

Lessons on the Life of Elijah

Taken from the 1st & 2nd Kings.

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Cover: *Elijah Ascends to Heaven in a Chariot of Fire*, Gustave Doré. Public Domain.

Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass
it on.”

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Elijah, the Prophet - (1 Kings 17:1-8)

The quintessential prophet of the Old Testament is Elijah. We can learn much from his life as an example. Here is his entry on to the stage of Biblical history:

(1 Ki 17:1-8 NIV) Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." {2} Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: {3} "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. {4} You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." {5} So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. {6} The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. {7} Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. {8} Then the word of the LORD came to him:

People

There are two main characters in this story, Elijah and Ahab, the king of the northern kingdom, Israel. Much of the appeal of the story comes from the contrast of their characters, for Ahab is a man of this world, and Elijah the man of God.

Elijah

One of the most striking things about Elijah is that he has no stated ancestry. This is quite unusual in the Old Testament. The Jews were very careful to record ancestry. This has led some scholars to suggest that he might even have been a Gentile. Others draw the parallel to Melchizedek, the priest of God with no ancestry, who is believed to be the pre-incarnate Christ. One thing is certain – he came out of nowhere.

Nowhere, geographically speaking, is the town of Tishbe in Gilead (see map). When a man is referred to by geography rather than by ancestry, it is something to notice. Elijah is from the sticks. But we may note two things about his character which define the man:

- ✚ He is one who serves God. The phrase in the original is that he is one who stands before God. It calls to our minds the picture of the cherubim before God, awaiting His command.
- ✚ He is, as James assures us, a man of prayer. So he is a man who combines the outward life of God's servant – a man of action who defines himself as *standing* before God, awaiting His pleasure – with the inner life of prayer.

In the combination of these two we see what kind of man God wants to bring to greatness.

Ahab

Ahab reminds me of no one more than Bill Clinton. I am sorry to say that, but the parallels are striking:

- ✚ First, he is dominated by his wife. She's the brains of the outfit and the power behind the throne, a woman who plays on his weak character.
- ✚ He is a man – ask Naboth! – who schemes for petty gain. This is a man who, at his wife's needling, has a man killed (by legal means) to get hold of his vineyard.

- ✦ But – like Mr. Clinton – he is not beyond hope. In the end, he humbles himself before God. His wife, alas, does not. She is proud to her end.

Background

To understand the times in which Elijah lived, we need to know a few more details.

Religion

The worship of Baal and Ashterah (also Astarte, Astoreth and several other variants) is, for the most part, extinct. (I exclude those radical feminists who now find Astarte so wonderful). Since these are not common in our time, we need a little bit of explanation.

- ✦ *Baal* – is the primary male god of the Canaanite religion, centered around Sidon (from which Jezebel came). Worship of this god included such interesting features as infant sacrifice and cannibalism. Represented by the sun, he is the primary male symbol of fertility. He (and Ashterah) give birth to 70 other gods who make up the pantheon of this worship style. The name is generic, and sometimes is applied to other, more particular gods.
- ✦ *Ashterah* – is the primary female goddess of this religion. Her worship features temple prostitutes. She is represented by the moon. Lately, worship of this goddess has been revised by certain radical feminists, about whom more later. In her Babylonian guise, she is the root of much of the “New Age” worship. Here, we see her in a cruder form.

Interestingly, the evil nature of the worship of these two has been much softened as of late. The “Noble Savage” myth runs strong in academic circles these days, and we now see the worshipers of these gods as being those who are “at peace with each other and in harmony with their environment.” In fact, this is a religion in which infant sacrifice and sexual infidelity are considered good things, acts of worship. If you substitute abortion for infant sacrifice, I’m not so sure things haven’t changed that much. The fascinating thing is that we now have some “new thinkers” who have revived this religion. Even in our depravity we must have the justification of some form of religion.

Geography

We need to have a map to see where things are in this story:



As you can see, Tishbe is on the western side of the Jordan – which leads to the suspicions about Elijah’s origins. The brook, Kerith, is (according to the traditional site) a transient stream – it normally dries up in the summer.

Ravens

Ravens are clever birds; indeed, one of the most intelligent of species. But there is a lesson in here for us – for ravens are also considered an “unclean” species to the Jew. So the miraculous feeding of Elijah is very unusual in that God uses an animal which is unclean to feed his prophet. The lesson? God’s purposes may be served by angels or ravens, the great or the least. He doesn’t seem to be too fussy that way.

Prophets and Prophecy

Does God use natural disaster to punish a nation?

It's one of those questions which has come up more frequently in these days of science and understanding. After all, these are "natural" disasters – how could you see the hand of God in them?

Do remember that this is his universe, sustained by his power. The reason that the "laws of nature" are the same today as yesterday is that HE is the same today as yesterday. The artwork reflects the artist.

Perhaps you might remember the Northridge earthquake. I recall the sermons from the next two weeks. In the first sermon, our preacher mildly reproached those who thought God would use natural disaster to punish a nation; it was just one of those trials of life. The next week he pointed out that Northridge, the epicenter of the quake, was also the city in which over 95% of the world's hard core pornography is physically produced.

You decide.

The role of the prophet

Prophecy, especially in the Old Testament, has two functions:

- ✚ The prophet is to *foretell* – not in the sense of predicting the stock market, but in terms of outlining the consequences God intends. Foretelling by a prophet always carries an "if" – "if you don't repent, ..."
- ✚ The prophet is to *forthtell* – to proclaim wickedness for what it is. In this day when everything is relative and there is no absolute truth, some may think this quaint, at best. But the prophet has no choice; this is God's work for the prophet.

The key to the character of the prophet is this: God does not hide his intentions from the prophet, but rather uses him to proclaim those intentions to the world.

Elijah's approach

It's instructive to see Elijah's approach:

- ✚ He did *not* go to the people and tell them of the impending drought. He is not to be a political rabble-rouser, or form a political party.
- ✚ He went instead to the source of the problem, the king.

This sounds a lot like church discipline, doesn't it? Elijah is doing this God's way, in the hope of producing repentance.

Purpose and Direction

Having delivered his message, Elijah is instructed to retreat. Indeed, he is to go and hide in the wilderness! Why? The instruction is similar to Christ's instruction to flee persecution. We might look at this and think that a man who would later call down fire from heaven to fall on his enemies would have little fear of a king like Ahab. Perhaps God knew his man; Elijah is a man who calls down fire – but just afterwards will run for his life.

The Wilderness

Why, then, did God have him flee to the wilderness? Surely there would be cities in which Elijah could be safe. I think God was preparing him for greater things:

- ✚ First, in the wilderness he was safe from the temptation to intercede with God on behalf of a pleading people. This would harden him to do what needed to be done later.
- ✚ He also needed to learn God's providence. The ravens brought him no stockpile; he learned to live from one meal to the next.
- ✚ I suspect he also learned the difference between necessity and desire. The prophets of Baal probably dined in higher style than Elijah. Elijah was fed as befits a servant of God, not in luxury but in necessity.

This is the real point of this story. God is shaping the man Elijah to do great things, and he is doing so by adversity. It is interesting how this part of the story ends: the brook dries up. Elijah could probably see this coming, but note that the brook dries up *before* God tells him what to do. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof – and one test leads to another.

Hard Times, Small Things - (1 Kings 17:9-16)

Many of us are of the opinion that our faith is tested and shown in "great moments." That may be – but our faith is grown in hard times and small things.

