. If

they did not like what you said, it would be nothing to have you killed. In some cases, someone would be killed simply because his countenance was not happy in the king's presence. God sent his mountain man to King Ahab with a very alarming message:

"As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1).

The mention of rain is significant because the Canaanites believed Baal appeared in the thunderclouds and the rainstorms. That is why they set up their altars on mountaintops so they could be closer to their God. When people came to worship Baal, they encountered the men and women who served in the priesthood. If you were praying for rain, you would offer your sacrifice and then you would have a sexual encounter with a priest or a priestess of Baal. They believed that somehow that sexual act joined them with the Baal, the God of fertility. And if things were really, really bad you would bring your children and you would offer them to Baal. Elijah tells the king, "It is not Baal who controls the rain. It is the God of Israel who is in control, and it is not going to rain until I say so. When you consider the fact that the king could have had Elijah executed on the spot, you understand the boldness of the prophet.

Ray Steadman was a very and well-known pastor in Southern California. He was sitting in his home one night when he noticed there was a meeting of homosexuals in his city. He thought, "I'm going to that meeting." He went in and sat down without anyone knowing who he was. As a group, they were railing against the church and against Christians with hatred. Then the speaker asked, "Does anyone have anything else they want to say?" Ray stood up and said, "My name is Ray, and I'm one of the Christians you've been talking about. I'm sorry for the treatment you received from many of my brothers and sisters. Our church meets at peninsula bible church, and all of you are invited. He went on to tell them that Christ was the only ray of hope they had for the life they needed." That's boldness.

Where does that kind of boldness come from? It comes from spending much time alone with God. Consider what he said to Ahab:

"As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1).

Elijah was bold because he stood in the presence of God.

Vance Havner said, "When you are accustomed to standing before God, kings don't matter much. Big potentates are just small potatoes when you have been standing in the presence of the most high." If you're going to follow God's will, you're going to have to have courage, and that courage comes from being in his presence.

2. God's will is revealed to us one step at a time.

We would like for God to give us a written itinerary of our lives so that we will know what the next move is, but that is not the way the Lord works. God's instructions to Elijah are clear. First, He says, "Elijah, go before the king." Then God gives Elijah more direction.

1 Kings 17:2-4, " 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 ordered the ravens to feed you there."

Notice that God does not give any explanations along with his direction. He doesn't tell Elijah how long he's going to stay there or what he will be doing while he is there. He just says, "Go."

Elijah knew only one thing: he was to go and hide himself in the ravine. And so it is with us. God normally does not explain what steps 1, 2 and 3 are going to be. He just gives us the first step and tells us to obey. When you take one step, then God will share the next, and that's the way we make it through life, following God, one step at a time.

3. God's direction comes after we obey not before.

1 Kings 17:5-6, " So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. "

What's the most important word in that verse? I'd like to nominate the last word, "There." God's command was tied to a specific place. God did not say, "Elijah, wander around wherever you want and do whatever you want, and I will bless you." In order to obey God, Elijah had to do some "ravine time." Why? Because "there" is where the brook is. That's where the water is. That's where the ravens are. For all of us, our "there" consists of being at church. It consists of reading God's word, spending time in prayer. It also consists of those special things that God wants for you in your life alone. God is saying, "If you want my blessings, you're going to have to be in the place of my blessing." Why? Because God's blessings come after our obedience, not before.

First there is God's command.

Then there is Elijah's obedience.

Then there is the miracle of the daily feeding by the ravens.

Command, obedience, miracle.

We all like the miracle part, but you will never get to the miracle side unless you go through the command and the obedience first.

4. ALL OF GOD'S STEPS ARE FAITH STEPS

1 Kings 17:7-9, "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 of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food."

That was God's next step for Elijah. The geography of Zarephath of Sidon is important because Sidon was a center of Baal worship. It is the place where Jezebel, Ahab's pagan wife was from. When he got there, he was somehow to meet a widow who would tell him what to do next.

Elijah has been by himself for a long time, hiding by the brook. Now the brook has dried up and God sends him into Baal's backyard. Not only that, the woman who is supposed to help Elijah is a widow which means he was very poor.

