

Lecture 4

Elijah: Famine, Faith, Fidelity, Follower

1 Kings 17:1-19:21

"People will forget what you said, or they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

That's true, isn't it? Seems like I've been on both sides of that statement. I've been guilty of inflicting hurt on others, however unintentional, and, in turn have felt the emotional pain of my own hurt feelings and strained relationships.

Our memory verse Psalm 118:6 said, "The Lord is with me, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" Eternally . . . nothing. I am saved. I am a child of God. Emotionally, however, is another story. People can evoke all the negative reactions or positive emotions within us. They can be encouragers or discouragers . . . the sting of rebuke or the pat on the back . . . the critic or the loving/accepting/comforting friend. We need them both for our spiritual growth.

How did the people in our lesson today feel about Elijah?

- Ahab and Jezebel would never forget their feelings of being threatened and the desire for revenge that Elijah would provoke in them.

- The widow of Zerepath would come to feel joy and gratitude to God that, through the presence of Elijah in her home, she had daily food and the restoration of her dead son.
- Obadiah felt relief when Elijah kept his word and appeared to King Ahab. Now he could continue his godly work of providing for the hidden prophets of God.
- The prophets of Baal felt the sting of humiliation and the pain of death as their god remained silent and powerless.
- Elisha felt the call of God as Elijah's cloak fell around his shoulders.

To cover the life of Elijah in one short lesson is a challenge. We've studied and discussed in detail the events of his life, so I'd like to concentrate on some of the lessons we can apply to ourselves from his experiences.

Elijah is an important man gauged by the fact that he appears no fewer than 27 times in the New Testament (more than any other prophet). You will remember he was chosen to appear with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. But James 5:17 gives us that wonderful insight that "Elijah was a man just like us." His name means, "Jehovah is my God" or "Jehovah is my strength."

Our lesson opened today with Elijah encountering King Ahab. Elijah was a man of courage. Like Martin Luther at Wittenburg, he single-handedly challenged the priesthood of a nation. Like John the Baptist, he confronted the king on the throne. It was neither convenient nor comfortable to take a stand for God in those circumstances . . . but then it never is.

God had a ministry for Elijah and, is often the case God will minister **to** us before He ministers **through** us. Elijah was told to go hide in Kerith Ravine where there would be running water and the promise that God would have ravens feed him twice a day. (Isn't it interesting to see the abundant provision . . . to have meat twice a day in that time was really living well). Sometimes we need the lessons learned in seclusion that we can't learn in a crowd.

Kerith's purpose was not only to protect Elijah from Ahab's wrath because he'd predicted extended drought, but also to prepare him for his future work by teaching him the lesson of dependence on God. His experience is encouraging to us because many of us have sat beside a brook that is drying up. The same God who gave water took it away. Our human inclination is to feel that once God gives water (or a mate, a child, a business, a home, a position), He should never withdraw it.

But that isn't always the case. When the brook dried up, no supernatural fountain appeared, no instant fix was forthcoming.

It's hard to sit by the drying brook . . . but God wants to teach us not to trust in His gifts but to trust in Himself.

How much did Elijah know? Did he realize that perhaps his enemies were already following the course of the little stream in the vain hope of finding ample water? Often our drying brook is God's sign for us to move on. Elijah obeyed and, by so doing, he not only preserved his own life, but also became a means whereby God met the needs of others. He'd been alone long enough. We need the joy of fellowship with other people. Our happiness is never complete unless we're instrumental in increasing the happiness of other people.

Elijah gives us a lesson in contentment. God's rule is – day by day. Matthew 6:33 "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Our Father has ample resources . . . the bottom of the barrel may be scrapped today, but when you go to it tomorrow, there will be just enough for tomorrow's need. Anxiety will do us no good; but the prayer of faith will. "Your Father knows what things you have need of."

Zarephath was some 100 miles away from Kerith Ravine across barren drought-ridden land that was ruled by Jezebel's father. Elijah probably prayed for a sign much like Abraham's servant did when he went to seek a bride for Isaac.

At Zarephath's gate Elijah met the widow whose home would be his shelter. Compassionately her heart responded to Elijah's requests as she confirmed for him that this is where God wanted him to stop. He'd asked for three things: 1) Fetch me a drink 2) Give me bread 3) Serve me first. "She went and did according to the words of Elijah" and was richly blessed for her obedience. Physically this was another hiding place for Elijah . . . spiritually it was another period of testing.

