

Elijah, the prophet of God

Volume 2

Introduction

This is the second ‘*Sound Words*’ study booklet dealing with the life of Elijah. In it we examine the details of his life after the events that took place on Mount Carmel, through to the time that God took him to heaven. We shall see how God dealt tenderly with Elijah when he was in the depths of despair. The Lord then gave him a companion and successor in the person of Elisha, and brought him through this period of spiritual depression. There are many practical lessons for us to learn from the Lord’s dealings with Elijah in this later part of his life and ministry. May God help us to understand these and apply them to our lives.

The ‘*Sound Words*’ programmes which were based on these studies, were recorded with the help of Brian Thompson, and I am again grateful to Brian for his assistance.

May the God of Elijah be our God, and may we consider it the highest delight and privilege to love and serve him.

Derek French
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Chapter 1, Elijah runs away (1 Kings 19:1-9a)

Introduction

One of the most significant things about the Bible is its truthfulness. This is not only truthfulness in doctrine and

historical detail, but also in the honest way it portrays its major characters. It not only records their triumphs and great exploits and faith, but it also records their weaknesses, trials, doubts, fears and failures. It does not try to cover these things up or pretend that they did not exist, but records them honestly. The Bible is totally reliable because, of course, it is the word of God.

Up to now we have seen Elijah at his best. We have seen his remarkable faith, his careful obedience, his absolute dependence on God, his desire for God’s glory, his towering spiritual courage, and his diligence in prayer (1 Kings 17 and 18 - see also ‘*Sound Words*’ study booklet ‘Elijah Volume 1’). Without a doubt, Elijah was a spiritual man of God, whose devotion to the Lord was outstanding and a joy to behold. However, as we come to 1 Kings 19, a change takes place. It is as if a great cloud hung over Elijah’s heart, and the man who showed outstanding spiritual strength is seen in weakness, fear and despair.

Before considering what took place in his life it is important to note that great men of God are just men. They are not super men, but frail flesh like us. Remember James tells us this very thing in James 5:17, “*Elijah was just like us.*” The importance of this is:

- (i) That our trust is to be in the Lord, not in men. While we thank God for those whose spiritual life and ministry has been a great help to us, it is to the Lord we are to look for all things and not to men.
- (ii) That the strongest believer is weak and frail, and also has room for improvement. Men will always

disappoint us, even great men, because like us, they are imperfect. Their faults and failings are recorded so that we may avoid making the same mistakes, and not as an excuse for ours! Only the Lord Jesus Christ has lived a perfect life.

- (iii) That being a useful servant of the Lord does not make us immune to life's trials and difficulties and feeling its pressures.
- (iv) For our comfort lest we despair. Having low points in our experience does not mean the Lord has cast us off or forsaken us. He certainly did neither of these to Elijah.

1) Jezebel's wicked threat (vv1-2)

After the Lord's triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Ahab, instead of repenting himself and urging his wife to repent and turn back to God, only told her all that had taken place, laying the blame firmly at Elijah's door (v1). Although Ahab explained how the Lord had shown himself to be the only true and living God, and how Elijah had killed all the prophets of the Baal, the false god that they worshipped, he actually did not mention God at all! He sees only Elijah's part in things and not the Lord's! Sadly and tragically, God had no part in his thoughts! Added to this, what is so astonishing is that instead of humbling herself before the Lord when she heard of these events, Jezebel was filled with hatred and malice and vengeance. She declared her intention to see Elijah murdered! She was just like one of the prophets of

Baal who had perished, and showed the earnestness of her intent by swearing an oath!

What a wicked woman she was, and how blind she was spiritually! It was as if she did not see the hand of God at work at all! She was like those of whom we read in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, who are blind to the gospel of Christ.

We see also how malicious her heart was, for she sent a messenger to inform Elijah of her intentions. This was blatant evil, designed to cause Elijah as much distress as possible. She was full of hatred instead of humility before God (see Romans 8:7-8). Evidently, Jezebel's heart had not been affected for good at all, and she was utterly unwilling to bow the knee to God and acknowledge him as Lord. The Bible mentions a number of women whose wickedness was outstanding. For example, there was Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39), who tried to seduce Joseph into immorality, only to accuse him of molesting her when he refused to give in to her sinful advances! Then there was Herodias, the wife of Herod, who hated John the Baptist because he had courageously told Herod it was wrong for him to have his brother's wife (Matthew 14:1-12). She had John beheaded! The Bible shows us that women are equally as sinful as men (Romans 3:23): "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."

2) Elijah's uncharacteristic reaction (vv3-4)

a) His initial response

We read in verse 3 that “*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.*” This was so untypical of the man we have come to know as a courageous man of faith in the face of huge opposition.

To understand how he was feeling we need to remind ourselves of what had just taken place and how this must have affected him. In the previous chapter we saw the great events that took place on Mount Carmel when Elijah stood alone against the prophets of Baal. That alone must have brought him under considerable mental and spiritual and emotional strain. We also saw him in intense prayer as he asked God for the drought to end and the rain to fall. Again, an exercise that would have sapped him of spiritual vigour. Then he ran some 30 kilometres ahead of Ahab who was riding in his chariot, something that must have left him utterly exhausted. A more recent example of such exhaustion was experienced in the last century by C.H. Spurgeon. He preached to over 20,000 people in Surrey Gardens, London, and then slept for three whole days afterwards! And it is in this weakened and exhausted condition, when he was most vulnerable, that the news reached Elijah that Jezebel was after his life! And in this weak state he was overwhelmed with distress and was filled with fear, and ran away.

We see an important lesson at this point, namely that the enemy of souls knows when to attack God’s servants to gain the advantage. Satan kicks us when we are down. He exploits situations when we are vulnerable, and he is an expert at diverting our attention from the Lord. And this is what happened to Elijah. He was threatened when his

resources were at their lowest, and he panicked. Many of God’s faithful servants have experienced similar things. They have been fearlessly serving the Lord, defending the Gospel against strong opposition, courageously proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ, and this has left them worn out and exhausted. Then at that very moment the devil has come at them with his attacks and filled them with fear and alarm. And this is what happened to Elijah. He had been so courageous but now he had become afraid. He had stood so firm for God but now he ran away to Beersheba in the far south, another long distance of about 140 km.

We must say that there is a significant silence in the Bible at this point. There is no reference to Elijah seeking God’s direction in prayer. That which had been part of his daily walk with God, and especially in times of great need, was now absent. His fears paralysed his prayers! His eye was on this wicked woman and not on the Lord, and he collapsed under the weight of her threats. (By contrast see Isaiah 12:2; 26:3; Philippians 4:6-7.) He was walking by sight and not by faith, whereas it ought to have been the reverse (see 2 Corinthians 5:7).

b) His continued response (v4)

After making this long trek, he left his servant and went a day’s further journey into the desert. There he found shelter under a broom tree, sometimes called a juniper tree. This is the white broom which can grow to a height of about 3 to 4 metres, and grows widely in wasteland areas of the Middle East. By now he was so exhausted and

isolated that he entered a period of deep depression, to such an extent that he prayed in a way he had never prayed before (1 Kings 19:4):

“He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, Lord,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’”

We must say that it was good that Elijah turned to God. Even if what he asked for was not appropriate, he knew that God would listen with sympathy. However, this really was a dark hour for Elijah. It appears he thought his mission had been a complete failure because Jezebel was as intent as ever on promoting the worship of Baal and destroying the worship of God. He felt unable to carry on.

Now why did he come to this state? It would be very easy to reproach Elijah and treat him unkindly. That does not mean he was correct in his desires expressed in prayer, but we must not forget the enormous pressures he had been under up to this point. He was very low and therefore very vulnerable to misinterpret the situation and prone to the danger of forgetting the greatness of God. And this threat from Jezebel came suddenly and unexpectedly and caught him off guard.

The fear of man, or woman in this case, has been a problem for the people of God in all ages. It can make us think irrationally, and it can make us do things irrationally. It can silence us when we ought to speak. It can cause us to water down the Gospel message so that we leave out unpalatable things such as the judgment and hell. It can

make us compromise with sin when we ought to be resisting it. And it can cause us to run away from our place of duty when we should remain, even though difficulties will have to be faced. It can also make us either doubt or, at least, forget that God cares for us at all times and will not let a hair of our head be lost if it is outside his purpose for us, nor let his work fail. It can make us desire to die because life is hard and difficult (cf. others who have felt this in Numbers 11:14-15; Jonah 4:3; Psalm 55:6).

And this was where Elijah had come. He ran away. He felt all his work was a failure, as if the work of God depended on him alone. Though he was in prayer to God, he seemed to have forgotten that the Lord who had so wonderfully protected and provided for him so far, was still looking after him. And he had lost his confidence in the success of the kingdom of God. Further, he seems to have completely lost sight of the fact that God is Almighty, and well able to sustain, support and empower his servants.

This is an experience that many Christian believers have been through. It may have been due to a period of prolonged illness, or the weaknesses that come with advancing years, or being engaged in Christian service and ministry over a prolonged period with apparent little fruit. There are all sorts of things that can bring us to the place where Elijah now was, of feeling afraid and cast down. That does not mean we are useless to God, or that we have been abandoned by him, for he has promised never to leave or forsake us.

However, we must also say that Elijah was not right in the way he was responding. He was simply displaying his weakness as a human being. This is a reminder that all men are but clay, and should lead us to do a number of things as believers.

