

At the End of Yourself

By David H. Roper

SERIES: ELIJAH

Turn with me to chapter 17 of 1 Kings as we continue in our study of the life of Elijah. Elijah is that wonderful, crusty old curmudgeon who came from what today is the land of Syria--the wilds of Transjordan--and who delivered a message to Ahab and his wife Jezebel. You'll remember that Ahab and Jezebel were the king and queen of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, at a very critical time in the history of that nation. I think of Elijah as a kind of 900 B.C. McCloud [*a fictional character from a popular television show in the 1970's*], who walked into Ahab's court in a rough-out coat and cowboy hat and, in his rustic manner, and delivered a powerful and telling message.

The time of Ahab and Elijah was a very critical time in the history of Israel. Ahab brought into his court Jezebel, the Sidonian princess, and she brought with her all the awfulness of Canaanite religion. It is incredible what the Canaanites believed and who they worshiped. Theirs was one of the most degrading systems of worship the world has ever known. I have a theory--one that isn't proved yet, but I'm almost certain of it--that our word "cannibal" comes from the Canaanite word for the priests of Baal. In Canaanite the word is "cani-baal". I have a feeling that the priests must have consumed the human sacrifices, and that is where our Indo-European word came from. I think that early visitors to Canaan were as appalled by that practice as we would be, and it made such an impact upon travelers that they took the word back with them. When Jezebel came to Israel she brought with her the priests of Baal and the priestesses of Baal, and the Asherah and introduced into the nation of Israel the entire pantheon of Canaanite gods and goddesses. It was during this time that God raised up Elijah to be his spokesman.

Now, wicked times, times of crisis like this, are times of opportunity. These are the times to speak out. And Elijah's time was very similar to our time today. There is really no difference between our society and Canaanite society. Perhaps there is a slight difference in quantity, but certainly not in quality. These are times for us to speak up as God's spokesmen. We have a message to address to our society. Our message is certainly not one of condemnation--it ought to be couched in terms of love and consideration and with an awareness that the people who live around us are the victims of the enemy. They are not the enemy; they are merely the victims. They have been victimized, and we, have a message of deliverance.

This is the very message that Elijah was called upon to deliver. His message, much as our message, was addressed to the heart of the thinking of that day--the philosophy that was underneath the actions of the people. God is not concerned so much about actions; he is concerned primarily about the way we think, what we worship, what we place value in. That is basically what worship is--attributing worth to a thing or a person or an idea. And that is what God is concerned about. What do we worship? What is valuable to us? What is our system of values based upon? It was this message that Elijah had to bring to his people.

This is what the gospel is. It challenges people's basic, underlying beliefs. Much as Elijah was called to minister at a time like this, so are we called to minister. What God does is render the object of worship impotent, and our message coincides with God's action. We need to point out to people how powerless their gods are. Everything that Elijah had to say, everything he did, was toward that end. Everything that God did to the people during the time of Elijah's ministry was designed to show them how powerless their gods were, how unrealistic their ideas were, how incapable of facing even the basic necessities of life people are when they are worshiping the wrong thing.

So God brought a drought. People believed that Baal brought the rain, so God shut up the heavens and there was no rain for a period of three and a half years. During this time, not only was God reaching out toward the people of Israel, but he was concerned about his prophet, as well, and so Elijah had to go through the same process. Having delivered his message to Ahab, Elijah fled to the brook Cherith, where he was sustained for a period of time by the ravens and by the water from the brook. It was necessary for God's prophet to go through that experience. It is not enough merely to speak God's words; we need to have experienced them as well. And so God will take us through the process. That is what happens to Elijah (verse 7):

And it happened after a while, that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

After a time the small stream that flowed through the ravine dried up. There was no water and there was no place to go. Where could Elijah go for help? We know from chapter 18 that Ahab had sought out Elijah. He looked everywhere he thought Elijah might have gone. Ahab had inquired after Elijah in every nation that was accessible to him. He had talked to the kings of the various states around him and had arranged to have Elijah turned over to him if he was found. There was no place for Elijah to go. He certainly was not accepted in Israel; he could not flee outside the boundaries of Israel, for the drought had extended all over Israel as well as the other nations. There was absolutely no place he could turn. But we read in verses 8-16:

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah.

The thing that strikes me about this account is that Elijah is sent to a most unlikely place to have his needs met. First, Zarephath was in Phoenicia. That was Canaanite territory; as a matter of fact, it was Jezebel's home town. Zarephath was located about halfway between Tyre and Sidon, and that was part of the nation ruled by her father. So it was a matter of escaping from the frying pan into the fire.

Secondly, it was unlikely that Elijah would be sent to Zarephath because the people were experiencing drought there just as the people were in the land of Israel. They were no better off--as a matter of fact, they were worse off. The supply there was no greater than in Israel.

And thirdly, God sends Elijah to a very unlikely person, a widow--and a Gentile widow, at that. You wouldn't expect that a widow would be able to supply your needs in a situation like that, because a widow, in the ancient world, was destitute, unless someone provided for her. One mark of a just man in the society of that time was that he would plead the case of widows and orphans. And yet the Lord sends Elijah to Phoenicia, where he is not likely to get help (as a matter of fact, he is likely to lose his life there), to a woman who is a most unlikely prospect. And it is there that God meets his needs.

That is so much like the Lord! That is the pattern that he follows. He uses things like ravens and widows, the weak, the impoverished--he uses the most unlikely sources to meet our needs. I'm sure you have discovered this in your dealings with the Lord. He always does the unexpected. You never know what he'll do next. Someone has said that the most predictable thing about the Lord is that he is totally unpredictable! We have a way of anticipating how the Lord is going to meet our needs, and very likely he will not follow that course at all. He loves to delight

us and surprise us.