(1 Ki 17:8-16 NIV) Then the word of the LORD came to him: {9} "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." {10} So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" {11} As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." {12} "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die." {13} Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. {14} For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land." {15} She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. {16} For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

Preliminary: Zarephath

Place names have a way of blurring in your mind when you read the Bible. I live in Southern California, so I'm used to Spanish place names. We tend to skip over names like Zarephath. Just where is this place?



Now you know. But if you know your geography of the time, you'll see that this city is outside Israel. Elijah is the first prophet to the Gentiles.

More than that, Zarephath is the home town of Jezebel – the queen who is the source of most of the trouble. I suspect that no one went looking for him there! But more important is this: it is God's way of showing us just exactly who is in control. His methods are different from ours:

- ✚ The evil would see Elijah as a fugitive, running from their power. God sends Elijah, his servant, as he pleases. By our weakness is his power shown; Ahab, for all his power, can't find the man. And he's in Jezebel's home town!

- ✚ It's a city of Gentiles. The super-righteous might be shocked by that; it's unclean! But by the unclean things God sustains his people, showing that all things are under his power.

How often we envy the evil, considering them powerful – when in fact they are so powerless that God can protect his children with even the weakest of methods.

The character of the widow

Widows of this time were a symbol of poverty, and a common one. It is normal for women to live longer than men; in this time women were often married to a man several years older than themselves. That almost guaranteed widowhood to a woman; the poor you will always have with you. But what do we know about this particular widow?

- ✚ She's gathering sticks. If you've ever cooked over a campfire, you know that sticks are kindling – not firewood. Whatever she's going to bake, it's not going to take long.

- ✚ She's rather a fatalist. She's accepted the fact that she and her son are going to die of starvation. She has given up hope.

- ✚ She is appointed by God to keep Elijah.

Now what kind of appointment is that? Surely God could find someone with a better attitude? But no; he chooses the small, the poor and the hopeless so that we might see his power. Her main qualification for the job is that she has no qualifications other than faith.

Faith in desperate times.

See how she greets Elijah: "As the Lord your God lives" – she is not Jewish, but she recognizes the living God. It's probably pretty obvious to her that Baal, the god of rain, thunder and good crops, has been of no help lately. The word has probably gotten around that it's Yahweh who's responsible for this drought. So this woman is probably not a worshiper of God. But she knows who he is.

She has faith – without hope. Not being Jewish, she has no access to the living God. Therefore she has no hope of remedy at his hands. But she knows; she believes. It is a pittance of faith, with neither hope nor joy – but it is enough. She takes the prophet at his word, and shares her last meal with him.

Faith tested in simple things

What does the prophet ask?

- ✚ A drink of water. It is a small request, and much honored, for it would be discourteous to refuse. Bread too – the simplest of foods, a bread without yeast made only of oil and flour – is so small.

- ✦ He asks it of a woman who has so little. Notice that he does not tell her that her supplies will not fail until the end of his request.

It is a small, simple thing – but consider the reward God gives. Our Lord tells us that to receive a prophet is to receive a prophet's reward¹, and she will receive the same food Elijah gets – and his company as well.

Elijah

It may not seem like it, but this meeting is a test for Elijah as well.

- ✦ He is tested by her lack of supply. God did not tell Elijah that he was going to work this miracle; he just said go. Can't you imagine that Elijah felt he had the wrong widow?
- ✦ He is tested by her lack of hope. Most of us are heavily influenced by the attitudes around us, and Elijah is no exception.

Elijah's message

Elijah answers the challenge to his faith.

- ✦ "Do not fear." Fear was the original reaction to sin in the Garden of Eden, for sin breaks the bond of trust with God.
- ✦ He challenges her to step out on faith, and give of her little. One is reminded of the widow's mites in the New Testament – a great faith, a great gift.
- ✦ He assures her that God will multiply what she has. As our Lord taught, (Luke 6:38 NRSV) give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

As Hudson Taylor put it, "God's work, done in God's way, will receive God's supply."

The unchanging nature of God

All this comes back to trust in God. If you trust him, you must know him.

- ✦ You must know his *infinite supply*. He is the God who created all things, and if you are doing his work he will (as Oswald Chambers put it), "tax the farthest star in the universe" to maintain you.
- ✦ You must know his *constant supply*. It is not to your benefit that he supply you with everything at once, for then you might grow content and forget Him. But he will supply your daily bread.
- ✦ You must know his will, for it conditions his supply. His will is that you should have faith. This widow did, and she met God-who-supplies three times a day. This is his love for us.

Lessons

All this happened a long time ago. What lessons are there for us today?

The world is a stage

Things are not always as they appear – nor as they will be tomorrow. That which seems sure today may be gone like so much dew.

¹ Matthew 10:41-42

- ✚ Does evil seem overwhelming? It often did to Elijah. But where did he hide? Jezebel's home town – and stayed there almost three years, undiscovered.
- ✚ Does it seem you're out of supplies? Not on God's watch you aren't. You will not hunger – neither will you need to build a barn to hold things.

Faith is tested in small things

The small things are the crucible from which God forges great believers. Most of us believe that if some great crisis of faith came around, we'd rise to the challenge. Therefore, we think, we needn't bother with the small stuff, since we can handle the big things.

It is not so. God prepares us for the big challenges of faith in the small ones. If we will not be diligent in answering the small challenges, we will not be able to answer the great ones. Faithful in little, faithful in much.

The providence of God

We see also the characteristics of God's providence.

- ✚ Little is rewarded with much. God's nature is to provide liberal reward for those who trust him with the little they have.
- ✚ His providence is always adequate, but it can never be stored up. Like the manna of the ancient Israelites, it's for today only. Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof; but also, sufficient to the day are the blessings of God.
- ✚ His providence is based upon his eternal nature: He is infinite, he is unchanging and he desires fellowship with us. Therefore there is no limit to his supply, either in amount or time, as long as we keep faith with him.

On Dying and Death - (1 Kings 17:17-24)

Perhaps it never occurred to you this way, but most Christians have adopted the world's attitude towards death. One symptom of this is that we seldom hear anything from the pulpit about death; people don't want to talk about it. This way of smoothing over death's existence changes nothing about death. It weakens us in the process. Perhaps we should see it from another time, so that we might see it more clearly.

(1 Ki 17:17-24 NIV) Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. {18} She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" {19} "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. {20} Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" {21} Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" {22} The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. {23} Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" {24} Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

How we deal with death

As much as we try to avoid the subject, we are not going to be successful in the long run. After all, we're going to die too, should the Lord delay sufficiently.

Our attitude

Our attitude towards death – as evidenced when we are actually dealing with it – is revealed in some ways by this widow.

- ✚ If there is plenty of warning – as the famine certainly gave her earlier – then we may greet it, eventually, with acceptance. We often see this when a loved one is dying of a lingering disease. We somehow prepare ourselves for it, and being prepared, we accept it.
- ✚ But sudden death is different. We're not prepared, and from deep inside we lash out at what we see as the unfairness of it.
- ✚ Often, this lashing out is done at God. We see him as the source of our problems in a variety of ways.

God is punishing....

The blame for our troubles: we are often quick to place it, and we are often wrong.

- ✚ This woman can see all around her the famine in the land, and it is no great leap to see God's punishment in it. This may have weighed on her mind.
- ✚ Because he was a child, perhaps she didn't think of her son's sins. But in adults, this is a common reaction: he died because he did this, that or the other.
- ✚ Her immediate reaction is simple: God is punishing me for my sins. It is a great punishment to lose an only child; perhaps she felt she deserved it. At least she suspected she did.