- (i) It should make us humble and distrustful of ourselves, for he who thinks he stands should take heed unless he falls (1 Corinthians 10:12).
- (ii) It should compel us to ensure our strength is found in the Lord alone, without whom we can do nothing (John 15:5).
- (iii) It should cause us to ask the Lord to help us subdue any pride and self-reliance and self-sufficiency in us (James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6).
- (iv) It should make us careful not to lean on men, even great men, but rather upon the Lord alone (Psalm 118:8-9; Proverbs 3:5-6).
- (v) It should make us prayerful for an increase in our faith (Luke 17:5).
- (vi) It should make us pray for our brethren in Christ, that the Lord will uphold them and keep them from sin (Ephesians 5:14-21; 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:23f).
- (vii) It should make us pray especially for God's servants that he would keep them from anything that would dishonour his name, and enable them to do only that which glorifies him (Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 13:18).

3) God's loving care (vv5-9a)

The Lord's response to his discouraged servant is most instructive. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to crush Elijah with a stern rebuke, but the Lord did not do this. He could easily have cast Elijah away, but he did not. God did not even remind Elijah of his past dealings with him, nor even of any of his promises in the Bible. Instead, he let Elijah sleep (1 Kings 19:5): "*Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.*"

This really is lovely because it shows both the Lord's understanding of our real needs and the gracious way that he deals with us. Elijah was exhausted and before he would be in a fit state to receive any instructions from the Lord, he needed to recoup his energy. He needed rest, and the Lord gave him rest. The Lord Jesus did this with his disciples when he told them to come aside and rest after they had expended their energy in serving him (Mark 6:30-31). God is most caring of his children even when they have lost their way. (Psalm 103:13)

"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."

(Luke 1:50) "*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*"

Even at his lowest, Elijah did not cease to be a child of God, nor sank out of the Lord's sight and loving interest.

How reassuring this is! How often we have fallen down under trial, and the Lord has not forgotten nor deserted us. This is true for the believer as even when the Lord has to chastise us for our sins, he still does not forsake his children (Psalm 89:32-33). God's love for his believing people is everlasting and unchanging whatever our circumstances or unworthiness (Jeremiah 31:3).

God's kindness is also seen in his refusal to grant Elijah's request to die. God said 'No!' and in fact Elijah did not have to face death, because, like Enoch, God took him directly to heaven, as we shall see later.

After a while the angel of the Lord came and woke Elijah (vv5-6), and the Lord provided food for his nourishment. Note again the tender way God dealt with Elijah, for the angel touches, not shakes, him! Then he was allowed rest again. The grace of God is a delight to behold and even more so to experience!

Then the angel of the Lord touched him again and gave him more food, and added "*for the journey is too much for you.*" Elijah had intended to go to Mount Horeb, or Sinai as it is also known. This was over 300 kilometres further south, and was where the Lord met with Moses and established his covenant with Israel and gave them his law. Interestingly, there is no record of Elijah being commanded to go to Horeb, simply that this was where he was going. This was not what he did on previous occasions when he went to Ahab, Kerith, Zarephath and Ahab again, for then he did so because God commanded him to go, but that command is missing this time. However, the Lord allowed

him even to do this, and miraculously sustained his servant for 40 days and nights, until he was brought safely to the mountain of God. Then he was allowed to rest again in a cave. What grace this is! The wisdom and mercy of God shine forth here in the gentle way that he dealt with Elijah. He was going to have to challenge Elijah, and encourage him and re-commission him with further work, but Elijah needed to be rested and refreshed in order to receive this, so the Lord did just that. This is so typical of the loving care the Lord shows to his children (Isaiah 42:3): "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*" (See also Psalm 22:24.) His servant was hurt and wounded and God binds up his wounds. How God's compassion and tender mercies are a delight to see! (See Psalm 103:4; Psalm 119:156; Psalm 121; Psalm 145:9.) The world we live in would dismiss Elijah and reject him, concluding he was useless and not worth considering. The law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest, is what characterises the world. But this does not characterise the heart of God. He deals with his children in tender mercy, and our frailties are his opportunities to show us his loving care.

Having rested and been refreshed, Elijah was then ready to receive the Lord's gentle rebuke and challenge, which we shall consider next.

Chapter 2 God rebukes and restores Elijah (1 Kings 19:9b-18)

At the end of the previous chapter we left Elijah in a sad state of spiritual depression. He had journeyed as far as

Mount Horeb, and had gone into a cave to spend the night. Having rested, the Lord then began to speak with him.

1) The Lord's searching question (v9b)

The Lord called to Elijah, "*What are you doing here Elijah?*"

The wording of this question implies that Elijah was not in the right place. He had not gone to Mount Horeb by God's direction, even though the Lord had miraculously sustained him on the journey (see vv7-8). Elijah had gone to Horeb entirely by his own desires. He had run away from the place where God had called him to, and from the people who so desperately needed his help and ministry now that they had forsaken Baal and acknowledged that the Lord was God alone (1 Kings 18:39). Though he had run away, the Lord knew where he was (Proverbs 15:3), and we are reminded that we cannot escape from him! This must have made Elijah feel very uncomfortable. The Lord was very direct with him and did not excuse his servant.

The Lord sometimes has to deal with us like that, especially when we have gone astray, turning to our own way. You will remember that God challenged Adam and Eve like this when they sinned in Eden (Genesis 3:8-9). The Lord also challenged David in a similar way through Nathan the prophet when he sinned with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12). This brings to our attention an important truth about the Lord and his dealings with his children when we do things we should not do. He puts his finger right on the spot. He does not talk in riddles or pretend our disobedience or waywardness does not matter. This is a

very uncomfortable experience to endure, but it is the first step to produce repentance and bring about our spiritual restoration. This is what the Lord was doing with Elijah.

I wonder, dear reader, is the Lord challenging you about things in your life which are wrong? If so, then do not ignore what God is doing. It is far better to feel uncomfortable now and to repent of your sin, than to ignore the voice of God and perish forever.

2) Elijah's defensive answer (v10)

We must say that Elijah's answer is a mixture of genuine desire for the glory of God, and a measure of self-pity. But by saying that, we are not taking a superior attitude, for we are just as frail as Elijah, and probably more so, if we are honest. We always need to exercise a humble spirit whenever we are confronted with the sins and failings of others.

a. His desire for God's glory

Elijah answered God, "*I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.*"

Undoubtedly this had been true as we have seen in his life up to now. His courageous announcement of the drought to Ahab in 17:1 demonstrated his love for God. His humble trust, submission and obedience to God at Kerith and Zarephath indicate this as well. Then there was his faithful explanation to the widow of God's ability to provide for their needs, and his patient and prayerful handling of the situation when the widow's son died, which also indicated his desire for God's glory. Then at Carmel

and the contest with the prophets of Baal was an undoubted example of his desire for the honour of the Lord, as was his praying for the rain afterwards. There was so much in Elijah's life that indicated he loved God dearly and desired that God should be honoured by the king and the people. Indeed, even as verse 10 continues, we see his sorrow over the sad state of things in Israel.

“The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.”

It grieved the heart of godly Elijah to see the Lord and his servants treated in this way. God's servants should always feel like that when they see those who once professed to follow the Lord falling away from him.

He had indeed been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty, but sadly that zeal for God was mixed with concern for self.

b. His self pity

“He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’”

Note the “I's” in his statement (v10), and the despair in his conclusion that he was the only one left. There was a mixture here of pride and self-pity. He reasoned as if he deserved more from the Lord. It was as if he thought the

Lord owed him success for his labours, instead of realising God required faithfulness from him rather than successfulness. As only God can bring blessing and make his work increase (see 1 Corinthians 3:6-7), his servants must leave that in his hands, and ensure they labour faithfully.

In this depressed condition Elijah did not reason correctly, even on the human level. He said, *“I am the only one left.”* But had he not met godly Obadiah only a short period before this (18:1ff), and had not Obadiah secured the safety of 100 prophets of the Lord (18:4)? Elijah seemed to have entirely forgotten these things. He was so depressed that he was filled with self-pity, bemoaned his isolation and loneliness, concluding there were no others who were faithful to God, but himself.

He also sees things out of proportion. *“... and now they are trying to kill me”* as if the whole nation of Israel was after his life when, in fact, it was only Jezebel. That is not to diminish the genuineness of her desire to kill him, but he felt as if the whole world was after him. And though he did not answer God's question directly, this really is the reason why he was where he was, because he was so discouraged and worried that he had run away.

3) Elijah's great privilege (vv11-12)

It is most significant to note at this point that the Lord did not castigate him with a crushing rebuke. Again we see the loving kindness of God in dealing with his wounded and discouraged servant. Like a shepherd with his sheep so the Lord comes to Elijah and deals most tenderly with him.

How true are the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 103:13-14:

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”

(See also Luke 1:50.) Instead of shouting at him sternly, the Lord granted to Elijah a most unexpected, undeserved and unusual privilege. He was to go out onto the mountain and the Lord himself would pass by. Very few have been privileged in this way, and this was quite remarkable. This is a reminder of the truth that once God has begun to deal with someone in his grace; he continues to deal with them in the same way. They receive grace upon grace, one blessing after another. (See John 1:16.)

Then a number of things took place (vv11-12). Firstly, a howling and very strong wind tore the mountains apart, but God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake shook the ground, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then fire came on the mountain, but the Lord was not in the fire. And finally there was a gentle whisper, a still small voice, and that was the Lord speaking to him.

We may well ask, *“Why did all these things happen?”* Certainly each of these powerful things took place when the Lord descended on this very mountain at the time he gave the law to Moses (see Exodus 19ff). But on this occasion it was different, and it was an important difference to teach a vital lesson. By this Elijah was taught that God does not always appear in what we might call the

unusual and spectacular and sensational. Very often, and indeed most of the time, he comes in the ordinary and the quiet to commune with his people. And this in itself was like a parable to Elijah, that though God can do most remarkable things whenever he chooses to do so, there are also times when he does not choose to act in that way, and Elijah could not dictate to God what he should do! It was not God’s will at this time to judge the people of Israel in some dramatic way.