The woman's son became ill and died. Elijah prayed for something not previously recorded in Scripture – restoring life to someone who was dead. He prayed in faith and perseverance and through that restored life and honor was brought to God.

I hope you didn't miss the tender gentleness of Elijah as he dealt with the mother's outburst of grief and accusation. If the Holy Spirit is really filling our hearts, there will be a gentleness of speech when others are hurting. Is that a quality in your life? Listen to this little poem:

Gently Spirit, dwell in me,
I myself would gentle be;
And with words that help and heal,
Would Thy life in mine reveal.

When tragedy strikes, do you seek to become involved or do you withdraw? Do you know how important your intercessory prayers are to others? It's a time to exercise your faith, to call on your Father who is "Lord of the Impossible."

Elijah hadn't been in public ministry for a long time, yet his private ministry to the widow and her son was just as important, both to the Lord and to them. During these three years as an exiled and hunted man, Elijah learned a great deal about the Lord, about himself and about the needs of people. He'd learned to live a day at a time, trusting God. No doubt people were asking, "Where's Elijah? Why won't he do anything to ease the problems caused by the drought?" But God was more concerned for the worker than the work. He'd been preparing Elijah for the greatest challenge to his faith in his entire ministry – Mount Carmel.

The word of the Lord told Elijah it was time to confront Ahab. Scripture shares with us the meeting between Elijah and

Obadiah and we learn a little about both Obadiah's position and disposition. His great authority in the court gave him foreknowledge of Jezebel's planned purge of God's prophets and he was able to hide, protect and provide for one hundred of them because "he feared the Lord greatly."

His fear also extended to possible retribution from Ahab if he should report Elijah's location in error. But Elijah reassured him that "I will surely present myself to Ahab today."

We spoke of the "Lord of the Impossible" and that's the perfect name when we consider all the events surrounding the confrontation on Mount Carmel. Notice the challenges that were present:

1. The people were challenged to make a choice.
2. The 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah were challenged to prove their gods. If sincerity is all it takes, we could certainly affirm that the prophets were sincere. You can believe sincerely, yet put your faith in the wrong thing.
3. God was challenged. The idol's prophets prayed for six solid hours. Elijah's prayer was short . . . the answer for him, as it often is for us, was already on the way.

4. Elijah was challenged to eradicate the cancer of idolatry or let the malignancy grow. As the surgeon uses a knife, Elijah used the sword and had the false prophets put to death. Ahab too had been on the mountain that day. What do you suppose was going through his mind as he ate his meal? Do you think he was awed in any way by witnessing the fire from the Lord? Or, was he more concerned about facing his wife Jezebel with the news that 400 of her prophets were dead – killed by their enemy Elijah?

Elijah had gone to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed for rain. This wasn't just a "God, please send rain" prayer, it was fervent, expectant, offered in humility, and persevering. Three times he prayed for the widow's dead son before there was an answer, so should he stop at four requests? No! Four, five, six, seven times he prayed (and would have prayed eight, nine, ten if necessary). But when the tiny cloud appeared over the Mediterranean Sea, he was off his knees and racing toward Jezreel some 18 miles away to escape the coming rain. Think of outrunning Ahab's chariot! That, my friends, is power from the "Lord of the Impossible!"

Brennan Manning has a book titled The Ragamuffin Gospel. Its sub-title is: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-up and

Burnt-out. The book was first published in 1990 and has been one of my favorites for a long time. Just recently I've seen it in republished in the local Christian book stores. It's a book about the grace of God. A reminder that He loves us when we succeed and when we fail; when we're strong and when we're weak. In it Manning shares an acrostic that perhaps some of you have heard: H – A – L – T. I'll tell you what that stands for in a minute.

Elijah had come from the mountain-top victory, but now he faced Jezebel's full rage. Elijah ran for his life . . . he did not run away from God, but he did take his eyes off God. The poor man was exhausted having traveled 150 miles from Jezreel to Beersheba plus another day's journey after leaving his servant behind. He was definitely bedraggled, beat-up and burnt-out.

Ever find yourself feeling like that? I'm sure we all have at one time or another.

Difficulties in life always become more pronounced as we fill in that acrostic H-A-L-T. H-hungry, A-anxious, L-lonely, T-tired.