Why would she suspect such a thing? Because the presence of the godly brings out a sense of sin. The presence of the godly is no barrier to death, nor to hard times, but it does point out God's righteous character, by reflection. Often, this results in anger: if you were really so close to God, ...

Why does God do this?

- ✚ We know that all must die – that's been the case since Adam. What we're usually asking is, "Why now? Why my son?"
- ✚ One answer is that this is a testing of our faith. By his attempt to sacrifice Isaac God knew that Abraham had great faith; often, he tests us in the death of loved ones, to see if we will remain faithful to him.
- ✚ Once in a great while, however – as with Lazarus – there comes the time when the death is in fact done for the glory of God. Even in our mortal lives this can happen; there is virtue in a noble death.

What shall we do?

The Christian may know all this. Indeed, intellectually we may be entirely prepared for death, in ourselves and in those we love. But when the time comes, we may find ourselves at a loss for what to do.

Practical action whenever possible.

- ✚ "Give me your son," says Elijah. Most of us would not presume upon God this way, but Elijah is a prophet, a man who knows God's intentions. He takes direct action, immediately. We can do that in our care for the grieving.
- ✚ He carries him upstairs to his own bed. A hug and shared tears are one thing; making personal sacrifices to ease the pain is entirely another. The sign here may be just a casserole, but it's a good sign.
- ✚ The prophet cries to the Lord (and his actions then match his cry). We need to pray for those in grief, and then let our actions match our prayers.

When God gets the blame

Elijah's example here is priceless – for what he does not do. Most of us, when confronted with anger at God, try to defend him. Elijah does no such thing. He does not even answer her. He takes the issue to God in prayer. See how the man of God talks to his Lord:

- ✚ He shares her feelings of pain: "have you brought tragedy..." It is the heart cry, the feelings pouring out. We need this. When we do it on behalf of our friends, it says clearly: "I'm with you."
- ✚ He prays – he asks, seeks and knocks, you see three times his actions. This is no time for puny prayer.
- ✚ He takes physical action which matches his prayer. Prayer must give rise to action. In this instance we see a beautiful example of the principle of identification; it is as if it were my own son, Lord.

In all this we must have faith – faith that God can do anything. But we must not mistake faith for presumption that he will do anything on our whim.

The Power of the Resurrection

One reason we have so little effect is that we do not experience in our lives the power of the Resurrection. Listen to a voice from another time:

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death, they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead. Before the divine advent of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection. But that devil who of old wickedly exulted in death, now that the pains of death are loosed, he alone it is who remains truly dead. There is proof of this too; for men who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise it so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses of the Savior's resurrection from it. Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet it. So weak has death become that even women, who used to be taken in by it, mock at it now as a dead thing, robbed of all its strength. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot as he now is, the passers-by jeer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to Him deride it, scoffing and saying, "O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?"

(Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, V-27)

Do you see the point? In his day death was viewed very differently – for they knew the power of the Resurrection. It led them to accept the most horrible of deaths calmly, for their Lord's sake. Sometimes death is for the glory of God.

Using the power

Power of the Resurrection? We seldom use the phrase; perhaps we should pick it up more often. Of what use is this power?

- ✚ It is, Paul tells us, the power of God Himself, for by this power he raised Jesus from the dead.
- ✚ This power changes our view of death. Death is no longer death, but a door to the presence of God.
- ✚ This power also changes our view of life. Death does not end our lives, it begins our lives. This life is but a preliminary to the real thing.

Having said that, what should we do? We need to be witnesses to the power of the Resurrection.

Witness to the power

A witness testifies to what he knows. If you know the power of the Resurrection in your life, you will testify to it.

- ✚ You will testify in words. In your speech you will make it clear that death is not final. You will let the world know who holds the keys to Death and Hell.
- ✚ You will testify in action. If your attitude is different, then your actions should show it. Do you act like one who knows that Death is in the hands of one who loves you?

✚ Ultimately, should our Lord delay, you will testify about it in your own death. The manner in which you go to your grave will show those around you what you really know about the Lord of Life.

God's Undercover Agent - (1 Kings 18:1-16)

There is a movie myth about. Have you ever noticed that, in the movies, the secret agent is always good looking, well spoken and *highly noticeable*? James Bond practically screams "secret agent." It plays well in Hollywood, but not in real life. The successful secret agent is one who is never noticed.

Something like that shows up in our study today.

(1 Ki 18:1-16 NIV) After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." {2} So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria, {3} and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of his palace. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the LORD. {4} While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) {5} Ahab had said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals." {6} So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another. {7} As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?" {8} "Yes," he replied. "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'" {9} "What have I done wrong," asked Obadiah, "that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? {10} As surely as the LORD your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. {11} But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' {12} I don't know where the Spirit of the LORD may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshiped the LORD since my youth. {13} Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the LORD? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. {14} And now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' He will kill me!" {15} Elijah said, "As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today." {16} So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

Elijah

If anyone's character is like that of our movie secret agent, it is Elijah – and ill fitted to the part he is. Like most of the prophets, he's a reluctant one. But we see the source of his greatness in this passage:

- ✚ He has learned – after three years – to trust the Lord. At least, he trusts him a little.
- ✚ More importantly for the purposes of this story, he has learned to be obedient. Obedience is trust in action, the key virtue of the faith.
- ✚ It shows us one thing: courage, for the believer, comes from trust and obedience. Elijah is not naturally an extroverted hero – but he does trust and obey.

Ahab

Actors know that the role of the hero pays better – but the role of the villain is a better part. Why? Because anyone can imagine himself a hero – we all daydream it – but it takes skill to play the villain. Consider this man Ahab:

- ✦ He knows quite well why this drought has occurred. God has told him, through Elijah. Elijah called the shot; what more evidence do you need?

- ✦ So what does he do about it? He goes out looking for water. How characteristic of human beings! We know the problem, but we aren't willing to repent – so we try "something else." This is the spiritual equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

How like us! We feel the judgment of God; we have it proclaimed to us – and what happens???

We run off in another direction. We know who controls this universe, yet we hope that somehow our other direction will turn out to be the right one.

Ahab himself doesn't believe this. If he really believed that God did not cause this drought, why would he be seeking Elijah?

- ✦ Vengeance? But if Elijah didn't cause the drought, he's just a harmless nut case, right?

- ✦ Relief? But how could Elijah relieve what he didn't cause?

No moth ever went after the flame like Ahab after Elijah. He wants what Elijah has – true righteousness – but is not willing to change to obtain it. That about sums up the human condition.

Obadiah

There is a curious divergence of opinion about the main character of today's lesson. Obadiah is praised by commentators who are out of copyright – and condemned by current commentators. The older commentators take the Scripture at its word, that Obadiah was a righteous man. The newer ones have a few questions:

- ✦ Why didn't this righteous man go to Judah, like so many of the priests and Levites? If monks can hide in monasteries, why couldn't this man go where God was worshiped?

- ✦ But if he had to stay, why didn't he speak up? After all, he could have been an anonymous martyr, or perhaps even a famous figure. Surely this is a failing?

In short, the complaint is this: Why isn't Obadiah just like Elijah?

- ✦ He is. Both men are fearful of being killed.

- ✦ He is. Both men are faithful.

His main difference is this: Elijah was called to be a prophet. Obadiah was not.

Why, then, the modern criticism of this servant of God? Perhaps it is that our writers today have missed some things:

- ✦ The church is a body – not a collection of identical parts.

- ✦ God assigns tasks to his people; we don't pick them out.

- ✦ As he assigns tasks, we must change the way we behave to match those tasks.