This is an important lesson for us today, as in many parts of the world there is an unhealthy interest in the extraordinary even amongst Christian believers. But God does not normally deal with us in that way, nor does he always promise to do so. Instead he usually works through what we might call ordinary and quiet ways, such as through our daily Bible reading, or our times of meeting with other Christian believers to hear the Bible explained. The problem with those who expect God to act only in spectacular ways is that they get very disappointed when he chooses not to, and then become easy prey for Satan to attack them with doubts that God can do anything. This is not to limit God in any way, nor to suggest that he can never act spectacularly, for God is sovereign in these things. What is important is for us to recognise that this is not his normal way of working. He uses ordinary people and ordinary means and can speak in the most unexpectedly ordinary ways. Here it was in a whisper. The Lord God Almighty chose to speak quietly! An example of this today is how the Lord assures Christian believers of their salvation. It is not by dramatic shocks or

thundering declarations, but by the quiet work of his Holy Spirit within our hearts (see Romans 8:16).

4) God gave Elijah more work to do (vv13-17)

a. The Lord repeated his question (vv13-14)

In this whisper God communed with Elijah as he wrapped himself in his cloak and stood at the mouth of the cave. God repeated his earlier question, “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” By doing this he was impressing on Elijah that he should have been in Israel, serving God. But Elijah did not even consider this, but simply repeated his earlier answer (v14). Even though the Lord had passed by him and he heard his voice, he was still preoccupied with himself and the apparent failure of his ministry.

b. The Lord commands Elijah to do more work

It is quite interesting to see the way the Lord deals with his discouraged and depressed servant at this point. He gives him more work to do. This is significant, for humanly speaking it could be argued that as Elijah had run away from the place appointed for him then he disqualified himself from serving God again. But the Lord does not work according to human reason. He is the God of grace, and though his servant had failed him, that did not mean he had rejected Elijah nor would do so. It is similar to the Lord’s dealings with Peter after he denied he ever knew the Lord Jesus. The Saviour restored him and gave him even more work to do (see John 21:15ff). And how good it is to know that the Lord is like this. He does not cast his

children off at their least failure, but reinstates and uses them. He is indeed the God of grace.

Then also it is significant to note that the Lord was helping Elijah to cope with his depression, and he did so by directing his attention away from himself by giving him this work to do. In so doing, Elijah’s spirits were being encouraged. His ministry had not come to an end, even though he felt he had been a failure. He was still useful to the Lord whatever Elijah or others might think. Therefore his earlier desire to die was very misplaced.

The work he was told to do was threefold.

- (i) He was to anoint Hazael king over Aram (v15). Hazael was a man whom God used to judge Israel at a later date, and he was a continual thorn in their side. You can read the details in 2 Kings 8:28-29; 10:32-33; 12:17-18; 13:3 and 22.
- (ii) Then he was to anoint Jehu king over Israel (v16a). Jehu destroyed the house of wicked king Ahab following Elisha’s instructions (2 Kings 9).
- (iii) He was to anoint Elisha as his successor (v16b).

This last instruction must have cheered Elijah’s heart because he was being assured that the work of the Lord would continue after his own ministry had ended. However unlikely it might have looked at that very moment, the work of God would not cease, and he would have his way with the people of Israel. Judgment would come on Israel for their prolonged backsliding and

rebellion, but God would do so in his time (v17 - see also 2 Kings 8:12; 9:7-10).

The appointment of Elisha as Elijah's successor is a lovely and important lesson for us to learn and be encouraged by. Although we may not see the work of the Lord flourish during our own time that does not mean it will come to nothing in the end. God has his servants in every age, and therefore what we need to ensure is that we serve him to the best of our ability now.

5) The Lord encourages Elijah (v18)

There was one further but vital message that the Lord spoke to Elijah. Elijah was not the only one who loved and honoured God. Indeed it was not even him, and Obadiah, and the 100 prophets Obadiah had preserved. In fact there were 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal nor kissed him. It was a common practice to kiss an idol as a mark of devotion to it, but we know that idolatry of all sorts is forbidden by God (see Exodus 20:1-6; Hosea 13:2). So the Lord told Elijah that there were many others in Israel who felt exactly like he did, and who had remained loyal to God during the difficult and idolatrous days of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. In other words, Elijah was not alone, and that must have cheered his heart.

In every age, even the most ungodly of times, the Lord has always preserved a godly remnant of people who loved him dearly (see Romans 11:1-6). This is because of God's sovereign mercy, who chooses men to become his children by his grace (Romans 11:5), and the gates of hell itself cannot prevent him doing so (see Matthew 16:18). This is

particularly comforting for Christian believers today who may live in hostile countries or amongst hostile people, and may have served God without seeing any fruit in the salvation of others. Though we might not see such blessing, that does not mean this blessing will not come later, nor that it is not being experienced elsewhere in the world. The true people of God are part of a company of people which one-day will be a countless multitude (Revelation 7:9-10). Therefore this truth is an encouragement to us to remain faithful to the Lord and serve him even in difficult days.

Chapter 3 Elijah meets Elisha, his successor (1 Kings 19:19-21)

Introduction

We know very little about Elisha's background except that:

- (i) he was the son of a man named Shaphat (19:19);
- (ii) he came from Abel Meholah in the Jordan valley (19:16);
- (iii) he was from a farming family who were obviously well off because they had twelve yoke of oxen to do their ploughing (19:19). Normally one yoke was all that a farmer could afford.

We do not know his age, what education he may have had, if any, or any details about his wider family. Elisha's name means 'God is salvation' or 'God saves'.

1) Elijah calls Elisha in a dramatic way (v19)

It is interesting to note that when Elijah first met Elisha not a word was spoken. Elijah saw Elisha ploughing and simply went up to him and threw his cloak around him (v19). This was Elijah's outer coat, which he tucked into his belt when he ran that long distance to Jezreel (1 Kings 18:46). In biblical days the clothing of a person often indicated their position. For example Joseph, when promoted by Pharaoh to be in charge of the whole land (Genesis 41:41-42), was dressed in Pharaoh's robes. Then King Saul tried to do the same for David when he went to fight Goliath (1 Samuel 17:38). Although this was too heavy for the young shepherd to wear and fight at the same time, the principle was the same. Then in the book of Esther this was done to indicate a man was honoured by the king. Mordecai the Jew was clothed in a royal robe (Esther 6). The same was done for Daniel by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5:29). (Cf. How the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is clothed in his righteousness. See Isaiah 61:10; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:21-26; Romans 4.) Elijah's cloak was a symbol of his ministry, and therefore Elijah was indicating that Elisha was to be his successor.

This must have been quite a shock to Elisha, as he was simply a farmer. Hamilton Smith, a Christian writer, has put it like this: *"It is upon this busy man that Elijah casts his mantle, an act that may signify that Elisha is called to take the place, exhibit the character, and act in the spirit of its owner."*

Lessons from this:-

a. Elisha was called to a very demanding task.

He was to walk the paths of righteousness when all around him was unrighteous. He was required to have great courage in the face of difficulties and enemies. Remember, Jezebel was still alive. He would need to exercise much wisdom, when the people had turned away from God in their folly. He would need to be patient when the work was slow and there was little response. He would need great grace first to learn from Elijah, and then to take his place as God's representative to an unfaithful nation.

The call of God was not to a life of ease, but one that was very demanding, and it is the same today, for God's work is never easy and there are many who oppose the servants of the Lord. This is true for any who would follow the Lord Jesus Christ, for we must be prepared to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24). Without such devotion we cannot be his disciples! The Lord's servants are called to endure hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3).

b. The choice of Elisha teaches us that God is no respecter of persons.

God chooses whom he will. He is not limited to the great and noble. He is not restricted by man, and can choose someone from the humblest of backgrounds to accomplish great things for God. The Bible is full of examples of this. There was the servant girl who brought blessing to Naaman (2 Kings 5). Then there was the shepherd boy, David, whom God chose to become the king of Israel (1 Samuel 16). God chose the woman engaged to the carpenter of

Nazareth to be the mother of the Saviour of the world (Matthew 1 and Luke 1-2). The Lord Jesus himself used a small boy's lunch to feed 5000 (John 6). Then the disciples he chose were known as ignorant and uneducated fishermen of Galilee (Acts 4:13), yet they were the ones through whom he was going to spread his kingdom. And now he uses a farmer to be the prophet of God for his generation. This is a most timely reminder, for we must never think that God is at a loss when human powers and abilities are small. He who created the universe out of nothing, can well sustain and further his work through the frailest and weakest of instruments. The gates of hell will not prevail against his church.

c. God does not choose lazy individuals to serve him.

Elisha was a hard workingman when God called him. So was Amos (Amos 1:1; 7:14), and so were Peter, Andrew, James and John (Matthew 4:18-22). Elisha was no idle dreamer, but a man who devoted himself to serve the Lord in his daily work.

We need to remember the honour the Lord Jesus Christ gave to daily work as he laboured as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). Whatever our daily occupation, we should serve the Lord in it, and therefore seek to do our work to the best of our ability. Elisha was a man who had proved himself faithful in little and now would be trusted with much. A person's background, even before becoming a Christian believer, can be part of God's training ground for future service in his kingdom.

d. We see another example of Elijah's obedience and submission to God.