Elijah was all of these and his depression was in full bloom. Sitting down under the broom tree, he said, "I have had enough . . . take my life." And exhausted he fell asleep. What do you suppose he felt when awakened by the angel to a hot meal?

Maybe better, probably grateful, but not fully recovered. He slept again.

God's remedy when he awoke and ate again was – get on your feet; there is purpose for your life – My purpose – continue your journey.

Getting up when you feel knocked down isn't easy, but it is essential. What helps us to our feet is Scripture. I had a dear cousin, Sharon, who was the greatest encourager in the world for me. Years ago she sent me this little card, I've used a hundred times. It's "God's promises to Carol." Listen . . .

(Read Scriptures) Dear Carol:

- I will never leave you nor forsake you (Joshua 1:5)
- I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you (Psalm 32:8)
- I will sustain you and I will rescue you (Isaiah 46:4)
- I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10)
- I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go (Genesis 18:15)
- I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isaiah 49:16)

- I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people (Leviticus 26:12)
- Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established (Proverbs 16:3)
- He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty (Psalm 91:1)
- I am the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth . . . those who hope in Me will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:28,31)
- Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know. (Jeremiah 33:3)
- I am with you, I am mighty to save, I will take great delight in you. I will quiet you with my love. I will rejoice over you with singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)
- I am your hiding place, I will protect you from trouble and surround you with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. (Psalm 32:7,8)

Signed, Your Heavenly Father

What beautiful encouragement from Scripture. God is with us and for us . . . and He strengthened Elijah to take that first step.

Forty days later Elijah made it to a cave at Mt. Horeb before the pity party set in again.

It's a common occurrence to make that same circle back to depression as the stress and pressure of daily living takes its toll on us. Discouragement deepens in the false idea that no one else feels the way we do. When you recognize the contributing factors of H-A-L-T (hungry/anxious/lonely/tired), love yourself enough to think of another acrostic S-T-O-P. That stands for Sleep, Trust God, Obedience to what you already know – using common sense/Prayer.

God promises to help us in our needs, but He also expects us to use the good common sense He gave us. And as long as we're into acrostics, let's do one more. This time the word is H-O-P-E.

H - heed what you know in God's Word. "I will never leave you or forsake you."

O - open your eyes to the needs of others. Get outside yourself.

P - pursue a godly life. Not one of legalism, but one of doing everything as you would do it for the Lord.

E - expect God to show you new and wonderful things He has for you to do in service for Him.

Satan loves to come and sweep away the remembrances of God's good hand on us. Don't let him have that victory. Stop and hope. He is still the "Lord of the Impossible!"

Elijah was in the cave, but the Creator called to him. This time the Lord evoked the wind, an earthquake and fire in a mighty display of power to get Elijah's attention, yet spoke to His servant in a gentle whisper saying, "you're not alone . . . I have work for you to do . . . and a successor for you to appoint."

The people the Lord named weren't especially significant in the social structure of that day. Hazael was a servant to King Ben-Hadad, Jehu was a captain of the army and Elisha was a farmer. They would have a mighty impact on reducing idolatry in Israel. No one generation can do everything, but each generation must see to it that the next generation is called and trained and the tools made available for them to continue the work of the Lord. God was calling Elijah to stop weeping over the past and running away from the present. It was time for him to prepare others for the future.

Elisha's name means "God has salvation." The fact that Elisha was using 12 yoke of oxen – 24 expensive animals, indicates that his family was probably better off financially than most Israelites. Elijah didn't say a word to the young man but merely cast his mantle (his outer garment/cloak) over him to indicate that the Lord had called him to serve the prophet and then be his successor.

Elisha's conduct seems to contradict what Jesus said in Luke 9:57-62 about going back to say good-bye, but in reality Elisha was wholehearted in his obedience to follow Elijah, while the man in the Gospel record had hesitation and reservations, and Jesus knew it. Elisha took his hand off the plow, offered a sacrifice, said his good-byes and set out to follow Elijah. No turning back.

We're going to learn more about Elisha in coming lessons, but let's close with two important lessons from Elijah's life:

First, our ministry is defeated when we focus on ourselves instead of God.

Second, our mission is completed when we prepare others to take our place.

To glamorize or criticize the past accomplishes little; what's important is that we do our job in the present and equip others to

continue in it after we're gone. God buries his workers, but His work goes on.

I exhort you to listen for God's whisper that encourages you and know that He is still the "Lord of the Impossible."