Obadiah is a man with a different task. If you want a testimony to his righteousness, you need look no further than Ahab:

- ✚ Ahab knows this man is a righteous man – for he has him in charge of the palace.
 - ✚ He knows he is a loyal man – for he sends him out in another direction to search. This man is one who does not need to be watched.
- Obadiah, I submit, has learned three things of the practical side of faith.

In the world, not of the world.

Consider his relationship to the worldly authority: King Ahab. We tend in our day to think that “protest movement” is a good thing. Our Lord taught us – remember how Peter caught the fish with the coin in its mouth – that anything not prohibited to us is permitted. Even though we may think it stupid, we are to be obedient subjects to those in authority. Why?

- ✚ First, that we may not cause them to stumble. Why should we place an obstacle in their path to knowing Jesus?
- ✚ Second, because we know who’s really running this world. When we think the world’s rulers so important that we must protest, we forget who is really in charge here.

Why, then, don’t we behave like this? Why are we so fearful of our authorities, and what might happen in our land? It is just that: fear. We have forgotten that “anywhere with Jesus I can safely go.” If he places us in contact with the world, then in contact we should be.

Some of us should be ascetics, who withdraw from the world to the monastery, if only in our own minds. Some of us – but by no means all of us. Most of us are to be salt and light to the world.

Salt and light

Obadiah is a practical man. He hides the prophets of God in a cave. In so doing, he gives us an example of what our Lord was talking about when he told us to be salt and light.

- ✚ These prophets are probably those of the “school of Samuel.” In other words, they are those who are most likely given to preaching, not foretelling the future. By hiding them, Obadiah preserves the word of God (like salt).
- ✚ Salt is also a purifier. By hiding these men, Obadiah maintains the means by which the people might be brought to repentance and therefore purified.
- ✚ Light is that which shows the way. By his character and by hiding these men, Obadiah shows us how much he values that.

Interestingly, light is not the opposite of darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. Just as evil is the corruption of good. Obadiah shows us here that it is sufficient to be righteous – and it is also necessary.

The remnant

A consistent theme of the Old Testament, explicitly proclaimed in the New Testament, is that God purifies his people via “the remnant.” When times are evil, as they are now, it is the remnant that preserves the word of God. That word later breaks out. How, then, do we know if we are “in the remnant?”

- ✚ It is a “for us or against us” position. If you are compromising with the world, you are not in the remnant.
- ✚ It shows in your daily life – by what you are, by what you say, by what you do.

- ✦ You will feel it. There is often a sense – as Obadiah had here – of being “alone.” But do not fear; you are the apple of God’s eye.

The time will come when the remnant will break out, and God will have purified his church. In the meanwhile, we might profitably ask ourselves these questions:

- ✦ To what are you called? God has given each of us a calling. Most are not called to be preachers, teachers or prophets. But do not fear; all things can be done to the glory of God. Know what you are called for, and do it to God’s glory.
- ✦ Wherever it is that you are called, are you salt and light there? Are you the one who preserves what is good, true and righteous? Are you the one who exposes what hides in darkness?
- ✦ Are you for Him or against Him? In the remnant, or wondering what the remnant might be?

Between Two Opinions - 1 Kings 18:16-46

No scene in the Bible more clearly shows a confrontation between good and evil as this. As such, it has much to say for modern times. Let's see the ancient version of the story first:

(1 Ki 18:16-46 NIV) So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. {17} When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" {18} "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. {19} Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." {20} So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. {21} Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. {22} Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. {23} Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. {24} Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire--he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." {25} Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." {26} So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. {27} At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." {28} So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. {29} Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. {30} Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. {31} Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." {32} With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. {33} He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." {34} "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. {35} The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. {36} At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. {37} Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." {38} Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. {39} When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!" {40} Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. {41} And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain."

{42} So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. {43} "Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." {44} The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" {45} Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. {46} The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

Ahab Meets Elijah

Ahab is a remarkably modern man – at least in his reaction to meeting someone who is righteous. Trace the interaction here and see if you don't hear the same thing going on in the world around you:

- ✚ His first reaction is to state – quite clearly – that this is all the fault of the righteous man. After all, if you hadn't pointed out my sin, and God's judgment of it, I wouldn't be in this fix. It reminds me so much of the candidate for Surgeon General who announced that right wing fundamentalists were responsible for the AIDS epidemic. After all, if they weren't so judgmental, we'd have had lots more money for research, and we'd have fixed it by now.²
- ✚ The man of God reacts calmly – with the facts. Had he been here in our day, he might have pointed out that spending on AIDS (per patient) was triple that of spending on cancer.
- ✚ At the last, Ahab never acknowledges that Elijah is right – but he does what he is told. This is the power of the Spirit, to convict the world of sin and judgment.

Contemporary Parallel

In the Los Angeles Times for Friday, January 26, 2001, there is an article by Lynn Smith entitled, "In France, Adultery Has a Certain Air of Je Ne Sais Quoi." (The error in the French is in the original). Subtitled, "Will puritanical, Victorian America ever be continentally blasé about cheating?", the article brings out (as fact) four commonly held opinions about adultery:

- ✚ First, that adultery is a "liberating concept." It is the oldest of lies, dating from the Garden.
- ✚ Second, that marital fidelity is to be laughed at. The faithful husband is stupid; the faithless wife the heroine of the play – and he is to be ridiculed for the fool he is.
- ✚ Third, that anyone who defends marital fidelity is "obviously" a hypocrite.
- ✚ Finally, that – though we have come a long way – we still have a long way to go before our attitude towards adultery is "correct." What this country needs is more marital infidelity.

I bring this to your attention not because I believe this tripe – but because it so cutely summarizes what's wrong with our attitude. It says quite clearly that the wife who is abandoned by her husband in favor of his next cute young thing – while she gets the care of the children – just has the wrong attitude. She should welcome this. Right.

What is amazing about this article is that so many Christians – including those wives just mentioned – so often take exactly the same point of view. How often I have heard from Christians such things as:

² Written in 2001. IIRC the incident took place in 1993.

- ✚ “I have a right to happiness, and I had to seize the opportunity when she came along.”
- ✚ “Something so beautiful as sex can’t be wrong.”
- ✚ “What did she expect? She’s no babe any more.”

God sees this and will not be silent on the subject. We shall see, through the lens of Mount Carmel, just how God deals with this.

God’s Indictment

It is important to understand that God’s accusation is against his own people. Those who say “In God We Trust” had very much better do so. Hear God’s indictment here:

- ✚ First, that you waver between two opinions. Either God or the world is right; both can’t be. It is foolish to try to please both – because it won’t work.
- ✚ Next – like the drought here – that God has sent upon you “natural” disaster as his warning. The epidemic of teenage, unwed pregnancies; the horror of abortion; the divorce rate which is higher in the church than in the world; the spread of sexual diseases – all these are related to our attitudes. Marital fidelity would wipe out all these plagues.
- ✚ Finally, that his case against us is so solid, so sure, that He need send but one man against the nattering of the crowd.

The Confrontation

Why are the prophets of Baal so confident here? Why did they agree to such a test against the man who prophesied the drought?