He did what God told him to do without hesitation or grumbling. He did not even question God's choice of a farmer to be his successor. He knew the will of the Lord is always right, good and wise.

Obedience to God is the hallmark of true devotion (see John 14:15). Elijah's action when meeting Elisha also indicated there was no jealousy over the appointment of his successor. And it indicated he was taking Elisha into his friendship and under his tuition.

2) Elijah allows Elisha to say farewell to his family and friends (vv20-21a)

Elisha knew God was calling him to the prophetic ministry. This demanded considerable sacrifice from him. It meant giving up the comforts of a good home, giving up the financial security of the farm, and the joys of family life. It is quite clear from his request to Elijah to be allowed to go and kiss his parents goodbye that he loved his family dearly. He valued their company, and his call meant he had to be prepared to forsake all this for the loneliness that so often characterises the life of the servants of God. But his readiness to serve the Lord did not mean he ignored his family. He requested that he may be allowed to kiss them goodbye.

Elijah's answer has been the cause of much discussion over the years (1 Kings 19:20):

“‘Go back,’ Elijah replied. ‘What have I done to you?’”

Some think that his reply was somewhat rough in order to test Elisha’s loyalty. But it may also mean that Elijah did not want to hinder Elisha in showing this high regard and affection for his family. This was not some excuse for not serving the Lord, because Elisha did leave home. Instead, it was a mark of his love and respect for his parents. Then he left them and followed Elijah.

There is an almost identical situation in the life of Jesus that deserves our careful attention at this point. We find it in Luke 9:61-62 where a man who wanted to follow Jesus said,

“I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” However, Jesus forbade him to do so and said, *“No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”*

And this raises the questions, ‘Why was Elisha allowed to say goodbye to his parents, whereas the man Jesus met was not allowed to do so? Is there some contradiction between these two incidents, or can we reconcile them?’ I think we must say two things. Firstly, the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ referred to looking back in his answer to the man’s request indicated that the man was not resolute in his desire to follow him. And added to that, secondly, the Lord Jesus could see what was in this man’s heart and mind, which he often did while here on earth, so he really knew the danger for this man if he went back. We must therefore say that

these two men were quite different, and were dealt with differently. For Elisha, to say goodbye to his parents was not going to be a hindrance to him serving the Lord, but for the man whom Jesus met, such a contact with his parents would have tempted him not to follow the Lord at all. Elisha was certainly unwavering and resolute in his determination to serve the Lord. The issue for both these men was that the Lord required them to put him first. The famous Christian commentator of a previous generation, Matthew Henry, said that Elisha went back *“Not to ask leave, but to take leave”*.

3) Elisha went with Elijah (v21b)

a. The Lord’s mercy to Elijah

We read about Elisha, *“Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.”* This was a lovely touch from the Lord. His servant Elijah had been so discouraged and dejected and lonely, but now the Lord gave him a companion! This must have been a great encouragement for his downcast servant. Now he had a companion of like mind and similar devotion to Almighty God with whom he could share. How the grace of God amazes us! His loving kindness and tender mercies never fail and are a delight to behold and an even greater delight to receive.

b. Elisha’s obedience to God

Elisha gave up his ordinary work. God came first. Elisha demonstrated the completeness of his devotion to the call of God by killing his yoke of oxen (v21), and building a fire with his plough to cook the animals, and then giving

the food to others. His break with his past employment was decisive and final. The will of God was pre-eminent for him. He was now going to give his whole life and attention to the service of God. He would not turn back nor turn away from the work into which God now directed him. In the same way those who would follow the Lord Jesus Christ today must give him the place of supremacy in their lives, and place his will as revealed in the Bible above everything else. (See Colossians 1:18.)

The fact that this parting was celebrated with a feast is indicative that Elisha was doing this gladly for the Lord. Whatever the Lord calls us to do, we should be ready to make the surrender which obedience demands, and do so happily. This is true in conversion, for we have to forsake our old sinful ways and follow Christ. If the Lord Jesus Christ is calling you to follow him, then you must give up sinful living. You cannot do both. This is also true when God calls a believer to Christian service. It requires our undivided attention and thorough dedication. Other ambitions must be laid aside so that we can concentrate on the work of the Lord. Christian believer, if the Lord Jesus is calling you to do this, then do not try to hold on to past plans, but seek to do his will and to please him alone.

c. Elisha's humility

Elisha became Elijah's attendant, his servant. This word was used of Joshua as Moses' 'assistant' in Exodus 24:13; 33:11. He was not too proud to take second place to Elijah, nor to do menial work (2 Kings 3:11): "*Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of*

Elijah." There is a lovely parallel here with the Lord Jesus Christ who humbled himself and became as a servant (Philippians 2:1-11). He washed his disciples' feet (John 13), and then went on to die for them on the cross (Luke 23:26-46). Such humility is amazing. The Lord of glory stooped to become a servant because this was the will of God the Father for him. The true servants of Christ are called to walk a similar path of humble willingness to do the lowliest of deeds for the glory of God, and the furtherance of his kingdom. Love of self, and praise of self, and self-importance have no part in the service of the King of kings. And such a response is the mark of one who loves God in truth, which was true both for Elisha and Elijah.

Chapter 4 Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-29)

Introduction

a. The spiritual condition of King Ahab

We have seen throughout our look at the life of Elijah, that Ahab the king of Israel lived a persistently wicked life. He disobeyed God without any regard, even when God demonstrated his power, as he did in sending the three year drought, and at mount Carmel when the prophets of the idol Baal were destroyed. Ahab's heart was very hard and unmoved by any of the things God did or said to him through his prophet Elijah. He still did not repent.

In 1 Kings 20 we have the record of a remarkable mercy shown to Ahab by the Lord. In spite of Ahab's evil rebellion, the Lord gave him two exceptional victories over his enemy Benhadad king of Aram. But still Ahab was

unmoved spiritually and never once repented and sought the Lord's forgiveness, nor even said thank you to God for the help he received. Further, Ahab spared Benhadad who should have been destroyed because of his opposition to the Lord and his people. Ahab was rebuked by the Lord for this failure, yet still he did not repent. Instead he grew sullen and angry (1 Kings 20:43). Ahab was very much like the Pharaoh in the days of Moses who hardened his heart against the Lord. Whether by stern rebuke and chastening, or by undeserved blessing, Ahab's heart remained obstinately sinful.

How similar this is to many today who refuse to listen to the voice of God, whether he acts in judgment or in mercy towards them. They still refuse to follow the Lord Jesus Christ who alone can bring them God's forgiveness and reconcile them to him! That is a very dangerous condition to remain in, because unrepented sin increases. Such men and women grow worse and worse. (See 2 Timothy 3:13.)

Ahab stands as a solemn example and warning to us. We need the Lord's help to ensure we are not like him. This situation now comes to a climax in the incident of Naboth's vineyard, and in which Elijah is again seen as God's faithful servant.

b. The background about land in Israel

In order to understand the significance of what took place concerning Naboth's vineyard, we must remember how the land in Israel was considered. When the people of Israel left Egypt at the time of the exodus, and eventually took the land under Joshua's leadership, the land was never

considered as belonging to Israel. Instead, the land was seen as God's land, his promised land. And it was therefore given to the Israelites like a loan from God. It was their inheritance from him, and they were only leaseholders. They were to look after it for him.

The land was divided up into portions for each of the tribes in Israel, and each family was in turn given a portion to look after. The fact that the land was entrusted to their care by God meant they could not do just as they liked with it. It was to belong to their families permanently. They were given careful instruction about this in Leviticus 25:23:

“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.”

Sometimes, because of poverty, land was allowed to be sold for a temporary period, but it could be redeemed back by a payment and it had to be returned to the original owner in the Year of Jubilee (see Leviticus 25:26-28). Hence it was guarded jealously by each family as their inheritance from God, and was not to be forsaken, and certainly never sold permanently.

With this in mind, we must now turn to consider the episode about Naboth's vineyard.

1) Ahab's sinful dissatisfaction (vv1-4)

In the area of Jezreel, in the north west of the country, lived a vineyard owner named Naboth. His vineyard was close to one of Ahab's palaces, and Ahab thought how good it

would be if he had that vineyard for himself. He wanted to turn it into a vegetable garden.

Now Ahab knew full well what God's instructions were about the land, and that he had no right to the vineyard at all, because God had given the land to Naboth's family. Further, there was specific instruction from God that kings were not to amass great possessions (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20). However, true to his character, Ahab completely disregarded God's commands and pursued his own selfish and self-willed desires.

In order to obtain his own desires he tried to make an attractive offer to Naboth in exchange for the vineyard. He promised Naboth either a better vineyard or money. But Naboth was more godly than Ahab bargained for, and refused to give up the inheritance God had given his family (v3). He was not going to disobey God, even though the king himself asked him to do so! He showed considerable courage in making this stand.

We must say that through Naboth's refusal, Ahab was given a further opportunity to reconsider his sinful ways and repent, but he did not. Sadly, like a spoilt child, he sulked and refused to eat (v4). What a childish way for a grown man to react, simply because he could not have his own way! This was a thoroughly sinful way to respond to the disappointment. Interestingly, the same words were used to describe him at the end of the previous chapter when he was rebuked by another prophet of God (see 1 Kings 20:43). He was certainly entrenched in his sinful habits.

2) Jezebel's wicked solution (vv5-14)

When his wife heard about his sulking she went to inquire why he was acting in such a way. He told her of Naboth's refusal to part with the vineyard. Jezebel had no thought at all for God's will as she hated him and his servants. Therefore she rebuked Ahab and claimed he could do whatever he wanted as he was king! She had no regard for what God had said at all. He did not enter her thinking. She was a wicked tyrant, and told Ahab she would get the vineyard.