1 Kings 17:10-12, "So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread. "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

That was not a very encouraging scenario to Elijah. Here's a woman that is so poor that he's preparing the last meal for her and her son before they starved to death. And this was the woman who was supposed to take care of Elijah. That's like going to the Airport to board a jet that will take you to another state. When you get there, you find that they have reserved a tricycle for you. At that point, I am thinking, "somebody messed up on this one!"

Do you ever feel like God got your file mixed up with somebody else's file? Elijah could have felt that way, but he didn't. This was a man of tremendous faith. If God said he was going to sustain Elijah through this poor woman, then Elijah believed that it would happen.

1 Kings 17:13-16, "Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land. She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."

What was God doing? God was teaching this man of faith to have even greater faith. When the barrel is full of oil, you don't need faith because you're got all the oil you need. Faith

comes in when you are almost out and you don't know how you're going to go to fill it up again. That's when you find out how much faith you have.

Personally I much prefer when the barrel is full of oil because it feels secure. But in the kingdom of God, the values of life are completely reversed. God values your growth in faith far more than any physical security you might have. *For the people of God, abundance is generally much more dangerous than lack.* That's why Jesus said it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:23), not because money is bad but when you have money, you depend upon it instead of God.

6. GOD'S DIRECTION LEADS US TO GREATER USEFULNESS

Nothing in Elijah's life happens by chance. From the mountains to the palace to the brook and now to the widow's home in Zarephath. God was preparing his man every step along the way.

In the chapters to come, we see Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal to a showdown on Mount Carmel. That story is one of the awesome stories in the bible of the power of the living God. All that went on before with the ravens, the dried up brook and the gentile widow woman were all preparing Elijah for that great event.

At Cherith Elijah learned, "God can take care of me." At Zarephath he learned, "God can use me to take care of others." Elijah needed the brook, and he needed the widow's house because they taught him lessons he couldn't learn any other way.

Maybe you are in a place today that is much and like what Elijah faced. Maybe God has led you into a situation that requires a real courage. Or maybe you are in a place of a waiting, and the wait is getting old. Whatever the case, understand that God has not forsaken you. Through the struggles, he is preparing you for something that will be a great blessing to you and to others.

Lessons to live by

1. We must learn to hear the voice of God

The first step in an obedient life is hearing the voice of God. Time and time again in the life of Elijah we find the words, "And the word of the Lord came unto him." God spoke to Elijah and he heard the voice of God. When he heard he obeyed.

We all need God's guidance in our life, but if we are not able to discern God's voice, God is unable to guide us. John V. Taylor said in his book *The Go-Between God*, "The computer makes us fantastically more able to calculate and analyze. It does not help us to meditate. We have instruments to enable us to see everything from the nebulae to the neutron, "everything but ourselves. We have immeasurably extended our gift of sight but

not of insight. We have built ourselves up into power transmitting stations, but as receiving sets we are feeble." In short, he was saying that as Christians we don't hear well.

How does God speak to us? God speaks through his word, through his people and even uses the circumstances of our live to speak to us. Hearing God's voice is not a formula; it is something that comes out of your relationship with him. The deeper your relationship becomes, the easier it is to hear and discern God's will. And deepening that relationship requires much time alone. David spent much time alone with God as he took care of his father's sheep. Moses spent 40 days and nights alone with God. Elijah was alone with God in the mountain, at the brook and in Sidon. If you are going to hear God's voice, you must slow down, stop what you are doing and be still before Him.

2. We must learn to submit fully to God

When you think of what Elijah was called to do, none of it was easy. Risking your life before the king is never an easy thing to do. And the brook had its own issues. There was no satellite television, no emails and no one dropping by to say hello. And the delivery system for his food is certainly not something he would choose. Ravens were on the list of unclean birds a Jew was not to eat. Maybe that's because they're scavenger birds. They are like a flying garbage disposal. And yet through all of it, Elijah was obedient to God.

When the philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, was a boy, his father was teaching him to swim. Splashing wildly with both arms and kicking with one leg, he called to his father, "Look at me, look at me. I'm swimming!" But, says Kierkegaard, all the time he was holding onto the bottom of the swimming pool with his big toe. Many of us are like that in our faith. We live relatively submissive lives, but there is that one or more things that we will not let go of. We will never accomplish all God has for us until we are willing to completely let go so that God can hold us up.