- ✚ First, all the external factors are in their favor. They outnumber the man 450 to one. Just as today, politically correct thinkers dominate our educational and journalistic institutions – and therefore need pay no heed to what some preacher says. He’ll never make it into the paper anyway.
- ✚ Next, they are probably sincere. And it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you’re sincere, does it Linus? Since they’re just as sincere as Elijah; outnumber him - and especially because all truth is relative – surely their view of reality will prevail. Right? I’m sure they had an explanation for the drought, just as today’s thinkers can explain our sexual epidemics (must be those darned right wing fundamentalists again).
- ✚ Finally, we must remember that Satan can work miracles – if God permits it. They’ve probably seen some. But this is how God delivers judgment. When he decides that judgment is at hand, he stops preventing the foul consequences of our actions. When adultery was sin in this nation, the sinners had consequences. When adultery became politically correct, the nation had consequences. God permits Satan to strut to a point – and if we fall for his lies, the consequences come.

The price of service to the Devil

I live across the street from a high school. Each morning I see students coming to school; many dressed in symbols of witchcraft. Listen to the music; see the frantic state of those who are listening to it. Look at the drugs used to induce it; see the body piercings. You’re looking at the prophets of Baal – in today’s culture. The price of service to the devil is very high.

The character of God’s answers

God’s answers are shown here, and they are significant in his character:

- ✚ God answers *immediately* upon the prayer of his chosen leader. His purpose cannot be delayed by Satan.
- ✚ God answers at the time he appoints – in this instance, the evening sacrifice.
- ✚ God answers – but his answer comes to his servants, not to the world. The world can only look on. It will be interesting to see the appointed time.

Intolerance

To the horror of modern advocates of tolerance, Elijah now orders these false prophets killed – as the Law of Moses demands. Why is such intolerance demanded?

- ✚ It is first a reaction to the holiness of God. Holiness carries the idea of being kept separate; God can have no agreement with Satan.
- ✚ Next, so that nothing might come between God and his people. God must come first with all of us, or we are not his.
- ✚ Finally – environmentalists to the contrary notwithstanding – some vermin should be totally exterminated. The man who wipes out smallpox is a hero, not a villain.

As Calvin Coolidge is reputed to have said, “Sometimes being open minded is just being too lazy to make up your mind.” Our relation with the Holy God demands that we make up our minds.

Go Again

Just so Elijah carries the point home with himself, God instructs him to get Ahab moving – so he won’t get stuck in the traffic jam because of the rain. This comes – literally – out of a clear blue sky. Why does God arrange this?

- ✚ After the triumph, the test. Satan likes to attack right after we’ve had some sort of spiritual triumph.
- ✚ Elijah meets the test – he sends the man to see seven times. Seven is the number of God’s completeness, signifying complete faith.
- ✚ But ask yourself: how did that servant feel, looking for something that was plainly not there? Elijah’s confidence kept him going back.

Challenges for us

- ✚ Are we double minded? Do we want a “continental” attitude towards sex for ourselves (but not, of course, for our spouses)? Do we want to have it both ways?
- ✚ Are we intolerably tolerant?
- ✚ Do we have the faith to “look again?”

It is a time of testing, of judgment. We should at least know that the trial is in progress.

Spiritual Undulation - 1 Kings 19

We come now to the great curiosity of Elijah's life: his flight from Jezebel. Many have wondered how a man who saw fire fall from the heavens at his command – and had the courage to stand next to the altar as it did – could now run at such a threat. Perhaps it is as simple as C. S. Lewis makes it in his *Screwtape Letters*: it is the law of Undulation. After the bad times come the good; after the good times come the bad; we must be prepared to deal with both.

(1 Ki 19 NIV) Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. {2} So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." {3} Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, {4} while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. 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." {5} Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." {6} He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. {7} The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." {8} So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. {9} There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" {10} 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." {11} The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. {12} After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. {13} When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" {14} 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." {15} The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. {16} Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. {17} Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. {18} Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." {19} So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. {20} Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" {21} So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

Elijah and Jezebel

The conflict between these two is dramatic, and raises interesting questions.

Why wasn't Jezebel convinced?

It just might have occurred to Ahab to mention that fire fell from the sky. That, to most of us, would have been convincing. But we must remember that powerful events often fail to impress evil minds:

- ✚ Great disasters are used of God to bring people back to him. But even then there are those who will not listen. We are in the midst of an epidemic of AIDS; the disease is spread entirely by sexual activity outside of Godly marriage. Do you hear anyone listening?
- ✚ The same can be said of great religious fervor – though we do not see this in our time. In the age of great revivals, there are always some who are proud to be those who will not listen.
- ✚ Perhaps such people – people of determined will, like Jezebel and like Elijah – can only be reached by the still small voice.

Why did she send a message – instead of an assassin?

OK, if you're going to do the job, why do you send a Hallmark card first?

- ✚ Some have suggested that she feared the people. If so, the assassin would have been her first thought – do it, do it quickly, and let people understand just who is ruler here.
- ✚ Perhaps it was rage. Assassination is rather cold-blooded. Maybe she wanted to vent a little first.
- ✚ Most likely, however, it is the desire to show who is in control – to call the shots, so to speak. That's the central issue in this story: who's in charge? God, or Jezebel?

Why did Elijah flee?

Now, this is a man who has just called down fire from heaven. Our first thought might be that he would just laugh at her. But he didn't. Why?

- ✚ First, despite recent events, he is aware that he is just a man, cognizant of his own weaknesses.
- ✚ More importantly, there is a natural process in which "highs" are followed by "lows." He's had a tremendous high. Satan now moves in to attack during the following low.

The flight

In his run through the desert we can see two things which give us great hope in God:

- ✚ First, God does *not* answer his prayer. We recall that he is the ultimate man of faith, the exemplar in the New Testament – and God says no. He will not take his life. When God says no, it usually means he has a better idea.
- ✚ Next, we see that God's supply will be made available for God's purposes – even miraculously.

The Slough of Despond

We come now to the moments of self-pity, of despondency.

Elijah's complaint

Elijah makes his complaint in three statements:

- ✦ First, that he's done a good job. He has, and God will reward that – but right now he's trying to get God to admit that God is obligated. God isn't.
- ✦ Next, he says, the results have been zero. The logical conclusion is that I've been wasting my time.
- ✦ And as if that wasn't bad enough, they're after my hide – the results are worse than zero.
Sounds pretty logical to us, doesn't it? Have you heard it before?

God's answer

It is worth noting that God – it seems to be a habit with him – does not answer Elijah's complaints point by point. God, not Elijah, is setting the agenda in this meeting.

- ✦ By the power displayed, he reminds Elijah that God is still God – and still sovereign. He will prevail.
- ✦ He makes it clear that he still has things for Elijah to do. There is no point in complaining; you have work to do.
- ✦ But – take heart, Christian – God controls the future. The battle you care so much about, and are so disheartened over, belongs to the Lord. It will go on after you leave, and it will go as God commands it.

How God deals with depression and failure

All of us will at one time or another face this. God deals with it in three ways:

- ✦ By the show of his power – so that we might remember who is God.
- ✦ By supplying our needs – so that we might remember that He cares for us.
- ✦ By gentle rebuke – so that we might be corrected in love.

Lessons for the servant of God

I submit the following for the consideration of the servants of God:

God does not change

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever – and therefore we can count on Him.

- ✦ He will continue to provide for us, physically and spiritually.
- ✦ He will continue to love us and care for us, both in this life and in the one to come.
- ✦ But – he will do it in his sovereign way; not necessarily the way we imagine is best.

God will change you – if you allow it

- ✦ You must “come out of the cave.” If you hide in Elijah's cave, God will challenge you to come out – but you must make the trip if he is to have his way with you.
- ✦ When God speaks, it is personal. He called Elijah by name. He will call us by name. That means that he will speak to our personal actions and attitudes by his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then will move in us to do his will.