Her plan was to arrange for Naboth to be invited to a fast and for a false accusation to be made against him for cursing God and the king, the penalty for which was death (see Leviticus 24:15-16). This was a deliberate act of lying and premeditated murder. It reminds us that the righteous are often falsely accused of wrongdoing by the wicked! They are persecuted for righteousness sake (Matthew 5:10f). You may remember that they did this to godly Stephen (Acts 6:11), and they even did this to the Lord Jesus himself (Matthew 26:60)!

Jezebel was very cunning in using a religious activity, fasting, to get Naboth to attend. He was, after all, one who obeyed God. She also asked for two scoundrels to accuse him, knowing full well that no righteous persons would want to tell lies. Two men accused him because the law of God demanded that at least two witnesses had to verify a crime before guilt was established (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:1-5), so Jezebel was very cunning to use the guise of being correct! She did not reveal her plan

to Ahab, and she cunningly sealed the instructions with his seal, so that the leaders who were instructed to do this evil thing thought it had the king's approval! We must say that although she did not tell Ahab, that did not excuse him, because he knew what a wicked woman his wife was, yet he did not even question her!

Tragically the leaders of the people gave in to Jezebel's wicked scheme, and, being as guilty as she was for allowing this falsehood, Naboth was indeed falsely accused and murdered!

3) Ahab's sinful acquisition (vv15-16)

Having got rid of Naboth, Jezebel brazenly told Ahab he could take the vineyard, as Naboth was dead. Incidentally, it was still not his vineyard for the taking, because it should have been handed on to Naboth's descendants, but it appears that Naboth's sons had also been killed (2 Kings 9:26). Without asking any questions, Ahab gladly went to acquire the vineyard, just as he wanted in the first place. He had no pangs of conscience! He had no questions to put to Jezebel about how this happened. He had no queries about Naboth's family. He was so self-centred that he simply went to take the vineyard for his very own! The fact that corruption, dishonesty, murder and theft were involved in this acquisition made no difference to him. All he wanted was the vineyard, so he asked no questions! He really was as much to blame as his wicked wife.

4) Elijah's righteous declaration (vv17-29)

Both Ahab and Jezebel, and everyone else involved in this evil crime, had made a serious omission. They had

forgotten God! He had seen all that had taken place (Proverbs 15:3), and nothing had escaped his view. And now he revealed this fact in a most solemn way. He told Elijah to go and confront Ahab with the information (vv17-19). Indeed, it was while Ahab was walking in Naboth's vineyard that the Lord sent Elijah to rebuke him for his wickedness. Elijah was to tell Ahab that God knew everything that had taken place, and that he was responsible for Naboth's murder, and would suffer the awful consequences of that wicked act - dogs would lick his blood!

We see again that it is impossible for anyone to do wrong, act selfishly and escape punishment. In the end the Lord will bring them to account for their evil actions. Indeed the Lord Jesus said that an account will be required for every word men utter wrongly (Matthew 12:36). And high status in the eyes of men does not mean some are accountable to no one, nor will it offer any protection against God's searching judgment. Ahab was a king, yet he was accountable to Almighty God. You see, self-centredness, deceit, and malice cannot be hidden from God! Indeed sin of any kind cannot be kept from God's all seeing eyes. Wherever we go God is there (Psalm 139), and whatever we do or say or think is known to him - nothing falls outside of his penetrating gaze.

We must say that again Elijah was being called to do a difficult task, to confront this powerful and wicked monarch. But Elijah, who had once run away in fear of Ahab's wife Jezebel, had learned his lesson, and went to

the place of God's appointing. He obeyed the Lord, and did so faithfully and courageously.

b. Ahab's response (v20a)

"Ahab said to Elijah, 'So you have found me, my enemy!'"

After all that had happened, and which the Lord had accomplished through Elijah, Ahab was not moved to change. He still viewed the servant of God with great animosity. He was still embittered against Elijah. Even at this point he did not repent.

c. Elijah's faithful and fearless declaration of God's message (vv20b-24)

Elijah told him why he had come; it was because of Ahab's sin. Ahab had sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. He was completely given over to doing what was wrong. Consider 1 Kings 21:25-26 where we are told there was no one as bad as Ahab in his absolute determination to do evil. He was a vile man through and through.

Elijah told him that God would bring judgment on him and his family; they would be destroyed, cut off from the land. He used the examples of two former kings who had acted wickedly to impress upon him that this was no idle threat (v21).

Many today pour scorn on those who speak of the last day and the judgment to come, as if it will never happen. The Lord Jesus has told us it will happen, and therefore we need to act wisely in the light of it. It is utter folly to think that the Day of Judgment will never come, simply because

some say otherwise! The two kings cited by Elijah were Jeroboam son of Nebat, and Baasha son of Ahijah. Jeroboam and his household were wiped out by Baasha (1 Kings 15:28-30), just as God had warned earlier (1 Kings 14:10). Baasha and his family were killed by Zimri (1 Kings 16:11-13), just as God had also warned earlier (1 Kings 16:1-4). These men, like Ahab, thought they could sin without punishment, but were utterly wrong, and died as a consequence. Now Ahab was going to meet the same fate.

The lesson we are taught from this passage is that God will let people go so far and then no further. If they persist in their sin and fail to repent humbly and seek his forgiveness, then in the end they will be destroyed by God. All these judgments that are recorded in the Bible are a foretaste of the dreadful and final judgment that will take place on the last day when the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this world and destroy all those who have refused to obey the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Now Ahab's time had run out. Further, his wicked wife Jezebel would also meet her just ends for her persistent wickedness, and she would be eaten by dogs (v23). And although Ahab humbled himself at this dreadful news, the judgment was only delayed but not cancelled. Both he and his wife died exactly as God said they would, and the dogs did indeed lick Ahab's blood (1 Kings 22:30-38) and eat Jezebel's flesh (2 Kings 9:30-37)!

Conclusion

This whole passage stands as a solemn warning to us that sin cannot go unpunished (Galatians 6:7): *“A man reaps what he sows.”* Unless we seek the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ we will perish. Either our sin’s punishment is borne by Christ or we must bear it ourselves. This solemn warning is given to make us realise the urgency and importance of being right with God. Wonderfully, all who do what Ahab and Jezebel failed to do, that is, to truly repent of their sin and seek the mercy of Christ, will be forgiven by God and will not be destroyed in the judgment of the last day. Instead they will enter into everlasting joy and blessedness in the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness, and be with Christ forever. (See 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-4.) Therefore seek the Lord now, while he may be found, and before it is too late.

Chapter 5 Elijah’s message of judgment to Ahaziah (2 Kings 1:1-18)

Introduction

When Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king in his place. He was only king in Israel for two years, and sadly he also was a wicked man (1 Kings 22:52-53):

“He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he walked in the ways of his father and mother and in the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. He served and worshipped Baal and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father had done.”

This was a very tragic state of affairs. After seeing all that God did to his father Ahab, we would expect Ahaziah to have learned from his father’s errors, but he did not. He simply continued in the same sinful way of living. There is an English proverb that is not always true, but it is so in this case: *“Like father, like son.”* Ahaziah followed in his father’s sinful steps.

1) Ahaziah’s accident (v2)

Eventually Ahaziah had a bad accident. He fell through the lattice of his upper room and was seriously injured (2 Kings 1:2). Naturally he was concerned to know if he was going to recover from his injuries, but the way he went about it reveals his sad spiritual state. Instead of asking the Lord God about his condition, he turned to idolatry for the solution (2 Kings 1:2):

“So he sent messengers, saying to them, ‘Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this illness.’”

Ekron was one of the major cities of the Philistines, the ungodly enemies of the people of God! Not only was this the height of spiritual stupidity because only the Lord determines our future, and idols are lifeless and useless, but also God had strictly forbidden anyone to worship any other god except himself (Exodus 20:3):

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

Those who worship such idols are really worshipping demons, as Paul taught the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 10:20. Also, to seek to know the future by

such idolatry was also forbidden by the Lord as a great wickedness (see Leviticus 20:6 & 27; Deuteronomy 18:10; 1 Chronicles 10:13). So this was blatant disobedience and therefore a very wrong thing to do. It was a very sinful way to act.

Sadly, we can compare this with many today who will turn everywhere for the answer to their problems, rather than looking to the Lord, the only true and living God. The reason is that the natural heart of man is in opposition to the Lord (Romans 8:7-8):

“... the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

All such forsaking of God is sinful and very serious.

Ahaziah’s actions were made worse by the fact that he knew about the Lord God of Israel, yet turned to Baal-Zebub. His disobedience was deliberate and defiant. And that kind of rebellion against God is very dangerous, as we shall see. We must beware that we do not make the same sinful mistake, but instead, trust in the Lord alone, always (see Proverbs 3:5-6).

2) God’s response (vv3-4)

a. God’s declaration

We have already seen on numerous occasions that it is impossible to do anything wrong and get away with it. God knows all about us, and nothing is hidden from his sight. He has a perfect record of everything we do, and when we sin that means there is no escape from God. His

penetrating gaze understands even the inclinations of the thoughts of our hearts (see Genesis 6:5). And he was fully aware of Ahaziah’s wickedness.