God's will must be done

- ✦ Whether in the roar of power or the stillness of his voice, God's will prevails.
- ✦ Even those who are not believers – consider the list of those anointed by Elijah – will be used by God for his purposes.
- ✦ At the end, God will raise up an Elisha to carry on the work. His work does not depend upon the lengths of our lives, nor our strength, nor our courage.

That last is good news to Elijah, for he is one who loves the work he has been given. If you truly love the work God has given you, then he will give you the joy of knowing that someone else will carry it on.

The Spread of Sin - 1 Kings 21

One of the reasons the story of Elijah fascinates us is found in the characters opposite him – in this instance, Ahab.

(1 Ki 21 NIV) Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. {2} Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." {3} But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." {4} So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. {5} His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?" {6} He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" {7} Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." {8} So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. {9} In those letters she wrote: "Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. {10} But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death." {11} So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. {12} They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. {13} Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. {14} Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned and is dead." {15} As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." {16} When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard. {17} Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: {18} "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. {19} Say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood--yes, yours!'" {20} Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!" "I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. {21} 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel--slave or free. {22} I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.' {23} "And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.' {24} "Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country." {25} (There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. {26} He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.) {27} When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. {28} Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: {29} "Have

you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."

Preliminary

We must understand who's being reasonable and righteous here. The idea that Naboth could not sell his land – it being the inheritance of his fathers – is commanded in the Old Testament. God viewed the Israelites as tenants on his land, and they were not privileged to sell it permanently. Ahab certainly would have known this. So what appears to us as an unreasonable, stubborn reaction is actually righteous obedience to God's law.

Times change. In my own lifetime I have been ridiculed – by people whom I thought knew me well enough – for refusing an offer of adultery. The blonde was cute; we were at a conference far from home; all were surprised at not only my refusal but my argument. Perhaps Ahab felt the same way.

Ahab – behaving like a King?

If there is any word which comes to mind about Ahab's behavior in the early part of this story, it is "childish." He sees something; he wants it. He makes what he thinks is a fair offer, and is refused. So he goes home to sulk. It is childish.

It is also a selfish attitude. The man is, after all, a king. We might expect some dignity, but he has been deprived of what he wants. He thinks of no one but himself. In this we see the root of the evil – selfishness.

Evil comes of it – in the person of Jezebel. She appeals to the one "push button" in Ahab's character which is sure to work: pride. His pride has been injured, and that makes him easy to manipulate.

Expectations

Ahab's argument to the contrary is worth examining:

- ✚ First, he made a reasonable financial offer. He's not trying to steal the man's vineyard; he's offering him a good deal on it. This is true – but see how it sets Ahab's expectations.
- ✚ He's the king, and entitled to a little respect – indeed, even some fear. The man should have had sense enough to know that a king's suggestion – especially when so fair – is a subject's command. Again, this is common – and sets Ahab's expectations.

In both instances, Ahab has developed expectations – and we will see that handling our expectations is key to handling sin. Sometimes our expectations mutate into our "rights" – and then Satan is given a powerful grip upon us.

Our expectations – Satan's handle

What do we do when our expectations are not met?

- ✚ Do we sulk like Ahab, and expect other people to take care of the problem for us? Some of us are good at manipulating people this way.
- ✚ Or do we become wrathful, rising up in "righteous anger?" Many a marriage comes apart when a husband expects something which his wife cannot deliver – and he strikes out at her.

- ✚ Do we scheme for our expectations – after all, we have a right to happiness, right? Do we use our expectations as justification for our means?

None of these are acceptable. Perhaps we should consider the alternative: changing our expectations. Do you see how desire gives birth to sin? Is it any wonder our Lord commanded the Israelites, “Thou shalt not covet?”

The Spread of Sin

It is an important lesson – how sin creeps in. Let’s start with Jezebel:

- ✚ She begins by using the king’s seal to send letters. It was probably a soft suggestion – “I’ll take care of it for you, honey, just let me borrow your seal ring.” He knew she was up to no good; but as long as he didn’t know exactly what evil – he’s off the hook, right?
- ✚ It’s not sufficient for the town officials to stone Naboth; they have to be brought into the action. They have to find the false witnesses and arrange the whole thing. Why? No whistle blowers will come from that bunch!
- ✚ To make the whole thing look even more whitewashed, she has them do it religiously. “Proclaim a fast!” Often used as a way of bringing the people to repentance, the people would assume that their elders had indeed found the hidden culprit.

Aftermath

Naboth’s death was marked with a simple epitaph; no incriminating documents will be found here. How quick we are to forget! They didn’t even know why she wanted Naboth dead, nor did they care. We often feel that “forget” is as good as “repent.”

Ahab confirms the crime, accepting his guilt therein. He had a chance to reject it; several, I suspect. Each time he “went along,” he got in deeper.

How we deceive ourselves! No doubt all was easy in the kingdom – the cover up complete, the crime undiscovered, the citizenry happy and the royal cook pleased with the new vegetable garden – until Elijah showed up.

Our ways, God’s ways.

It’s instructive to compare our ways and His:

- ✚ We are temporary. We forget a sin, and think that the same as repentance. He is eternal; he does not forget the sin. We recognize the justice of this; Byron de la Beckwith³ would be a good example.
- ✚ We consider the dead to be gone. Those who espouse their cause are “raking up old wounds. Let sleeping dogs lie.” But God is the God of the Living – and those who are alive in Him will be heard by Him.
- ✚ Because we do not seek repentance, when the crime is found out, we seek vengeance. But God always seeks our repentance; in His love, He seeks our return to Him.

³ The man who assassinated civil rights worker Medgar Evers.

Accusation, Repentance – and Sentence Delayed

The Accusation

God brings charges against Ahab – as he will against us, as well:

- ✦ First, that despite the spreading web of the sin, the fault is with Ahab. He gave birth to it; his guilt is not diminished by the participation of others.
- ✦ Next, that he has “sold himself” to do evil. The word is interesting. It can mean sold in the usual market sense; it also is used of those who are sold into slavery – or marriage! It carries with it the sense that his honesty and integrity have been bartered away – for real estate.
- ✦ Finally, God has punished this before – and he will do it again. You should have known that he would not be inactive forever. When the sin blossomed, God pruned it.

The nature of repentance

Ahab is a marvel. Just when you think him beyond all hope, he repents. We can learn from his repentance:

- ✦ His repentance is rooted in humility – he has humbled himself before the Lord. This is just; for humility comes of comparing ourselves with Almighty God.
- ✦ His repentance is neither private nor silent – but done in action. From his actions you may conclude that he means it.
- ✦ Repentance, ultimately, is an overcoming of self. It cannot restore Naboth; it cannot undo the past – but it can remove the barrier of sin between us and God.

God’s reprieve

God then spares this man, bringing upon his son the disasters prophesied. As there is no atonement – either from the Cross or Ahab – there is no forgiveness. But consider: if God takes a man like this, and for his repentance spares him in his lifetime – how much more will he forgive the repentant sinner of our day who looks to the Cross for his atonement?

Summary

I leave you with three thoughts:

- ✦ Consider your expectations well, for out of them comes frustrated desire and covetousness. Better to change your expectations than to scheme to get them.
- ✦ Remember that the spread of sin is bit by bit. Ahab would have been better off to have cut this vine before it consumed him.
- ✦ But in all things, remember that God is merciful – always desiring the true repentance of sinners.

A Season of Repentance - 2 Kings 1

It is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life that our troubles are often the path of our salvation. As long as things are going smoothly, we think we have no reason to repent and seek salvation. But when troubles arise, we are reminded that we are mortal; we begin to ask eternal questions, and seek eternal answers. Sometimes God sends those very troubles to provoke us into such self-examination.