So God sent his angel, his heavenly messenger, to tell Elijah to meet Ahaziah’s messengers and confront them with these words (2 Kings 1:3-4):

“Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!’”

b. Elijah’s obedience

We read in verse 4c, *“So Elijah went.”* Elijah’s response was immediate, and he went to confront Ahaziah’s servants with this most solemn news from God. The reference to *“the Lord”* in the message was a reminder that Ahaziah had forsaken the God who had been infinitely gracious to Israel and who had promised to bless them if they followed him. This was underlining the fact that Ahaziah’s disregard of God was inexcusable and very serious. He had taken no notice whatsoever of God’s dealings with his father, and had ignored all that God had said through Elijah to Ahab. He had, in fact, rejected the Lord. And that is the most terrible thing ever to do! Hence the gravity of the Lord’s message to him through Elijah. He was going to die!

3) Ahaziah’s reaction (vv5-9)

Ahaziah's servants returned immediately to their king and reported to him all that had been told them by Elijah. They did not go to Baal-Zebub in Ekron, and evidently recognised the authority of God in the message given them by Elijah. After all, they had not told Elijah where they were going; he already knew, and only God could have revealed that to him.

We can picture the scene as they entered the king's bedroom and delivered this most solemn news to him. We must add at this point that the Lord was giving Ahaziah time to repent through these words, and the events that followed. How merciful God was to give him this warning before it took place! Ahaziah's reaction was as interesting as it was tragic. Instead of calling out to God for mercy and repenting of his wickedness, all he was concerned about was to identify Elijah (v7). It is quite instructive to note that the king was more concerned with the messenger than the message! He wanted to know who he was, and was not concerned with the word of the Lord through Elijah! This is so true of many even today who do not want to face up to the searching message of God's judgment, and so when such a message is delivered to them they divert their attention to the messenger. They criticise him instead. They pick on things such as his clothes, or mannerisms, or grammar, personality or style, anything instead of facing God's challenge. But by so doing, tragically, they imperil their own souls by failing to heed God's word. A.W.Pink wrote this about such people: *"Yet when the postman hands them an important business letter they are not concerned about his appearance."*

Having asked the men what he looked like, and being told of his distinctive prophet's clothing, Ahaziah immediately recognised it was Elijah (v8). Again this should have made him reconsider his spiritual condition and led him to repent, but instead he demanded that Elijah be brought to him. Neither his injury nor his impending death moved his heart to seek God! This was tragic indeed! He sent a captain and 50 men to order Elijah to come to him. The captain's words are recorded in verse 9: *"Man of God, the king says, 'Come down.'"*

Ahaziah thought he could cause Elijah to recant on the curse in some way, or even worse, kill him so that the curse might be avoided. Foolishly, he failed to realise the curse was from God, and even if he did force Elijah to recant or had even killed him, that would not alter God's revealed will concerning him. This was a clear case of arrogant pride, making a man so full of his own importance that he thought he could take God on and win! This was the most offensive audacity and folly. It was certainly not the response of a man humbled before God by the thought of the shortness of his days and the wickedness of his life! But man with all his force cannot overthrow the purposes of God, and all who think that way are spiritual fools. Many today who think they can sin and escape punishment are sadly very mistaken. If not in this life, then certainly in the life to come, they will have to render account to God, and will come under his judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Even every idle word we have uttered will be accounted for (Matthew 12:36), and there will be no escape for those who blatantly disregard God.

4) Elijah's solemn response (vv10-15)

The king sent a captain with 50 men to bring Elijah back to him. The king displayed his arrogance in this action, because in Israel kings were to be under the scrutiny and authority of the word of the Lord which was brought by his prophets. This was made plain in the days of Samuel when Israel required a king like other nations, and Saul was appointed as the first king (1 Samuel 10:25):

“Samuel explained to the people the regulations of kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the Lord.”

Then later in his farewell speech, Samuel declared (1 Samuel 12:23f),

“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away.”

It is evident from these words that the kings of Israel were to be subject to the word of God through the prophets, and not to do things arrogantly in their own way. Yet this was what Ahaziah was doing. That arrogance was also seen in the captain's words, which were very terse in verse 9, *“Man of God, the king says, ‘Come down!’”*

The very use of the words *“Man of God”* seems to have meant very little both to the king and this captain. The

issue was who really ruled, the Lord or the king? And Ahaziah had already taken his stand defiantly on this issue, for he had rejected the Lord, and now he was to learn in a most solemn way of his great mistake.

Elijah courageously took the very words of the captain and said that if he was indeed a true man of God, then let fire fall down from heaven and consume the captain and his men. And the fire did fall and they were all destroyed!

We must realise that this was not selfish revenge on Elijah's part, but rather a defence of the honour and glory of God. King Ahaziah was disregarding God defiantly, and so was this captain, and God would not allow that state of affairs to continue. So God sent the fire down. This was a most solemn indication that the Lord was God and Ahaziah was wickedly wrong! It was very similar to what happened to Ahab and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel recorded in 1 Kings 18, an event that should have said much to Ahaziah, but which he ignored! However, when the news reached him about the death of his captain and soldiers, he remained in obstinate rebellion against the Lord and sent out another captain and a further 50 soldiers (v11)! This really was quite astonishing and inexcusable folly and evil! He was refusing blatantly to humble himself before the Lord, and did not even have a care for the lives of his own soldiers!

The procedure was repeated again (vv11-12), and these men also perished. Still Ahaziah was unmoved, for he sent another captain and 50 men to do the same (v13a). He

really was without excuse. His sin, because he had not repented, simply increased (Ecclesiastes 9:3):

“The hearts of men ... are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live...”

However, the third Captain was much wiser than his king and his predecessors who simply followed the king’s command. He approached Elijah humbly, knowing in truth that he was a man of God, and pleaded with him to spare the lives of his men and himself (vv13b-14). He knew the Lord had sent this fire down at Elijah’s request, and that to stand against God and his appointed servants arrogantly was a grave sin. The man’s life was spared. At this, the angel of the Lord, who had urged Elijah to rebuke Ahaziah, commanded him to go with this third captain to meet the king face to face. This fact itself indicated that Elijah had not acted in an uncontrolled selfish, vengeful way when he said, *“Let fire come down from heaven.”* He was subject to the Lord throughout these events.

As he confronted the king, his faithfulness to God remained unmoved before this arrogant, rebellious monarch. He was like the Psalmist who is quoted in Hebrews 13:6:

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

Elijah was not put off by the king’s power, nor did he water down or compromise the message of God simply to make it easier for himself. He declared the word of God faithfully, even though it was a most difficult message to

pass on! The king would die because he had turned to the Philistine idol Baal-Zebub and had forsaken the Lord! Indeed, Elijah added, *“You will certainly die!”* such was the force of God’s judgment upon Ahaziah. 2 Kings 1:17 tells us that this was fulfilled exactly as God had said through Elijah: *“So he died, according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.”* The Lord was indeed God, and his glory he would not give to another, not even a king of Israel.

Lessons:

a. Concerning Elijah

From this passage we learn that though sometimes the servants of God are the fragrance of life, as was the case with Elijah and the widow’s son at Zarephath, they are also, as here, the smell of death, as Elijah is God’s instrument to pronounce judgment on the king. (See 2 Corinthians 2:16.) Indeed, this was seen in the life of the Lord Jesus himself who ministered grace and mercy to his people yet also pronounced great judgments on the wicked. Compare Matthew 5:1ff and the *‘Blesseds’* with Matthew 23 and the *‘Woes’* that came from his lips. So too, today, the ministers of the Gospel are called to help and strengthen and comfort and feed the people of God, and also to warn the wicked to repent or they will perish. Elijah was a faithful servant of God. May the Lord grant that we shall be found faithful to God also.

b. Concerning Ahaziah

This solemn passage teaches us:

- (i) It is absolute folly to attempt to resist God and his purposes, for if we do we shall utterly fail, for God is omnipotent.
- (ii) It is a grievous sin to forsake God for other idols, and will not go unnoticed by him.
- (iii) Persistent sinful behaviour will reap its reward of judgment from God, for a man reaps what he sows. (See Galatians 6:7ff.)

This passage, and all the other biblical examples of God acting in judgment, point us to the last day, and the final judgment. It will be a day of holy vengeance, and flaming fire will fall on all who rebel against God (see 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). That day is fixed and no one will avoid it. Therefore the great urgency is for us to be ready for it. How? By seeking the forgiveness that God gives to those who repent of their rebellion against him, and who place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who alone has paid the penalty for sin in his death on the cross. We must walk humbly before the Lord, and rely solely on him and submit to his revealed will in the Bible. Ahaziah did neither of these, and he perished as a consequence! May the Lord give us grace to learn from his fearful mistake and repent and believe before it is too late.

Chapter 6 Elijah tests Elisha and Elijah's last miracle (2 Kings 2:1-8)

Introduction

In the Bible there are two men who did not die. One was Enoch, who walked with God, for God took him away

(Genesis 5:24). And the other was Elijah. Both these godly servants of the Lord were spared the experience of death and were taken bodily to heaven. Before Elijah was taken, and on that very same day, he set a test before Elisha.

You will remember that God had given Elijah a successor in the person of Elisha (see chapters 2 and 3 of this book). Elijah had been very depressed after the threat on his life made by Jezebel, and this was one of the ways that the Lord encouraged Elijah. Elisha's appointment meant that the work of God would continue and not disappear, and also it gave Elijah a companion in his loneliness. Elisha had become his attendant (1 Kings 19:21), and in 2 Kings 3:11 he is described as the one who "*used to pour water on the hands of Elijah.*" So he was a humble and faithful helper for Elijah. It is not surprising then to discover that Elisha was with Elijah on the day that God took Elijah up to heaven, and that is where 2 Kings 2:1 begins, with both men on their way from the city of Gilgal.

Gilgal was a short distance of a few kilometres north west of Jericho, and about 20 kilometres to the east of Bethel. Each of these cities had companies of prophets during Elijah's time, and they were probably established to study under the leadership of men like Elijah, being trained to read and teach the Word of God to their needy generation. They are mentioned because they were involved in delivering messages to Elisha on this very day when Elijah was to be taken from him.

1) The journey to Bethel (vv1-3)

We have seen throughout Elijah's life that he was a man who was under the directions of the Lord. His whole life and ministry showed obedience to the commands of God, with the one exception when he ran away during his depression. But apart from that brief lapse, he was a man whose life was ordered by the Lord, and it was so on this day. He had been directed by God to go to Bethel (v1). Then he gave an interesting instruction and challenge to Elisha in verse 2, "*Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel.*" Would Elisha forsake his master on this last day of their lives together? This was the test and challenge Elijah set before him.

Elisha remained absolutely loyal. Elisha had pledged this the very first day he was called to become Elijah's assistant (1 Kings 19:20): "*I will come with you.*" Now he is tested to see if he would be faithful to the very end, or give up. We are told in verse 2, "*Elisha said, 'As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.'*" He, too, was a man who would not forsake his God-given appointment, even when he had the opportunity to do so. This is challenging and instructive to us, for there do come times when we are tempted perhaps to give up a particular job the Lord has called us to do. It might be that the work is hard or there has been little fruit for our labours or that we have not been appreciated by those we tried to help. It may even be that another believer tells us we can give up our God-given task. The response that is required of us at such times is that like Elisha we remain loyal to the Lord and his appointment for us, and indeed that we do so until he tells us to do otherwise.

When they arrived at Bethel a company of the prophets asked Elisha if he realised that this was the day the Lord was going to take Elijah from him (v3). Elisha replied that it was, but asked them not to speak about it. No doubt the thought of losing his beloved master was not something he was looking forward to, such was the love and respect he had for Elijah. Note that God had revealed this to these sons of the prophets, and note also the affection Elisha had for Elijah.

2) The journey to Jericho (vv4-5)

Again Elijah gave Elisha the opportunity to stay at Bethel because the Lord had now directed Elijah to Jericho (v4a). And again Elisha remained resolute, and stayed with Elijah, as God had called him to do. He really was a faithful servant of both Elijah and the Lord. Nothing could tempt him to give up his obedience to the call of God. He was resolute in his determination to obey.

On arrival at Jericho the company of the prophets there also asked Elisha if he realised God was going to take Elijah from him that day (v5). Again he replied that it was and asked them not to talk about it any more (v5b).

3) The journey to Jordan (v6)

A third time Elijah urged Elisha to stay behind, this time at Jericho, as the Lord had directed him to the Jordan River (v6a). Elisha remained loyal to the very end (v6b). He truly was a faithful servant of the Lord, diligent, persistent, and steadfast. Although they had travelled many miles, Elisha did not tire and give up being with Elijah.

What a difference from many who claim to follow Christ, who run well to begin with, but then grow tired and weary of doing well and turn back from following him. May the Lord give us grace to be as determined in our desire to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus to the very end, as Elisha was to Elijah, especially when we are tempted to give up or to cease walking with him as closely as we ought to.

4) Elijah's last miracle (vv7-8)

When they arrived at the Jordan, 50 of the company of the prophets went with them but stood watching at a distance. These men were the privileged witnesses of the last of Elijah's miracles before he went up to heaven. Elijah rolled up his cloak and struck the water with it (v8), and the river parted in front of him. Both Elijah and Elisha walked across on dry land. You will remember that Joshua walked across the Jordan on dry ground when he entered the land (Joshua 3), now Elijah does the same as he is about to leave it.

Both those events were very significant because the Lord was at work in them. Both Joshua and Elijah were brought across the river in safety. The Lord was protecting his servants. To Joshua it was an indication from the Lord that God was with him as he had to take possession of the land, and for Elijah that God was with him now he was to leave this world. Both men were secure because the Lord was with each of them.

It is significant to note that though this company of the prophets knew Elijah was to be taken, and 50 of them witnessed Elijah's last miracle in the parting of the Jordan

(vv7-8), they were not permitted to see Elijah ascend into heaven. The lesson from this simple fact is none-the-less important. The Lord is sovereign in all the blessings he gives to his people, and though he may bless one believer in one way, that does not mean he will necessarily do the same to another believer. Here both Elisha and these prophets were the servants of God, yet he permitted only Elisha to see Elijah go into heaven. The reason is not disclosed to us in the Bible, just simply that this was what God chose to do. We need to learn from this that God is sovereign in his dealings with us and we have to leave our lives completely in his hands and be satisfied with his all-wise choices for us.

Lessons

The main lessons from this Bible passage are these:

- (i) We are to be faithful to do whatever the Lord calls us to do, and not to forsake the path of obedience he sets before us.
 - (ii) God will never desert his children and will be with them even when the time comes for them to leave this world, whether that is by dying or by the Lord Jesus Christ returning first to take us to be with him.
 - (iii) We must trust in the Lord at all times and be content with his sovereign will for us, even if it is quite different from his dealings with other believers.
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Chapter 7 Elijah's miraculous exit from this world (2 Kings 2:9-12)

Introduction

Elijah was quite aware that he was soon to leave Elisha. Evidently God had revealed this to him. Remember, God is the One who knows all things before they ever happen (see Isaiah 46:10). Before he left, Elijah set another test before Elisha.

1) The test of Elisha's character (vv9-10)

Elijah asked Elisha if there was anything he could do for him before he was taken from him (v9), and this was a real test of his character. He could so easily have asked for something entirely selfish, such as riches, or fame, personal prestige, or recognition or power. Elisha's answer is most significant. He desired a double portion of Elijah's spirit (v9b). He wanted a life and ministry that was as effective and fruitful as Elijah's. Elisha wanted God to be glorified in his life, and exercised tremendous faith, for he believed God could bless and use him to this degree. In many ways he was like Solomon who prayed for wisdom when God said to him (1 Kings 3:5), *"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."* Solomon asked for wisdom so that he might govern the people of God in the right way. He did not ask for long life or wealth or the death of his enemies, but for help to glorify God as he cared for his people. In a similar way, Elisha responded to Elijah's invitation in a selfless and spiritual manner. He longed for that which would honour the Lord. He had been called by God to take Elijah's place, and he could not do this in his own strength,

therefore he made this lovely request. A.W.Pink put it like this: *"... he asked for a double portion of the spirit of prophecy - of wisdom and grace, of faith and strength - that he might be 'thoroughly furnished unto all good works.'" Elisha felt his own weakness, inadequacy and unworthiness for the work he had been called to do, and therefore recognised he was going to need the special enabling of the Lord to do this work, and this is what he requested.*

Notice also that Elijah said to Elisha,

*"Tell me, what can I do for you **before** I am taken from you."*

It would have been no use Elisha asking Elijah to do something for him after he had been removed from the earth. The importance of this little word '*before*' is that today many people think they are to pray to saints who have now died and gone to heaven. We are not to do that. Even the godliest of God's children who have lived cannot help us or answer our prayers when they are dead. Elijah knew he could not do what Elisha requested even while he was alive! He left the outcome in God's hands. Indeed, the only one we are to pray to is the Lord. God alone is able to answer our prayers, not believers who have died and been taken to heaven. Elisha was not to pray to Elijah once he had been taken to heaven.

Immediately Elijah acknowledged this was a hard thing to be granted. It was not in Elijah's power to do this, only the Lord could do so (v10). Therefore Elisha was promised this only if he saw Elijah taken from him. Elijah was really

leaving the outcome of this request entirely in the Lord's hands.

2) Elijah's departure (vv11-12)

The two men were walking together and talking, when suddenly a chariot and horses of fire appeared and separated Elijah from Elisha, and Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (v11). Elijah did not die, but was taken bodily directly to the dwelling place of God. God took him. It is quite interesting to note that the very man who once prayed in a moment of depression that he might die, did not die at all! How God's ways are better than ours! He denied his servant's earlier desire to die because he had something better in store for him. The Lord still does this today and sometimes denies us things we ask for because he knows he has something better in store for us.

This most unusual event raises the questions, what was its significance? Why did God take Elijah in this way? What is the Lord teaching us through this miracle? We can suggest a number of answers to this.

- (i) This was a reward for his faithfulness. The Bible teaches believers about the Lord's rewards that it might encourage our perseverance and faithfulness to him in this life. (See Mark 10:29f; 1 Corinthians 3:8; Hebrews 11:26; 2 Peter 1:10-11; Revelation 2:10, 22:12.) And this is important because often it can appear to be the opposite down here on earth. Often God's faithful servants suffer deprivation, discouragement and persecution because they are faithful, but all is not lost. Though the unbelieving

world may mock us for our love for Christ and our determination to be holy in a very unclean world, and it can be costly to make such a stand, the Lord sees all and in the end will reward his faithful people. Elijah was resolutely righteous and loyal to God throughout his life, even in the face of fierce hostility and opposition, and now the Lord rewarded him in this remarkable way. We need to remember that beyond this life there are blessings that will more than compensate for our sufferings now (Romans 8:18): *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* We need to remember that God's rewards are rewards of his grace, for even the ability to be faithful to him, as Elijah was, comes from God himself who sustains his children

- (ii) Elijah had no resting place on earth but a place was reserved for him in heaven. Christian believers today are pilgrims and strangers on earth (1 Peter 1:1). Like Abraham, Elijah had no continuing city but looked for that heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God (see Hebrews 11:10). Throughout our lives we should not fix our attention on this world as it is not our permanent home. As believers, we are simply passing through it to a better place, one that God has reserved for us in heaven itself (1 Peter 1:3-5).
- (iii) There is life beyond this world, and therefore we need to prepare for it now. Whether our life should end by death or, like Elijah, by being translated from

this world, there is the life to come. Elijah was prepared to meet God long before the events of his last day on earth. It is really foolishness to ignore such preparation, for unlike Elijah, none of us knows when our last day will come. Therefore we must ensure we are ready today by committing our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ and relying solely on him for the forgiveness of our sins. He alone can make us fit for heaven.