How we react, however, is up to us. Some of us are swift to repent; others slow; some stand up and proclaim themselves captains of their fate – and their pride swallows them whole. Here is such a man in Ahab's son, Ahaziah.

(2 Ki 1 NIV) After Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel. {2} Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, "Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury." {3} But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, "Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?'" {4} Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'" So Elijah went. {5} When the messengers returned to the king, he asked them, "Why have you come back?" {6} "A man came to meet us," they replied. "And he said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, 'This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'" {7} The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" {8} They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite." {9} Then he sent to Elijah a captain with his company of fifty men. The captain went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, "Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'" {10} Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. {11} At this the king sent to Elijah another captain with his fifty men. The captain said to him, "Man of God, this is what the king says, 'Come down at once!'" {12} "If I am a man of God," Elijah replied, "may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men. {13} So the king sent a third captain with his fifty men. This third captain went up and fell on his knees before Elijah. "Man of God," he begged, "please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! {14} See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!" {15} The angel of the LORD said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. {16} He told the king, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because you have done this, you will never leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!" {17} So he died, according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. Because Ahaziah had no son, Joram succeeded him as king in the second year of Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah. {18} As for all the other events of Ahaziah's reign, and what he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

You might wonder how Ahaziah thought this Baal-Zebub would be of any assistance to him. In the Philistine theology, this god was “god of the flies” – and presumed to be responsible for healing! Perhaps they reasoned that flies being attracted to an open wound had something to do with it.

God’s Attitude Towards Sin

If we are to make sense of this passage, we must go back to one of the essentials of the faith: God’s attitude towards sin (and our response to it).

Intolerance

In our day, this business of fire coming down from heaven seems unbelievable – not just because we are troubled by miracles, but because we can’t see how a kind and loving God would roast 51 people at a time. If God made a habit of this, it’s difficult to see how much of the planet would be left unburned. The modern view is that God the nice guy would be “tolerant.”

We have forgotten something: the holiness of God. He is perfect, unlike us. In our imperfections we are well advised not to be judgmental of the imperfections of others. It’s a very risky business for us. God will use our standard of judgment on us, which is a good reason to be very forgiving. But that’s because we are imperfect people who will someday stand before a perfect God. He is holy and righteous, and he alone has the right to consume with fire from heaven. We abhor the judge with dirty hands; we should fear the Judge with clean ones.

How difficult it must be for God to forgive! Indeed, difficult it is – for his forgiveness was purchased for us at the Cross. The price was the life of his only begotten Son, Jesus. Grace is not cheap.

Moral authority

Most of us would like to plead ignorance to God’s moral authority – but we can’t. We have a good example of that here. Elijah stops the messengers and sends them back to the king. Why didn’t they just ignore him? After all, he has nothing to do with this “god of the flies.” The reason is simple: moral authority. Ahaziah knew it too; all he had to do was ask for a description of the man, and he understood perfectly. He knew the lion by his claw – and so do we.

Even today, a man of moral authority stands out. He does not have to make his voice heard over the roar; people simply know that this man carries with him moral authority. This can be seen in the negative sense in our attitude towards Christian leaders who sin; we hold them more guilty, because they proclaimed the Word.

God opposes the proud

There is a great truth shown in this passage: God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Throughout Christ’s ministry the sinners heard him gladly, but the self-righteous hated him. Why? The sinners knew what they were. If you’re a prostitute, it’s a little hard not to notice, for example. You know it’s wrong, but you find a way to justify it to yourself. But when Christ comes, you can throw away the weak support of self-justification and stand instead on the solid rock. To do that, you must humble yourself and admit who you really are.

But if you have pride, you are in what C. S. Lewis called the “complete anti-God state of mind.” As long as you are proud, your own self-justification will look stronger than anything God can show you. You will not change; you will not become humble. And what can God do about that?

A season of repentance

Humility

“Humble” is not a favored word these days. No one likes to be thought of as humble; our society considers pride a virtue, not a fault. God, however, calls us to be humble; why then do Christians not respond to Him?

- ✚ Many of us would – if we could do it in secret. As long as we could “save face” in society, we’d be willing to do any amount of repentance in secret. But isn’t this a false repentance? A false humility? This is “wannabe” humility, not the real thing. Real humility results in action.
- ✚ One reason we are not good at it: we don’t practice it. We do not intentionally humble ourselves. We say, “I’ll do it when the time comes” – not thinking that doing it now makes “the time” much easier. You play like you practice.
- ✚ Worse yet, we have a lot of practice at using every other means of dealing with our sins. God is our last resort when He should be our first.

God gives opportunity

See how God responds to this. It’s really our problem, not his, but in his love for us he gives us occasion to humble ourselves. He does that with Ahaziah here. The man has a serious injury; his thoughts turn to one thing: “will I live?” By providing him this occasion God has brought the man to asking eternal questions. Unfortunately, he’s looking for answers in the wrong place.

We often think we can avoid these circumstances. Like Ahaziah, we think we’re safe in our own homes. We design them to be our fortresses – both physically and spiritually. We think that, somehow, here is a place where we can’t be touched. We so often seek this security. It’s available – but not where we’re looking.

One way or another, God will provoke us by circumstance. Ahaziah stayed home when Moab rebelled. After all, his father died in battle; why risk it for the sake of some rebellious vassal? So God provided him with an “accident” instead.

Season – long or short?

The nasty question is this: just how long will God continue to provide these “accidents?” As one writer put it, “Some sinners live long, to aggravate their judgment. Others die soon, to hasten it.” We need to remember that – barring the Lord’s return – we are all appointed to die.

God’s love for man prevents him from forcing himself upon us. Therefore, he arranges our circumstances providentially so that we are provoked into turning to him.

The sure grace of God

If we do turn to him, his grace is sure. He will forgive. But let us not take that grace lightly!

The price of grace

We must remember that forgiveness is done at the expense of the forgiver. In this lesson we have paid most attention to the sinner. We need to remember that God is the one who pays.

God's forgiveness must match his holiness, for He is perfect in all things. His holiness is perfect; so is his forgiveness. His forgiveness, therefore, is complete forgiveness. What a blessing to know this! Not just a part of what I have done, but all – forgiven.

Forgiven – but at a price. The price of forgiveness for me may be very painful as I forgive others. The price of God's forgiveness is the Cross, which cost the very life of his son, Jesus.

Now – or later

Most of us know this. The temptation is, "later." But is later better?

- ✚ Does sin get better or worse with time? Does it grow and fester, or does it go away?
- ✚ If it does go away, does that mean that "our forgetfulness" equals "his forgiveness?" Or does the eternal God still remember what we have forgotten?
- ✚ Finally, do you really have "later" at your command? Are you really so sure of tomorrow? Or are you like the man who jumped off the building: each floor on the way down people heard him repeating, "so far, so good!"

All of us need it

Perhaps the most difficult thing for "good Christians" to realize is that they too are in need of repentance. Let me share with you a story:

A large prosperous downtown church had three mission churches under its care that it had started. On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches came to the city church for a combined Communion service. In those mission churches, which were located in the slums of the city, were some outstanding cases of conversions - thieves, burglars, and so on - but all knelt side by side at the Communion rail. On one such occasion the pastor saw a former burglar kneeling beside a judge of the Supreme Court of England - the judge who had sent him to jail where he had served seven years. After his release this burglar had been converted and become a Christian worker. Yet, as they knelt there, the judge and the former convict, neither one seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?" The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace." Then the judge said "But to who do you refer?" And the pastor said, "Why, to the conversion of that convict." The judge said, "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself." The pastor, surprised, replied: "You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand." "Yes," the judge replied, "It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help. But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take

Communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I had sent to prison.

A season of repentance

In the Gospels it is recorded that Jesus' disciples once asked if He wanted them to call down fire from heaven.⁴ Jesus rebuked them; he came to seek and save the lost, not to destroy. But each of us faces death, we know not when. Even if we don't, it is because our Lord comes again – to judge the living and the dead. None of us is guaranteed tomorrow. Now is our season of repentance.

Time is short; eternity is long. Hell is hot – but Jesus saves.

⁴ Luke 9:54

Ascension - 2 Kings 2:1-18

Elijah is about to leave the planet – literally. In this unusual transition we can learn much – about those we teach, about the journey of life, and the life to come.

(2 Ki 2:1-18 NIV) When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. {2} Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. {3} The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it." {4} Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. {5} The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it." {6} Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. {7} Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. {8} Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. {9} When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. {10} "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours--otherwise not." {11} As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. {12} Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. {13} He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. {14} Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. {15} The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. {16} "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley." "No," Elisha replied, "do not send them." {17} But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. {18} When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Preparing Your Elisha

One of our favorite sayings concerning our children has been this: “We are not raising chickens for Colonel Sanders. We are raising eagles to fly.” The rest of the world, it seems, prefers chickens. We need to compare the two views:

- ✚ The world holds that the purpose of education is to teach our children the grasp of certain skills and facts. In particular, those skills and facts which tend to be most profitable monetarily are preferred. The reason you learn to read and write is so that you can get a better job.
- ✚ The Christian view is quite different. In the Christian view your education is to make you more like Christ. You are to acquire wisdom in preference to knowledge. Knowledge – like learning to read – is a tool for acquiring wisdom.

The world’s view is predicated upon our “new philosophy.” As there is no such thing as “right and wrong” to guide us, there remains only the principle of pleasure. The grind of education has been reduced to delayed gratification.

Contrast the older, Christian view. King William of England confided his son to the Duke of Marlborough as tutor. “Teach him to be but what you are,” said the king, “and I shall be content.” Worldly education stays on the temporal – what this can do for you now, or in the near future. Christian education stays on the eternal – what will you become forever?

So it is not surprising, then, that the prophet of God raises up his successor in ways which might surprise us.

Tension

As the time comes for the student or disciple to “graduate,” there arises a certain normal tension between the teacher and the student. We see it in this story; it is the transition from student to leader in Elisha.

- ✚ We must remember that authority has as its purpose the benefit of those in submission. This is not just the pouring of facts into the students head, however.
- ✚ When those in submission are about to become those in authority, there must be a time when the new authority asserts itself. This must be handled with grace.

We see these things here. Elijah is about to be greatly honored by God; he would have it done privately, in accordance with the humility he has taught. Elisha would see the glory of God revealed – in accordance with the desire Elijah has planted in his heart.

This gives rise to the tension, and the test. Elijah tells him to stay, three times. Elisha goes with him, three times. He’s ready for the test.

Signs of success

How do you know that you’ve succeeded in raising up a disciple, and not just a note-taker?

- ✚ See the wisdom in what Elisha asks for! He knows the value of the Spirit, and this above all else he prizes.

✚ He also asks for a double portion. This is the right of the first born, and here we see why. Elisha is asking for more of the Spirit – so that he might surpass Elijah in good things.

We know this with our children. Do we not want them to value the things we value? Are we not pleased when they rise higher than we could?

Symbolic: Our life, death and entrance into heaven

It is the most common symbolic interpretation of “crossing the Jordan” – the transition from life into death. We can examine this in some detail, with profit (pun intended).

Life: preparing others to carry on

Do you notice the “company of the prophets” spoken of here? Elijah has evidently been the teacher of these companies.

✚ First, we must teach others as we can. Even if we are not among the great, we must do what we can to bring others along. Elijah spent time with his Elisha – but also with these hundred other anonymous souls.

✚ Note that there is more than one company – we must not restrict ourselves, for example, to our own families. We must share with others too.

It’s interesting to note that Elisha’s life contrasts favorably with Elijah. Where Elijah walked in doubt, Elisha walked in confidence. He indeed inherited the double portion. I suspect some of us might have been jealous in that situation – the man who succeeds me will be twice as successful as I am? Not if I can help it! But isn’t that what we should aim at, in God’s kingdom? To God be the glory, not ourselves.

At the end of this life we need to see something important: Elijah went willingly to meet his Lord. Some of us are very reluctant to do that. One reason: we don’t really believe in life after death, and we don’t really believe in the resurrection of the dead. But our lack of faith does not change the promise of God.

Another reason might be this: no matter what good we have done, we all are sinners. When you come to the end of your life, you may look back and think, “I’m not worthy.” But was Elijah?

Why Elijah?

It’s a fair question. We know very little about Enoch, who was also taken up in similar manner. But we know a lot about, for example, Moses. David would have been a good candidate. Elisha would also. What about Isaiah or Ezekiel? Why this man?

✚ So that we will understand that God does the choosing. He will have mercy upon those he chooses.

✚ He has chosen us. We are the recipients of grace, through Christ. It is not on our merits we make it, but by his blood.

We’re not worthy. He is worthy, and that’s what counts.

Splitting the river

It is a sign of God’s power and favor resting upon someone – the ability to work a mighty miracle. Remember Moses dividing the sea, Joshua sending the Ark of the Covenant through the Jordan! So when Elisha does it, it is a sign that the power formerly in Elijah is now with him.

- ✦ But with power comes responsibility. No authority comes in the kingdom without power; none comes without responsibility either. So Elisha has work to do – the same work Elijah did.
- ✦ “Where is the God of Elijah?” he asks. The question is rhetorical; it is to show that God has not left at all. The faces change; the kingdom continues.

There is a lesson for us in this regarding our deaths. Many of us think that if our dreams cannot be accomplished in our lifetimes, then they cannot be accomplished. We must remember that the kingdom of God is eternal.

Most of us care little for our dreams when death approaches – we cling to life. But consider what waits: to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. In whose hands would you rather be? Have you forgotten the resurrection to come?

Symbolic: the resurrection to come

In the ascension of Elijah we can see forerunners of Christ’s ascension:

- ✦ He ascends bodily - the prophets don’t think so. They search for his body, but God teaches us here that body and soul belong together. This union will be restored at the resurrection of the dead.
- ✦ It is an event which shows the glory of God – as will our resurrection.
- ✦ It is the “end of the road” for Elijah – like our deaths. But just as this ascension was foretold to the prophets, so the return of Christ is told to us.

There are contrasts, too: Christ ascended *after* death. Why the difference?

- ✦ Obviously, his death was necessary for the atonement. It gave victory over the grave.
- ✦ Also, it gave us a clear picture that we too will be with our Father after death.
- ✦ And, like Elisha, the church was told it would do greater things – but only after our Lord ascended.

The sure and certain hope

We all must face our “River Jordan.” But when we do, let us face it reminded of what we have seen here:

- ✦ The resurrection of the dead – promised from the time of Job – is our sure and certain hope.
- ✦ It is guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus – the central fact of the faith.
- ✦ We will rise not as disembodied spirits – ghosts – but rather as human beings – body and soul united in a new kind of body.

All this is certain for those who belong to Christ. As he told us, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Therefore, let us look to Him as we approach our deaths; there is no other way.