- (iv) This is a foretaste of the day of resurrection. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51ff.) The Christian believer's great hope is that one-day we too shall rise and be like Christ. If we should be called to die before the day of resurrection, then death will not harm us. As far as our bodies are concerned, death will be but like a refreshing sleep, and at death our souls will be carried to heaven by the angels of God (Luke 16:22) to await that great and notable day of the Lord. Then when that great day arrives, if we have died we shall rise from the dead, or if we are still alive on the earth we shall be changed in a moment, and so we shall have new glorified bodies. Bodies fit for the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1ff). Bodies free from sin and all its sad consequences (Revelation 21:4). Bodies like Christ's glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21). And so like Elijah, we shall be with the Lord forever. What a day for the Christian believer to look forward to! What an incentive to seek to follow the Lord with all our hearts, just as Elijah did.

Chapter 8 Jesus, Elijah, and the Transfiguration (Luke 19:28-36)

Introduction

There is one more Biblical event involving Elijah that is worthy of our consideration. This was the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ. A few days before this event, the Lord Jesus had been declared by Peter to be *'the Christ of God'* (Luke 9:20), meaning that the Lord Jesus was the mighty Deliverer whom God had promised throughout the Old Testament period would come to rescue his people from their sins. The Lord Jesus then immediately told the disciples about the suffering he would endure in Jerusalem (Luke 9:22):

"And he said, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.'"

He said this because it was through his death on the cross that he was going to achieve this great salvation of his people.

Luke then tells us in Luke 9:28,

"About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray."

Regularly, throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus spent a great deal of time with his Father in prayer. And this is even more understandable now that the time for him to be

crucified was drawing near. As that great work of securing the salvation of all his people weighed upon him, he turned to prayer. This is an important lesson for us to grasp when we face trials and difficulties. We need to be in contact with our heavenly Father in prayer, and lay all our burdens and needs before him in humble trust, seeking his help.

1) The Transfiguration

It was while Jesus was praying that a great change came over him, and which we call the transfiguration (Luke 9:29): *“As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.”*

It was indeed a remarkable sight to behold as Jesus' outward appearance was transformed. Matthew speaks of his clothes becoming *‘... as white as light’* (Matthew 17:2). And Mark expresses it in this way in Mark 9:3,

“His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”

Something of the glory and splendour of heaven shone out from him, and much more. This was nothing less than his divine majesty shining forth. This was the glory he enjoyed with the Father even before the world came into existence. In his high priestly prayer just before his crucifixion we read in John 17:5,

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

It was this glory that he had laid aside as he emptied himself and became a man. Paul put it like this in Philippians 2:6-7:

“Who (i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ), being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

He had not ceased to be God, but he had laid aside all the outward manifestations of that glory for the period of his humiliation on earth. But now, for a brief period, that glory shone forth in all its brilliance. The Lord Jesus glistened with the splendour of it. It was a marvellous declaration of his divine nature.

Peter wrote about it some time later in these words in 2 Peter 1:16-18,

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

The wonder of the divine nature of the Lord Jesus Christ has filled his people with praise all down through the ages. The hymn writer Charles Wesley put it like this as he wrote about his Saviour. He was *“God of God”* and *“Light of*

Light". He also wrote in another of his hymns that the Lord Jesus Christ is "*Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man*".

2) The visitors from Heaven

Luke 9:30-31:

"... Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure (literally his 'exodus') which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem."

a) Their presence

The man whose life we have been studying came back to the earth, and talked with the Lord Jesus! He too, along with Moses, had something of the glory of heaven in his appearance. This is not surprising, considering Moses had died centuries before and been in heaven with the Lord since that time, and Elijah had not died at all but had been taken bodily to heaven in the flaming chariot and whirlwind we read about in 2 Kings 2:11.

How instructive this is for us. All believers, whether they die as Moses did and will be the case for most believers, or are taken bodily to heaven as Elijah was, which will happen to those who are alive when the Lord Jesus returns, are safe in God's keeping when they leave this world. To use Paul's expression in Philippians 1:23, they depart and are with "*Christ, which is better by far.*" All Christian believers enter into the glorious presence of Almighty God the instant our earthly life comes to its conclusion. We are utterly secure, and although the process of dying may be

for us an unpleasant experience and not one that we look forward to, it cannot harm us nor separate us from the love of God. So Paul could write in 2 Corinthians 5:8,

"We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

And the presence of Elijah and Moses when Jesus was transfigured, reassures us of these great blessings and the security Christian believers possess, and therefore should enjoy.

b) Their purpose

The question arises - why did Elijah and Moses meet with Jesus at this time? And the answer is twofold.

Firstly, Moses was the great lawgiver of the Old Testament, and Elijah represented all the prophets. And Jesus had come to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17):

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."

Jesus came to obey the law perfectly, to give it its fullest meaning, and to accomplish all that the prophets spoke about.

Secondly, and following on from this, Elijah and Moses came to speak with him particularly about his departure or 'exodus' as the word is literally translated. This departure had been described in the law and the prophets in great detail. It included his agonies on the cross as he bore the

sins of his people giving his life as the sacrificial Lamb to atone for their sins. All the examples of the Old Testament sacrifices pointed towards his coming to Calvary. Isaiah spoke of it with such clarity (Isaiah 53:4-5):

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him...”

And it included also his resurrection and exaltation to glory following on from that. What David wrote prophetically in Psalm 16, and which Peter stated on the day of Pentecost was fulfilled in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Psalm 16:9-11):

“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

And so their presence with the Lord Jesus at this precise time was a tremendous encouragement and comfort to him. His work would not come to nothing, but fulfil all it was intended to achieve. He would indeed bring many sons to glory, firstly by dying for them and then rising and ascending to the right hand of God on high. That God the Father should send these two men was an indication of his deep and tender love for his dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And what a marvellous privilege for Elijah to be

included with Moses in this vital errand. It points us towards the joys and privileges we shall share in heaven when our earthly days are over. We shall continue to serve and honour our gracious God, and do so without any of the hindrances of our present frail condition. (See Revelation 7:15.)

3) Peter’s response (vv32-33)

Peter and James and John had been very sleepy, but this event aroused them out of their slumber and they saw the Lord in all his splendour, and Moses and Elijah standing talking with him. Impetuous as ever, and not realising what he was saying, Peter blurted out (Luke 9:33),

“Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

It seems that he wanted to prolong the stay of these three important people on the mountainside. However, his suggestion, though out of kind motives, was not right. The Lord Jesus had to finish his important work in Jerusalem itself, and could not linger. Nothing would deter him or divert him from completing that work by the shedding of his precious blood. Peter shows us that even though he had heard the Lord Jesus speak about the necessity of his sufferings on the cross, he had not really grasped the significance and importance of that work. Disciples in every age have been slow to learn from the Lord, and we are no different. How much we need to pray that the Lord will be patient with us and give us a deeper understanding of his word.

It is significant that Jesus did not even answer Peter, but remained silent. He was not going to give in to Peter's suggestion at all and did not consider it even worth discussing. May God our Father give us such determination and resolve to serve him just as the Lord Jesus did, not allowing anything to divert us from doing his will.

4) The declaration from Heaven (vv34-35)

However, while Peter was speaking, a cloud enveloped them. Often in the Bible the presence of God is indicated by a cloud. One thinks of the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). Or when they grumbled against God and he came to rebuke them (Exodus 16:10). Or when the glory of the Lord filled the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 40:34). Or when the Lord came to the holy place once the temple was completed by Solomon (1 Kings 8:10). It indicated the presence of God, and was so on this occasion.

The disciples were afraid as they entered the cloud, but then they heard the very voice of God (Luke 9:35): "*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*" What important words these were.

Firstly, they must have been a tremendous encouragement to the Lord Jesus himself as he anticipated the cross. He was doing his Father's chosen will for him, and his Father was well pleased with that. (See Matthew's account in Matthew 17.) How much the Father loved him and was delighted with his whole-hearted obedience, even to the death of the cross.

Secondly, it was a fitting word for the disciples, especially Peter, who had not listened to Jesus' words as carefully as he should have done.

Thirdly, it is a vital instruction for us as believers today to ensure it is the Lord Jesus we follow. As important as Elijah and Moses are, and all that they have to teach us, all their teaching should direct us to Christ. We are to follow him, not them, for he alone is the Saviour of sinners. No one must ever take his place in our lives, and we must give our undivided loyalty to him alone. The great question is, 'Are we?' Are we really listening to the voice of the holy Son of God? Are we really doing all in our power to obey and honour him in our lives? Are we indeed following the example set for us by Elijah and Moses themselves, who were both godly servants of the Lord? Where is the proof? If we were on trial for loving, serving and obeying the Lord Jesus Christ, would there be sufficient evidence to convict us?

As we close this study of the life of Elijah, the prophet of God, may the Lord himself help us not only to recognise the lessons from this godly man's life, but actually to put them into practice in our own lives. If all we do is the former, then we will have failed to benefit from the sacred record of the Bible that has described his life so fully. Let us take notice of the wise words of James (James 1:22):

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

For if we do this, we shall share in the privilege and joy that is Elijah's experience right now. A time will come

when we, too, will see Jesus face to face and dwell with him forever.

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