That is what God is doing with Elijah. He is using a weak instrument, a most unlikely instrument, to meet his needs. As Elijah approaches the city gates, he finds this woman gathering sticks. As she explains, she is going to gather a couple of sticks and cook her last meal, and then she and her son will die. Evidently, she was already starving, for this was the last meal that she had in her house, and she would prepare this meal and then perish.

Elijah does a very unlikely thing. He says to her, "Prepare something for me. Take the last meal that you have in your little bowl, and prepare a little bread cake and give it to me first. Then you can have whatever is left." That seems unnecessary and cruel. And yet Elijah is acting according to the word of God. He can say these things because God has promised to meet his needs through the widow. He has heard God's word on the subject. God told him to go up to Zarephath because there he had commanded a widow to meet his needs. "A widow there will provide for you." He didn't say, "A widow there will allow you to starve, and she will starve along with you." God promised to meet Elijah's needs, so he had God's word to act upon. That is why Elijah makes this request of the widow, because he is confident that God is going to meet her needs and his. God isn't going to allow her to starve. So he can make what appears to be a very harsh request.

Elijah not only has God's word on this matter, but he also has his own experience to fall back upon. While Elijah was at the brook of Cherith, God had commanded ravens to provide for his needs. By this time Elijah was convinced that if God could command ravens to feed him, he could command a widow to feed him. So Elijah had no problem in making this request.

Now, you have to understand what this young woman had. (She was, by the way, evidently a young woman. She had just one child, and the child was very small. She had had a very tragic life and had lost her husband--which happened very frequently in those hard and cruel times.) She was down to one bowl of cornmeal. I have here a bowl or vase--which in Hebrew is called a *cad*--the same size as this widow's. This is a vase from that approximate time, 900 B.C., so this is what she had on her shelf, with a little cornmeal in it. She also had a little vial that contained olive oil, and she was going to prepare a little pancake out of the oil and cornmeal, cook it, and die. This was her plan. She had just enough to prepare one little cake. Once she pours out the oil, there will be nothing left.

So she prepared this little cake, and Elijah sat down to eat it--and there was enough to go around. The next day she shook the same amount of cornmeal out of her little bowl, and it was empty--there was nothing in it. She put the vase back on the shelf and prepared the meal, and they consumed that. There was nothing left in the house. The Hebrew actually says that God fed them day by day by day by day. After every meal there was nothing left--the cupboard was bare. She was as bad off as Mother Hubbard--she didn't even have a bone! And every day God met her needs. That is all God ever promises to do--to just meet our needs on a day-to-day basis.

Now, if this widow was like us, I am sure there must have been times when she was tempted to keep back a little bit of the flour in the bottom of her bowl--for a rainy day. But it didn't matter whether she saved some or whether she consumed it all, when the need arose the next day for a meal, there it was. As far as we know, for two years, and perhaps six months more, Elijah and the widow were fed on that basis. That is what the Lord promises. Philippians 4:19 tells us, "My God shall supply your needs according to his riches in glory, by Christ Jesus." And through the time of drought, when all around them were struggling to meet their needs, Elijah and this widow and her son had their needs met by God.

But before things get better, they get worse, as is often the case (verses 17-24):

Now it came about after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe, that there was no breath left in him. [In other words, he died. Plagues often accompany drought and spread like wildfire. This child evidently contracted a very grave sickness and perished.] **So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance, and to put my son to death!" And he said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the**

upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. And he called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, hast Thou also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord, and said, "O Lord my God, I pray Thee, let this child's life return to him." And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God [the one God], and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Here is another crisis in Elijah's life--and that is what life is made up of, one crisis after another. I really believe that my life is just a crisis going someplace to happen. You get one thing squared away, and something else falls apart. You get one car running, and the other dies. It never stops--there is just one thing after another. That is what life is made up of. And very often, the great crises in life come after some act of commitment, when you have determined to do God's will. There may be some area in your life and mine where we struggle to do what God has called us to do, and we resist it for a time. But then we give way to the Lord and commit ourselves to obedience, and shortly thereafter, everything begins to sour. We begin to wonder, "What has happened?"

Somewhere we have picked up the idea that to do God's will means that life will always go smoothly, that there will never be hard times or distressing circumstances. That simply isn't true. There are some wonderful examples of this in the Old Testament, like the story of Moses. Moses very reluctantly went back to Egypt to deliver his people. He really didn't want to go. He was fearful of the assignment, and though he finally went (because the Lord wouldn't let him say no), he dragged his feet all the way. He went back to Egypt, and when he got there he did what God called him to do, and he made things worse. Pharaoh said, "If you people have so much time to hassle me, then I'll just put you to work." He took their straw away, and they had to make bricks without straw. The Israelites complained to Moses, "Who called for you? Who needs you?"

I am sure Moses must have thought what you and I would think: Somehow I must have missed God's will. But Moses was right where God wanted him. Very often you will change jobs because you feel that is what God has called you to do. You move to another neighborhood, or you put your children in a certain school, or you change schools, or marry a certain person because you feel that is God's will. Then you discover that there is a lot of struggle in that relationship, and you begin to wonder, "Did I do the right thing? Was I really called of God to do this?"

What we don't realize is that it is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises. God calls us to continue to do the thing that he has called us to do, and to continue to trust him and to rest in his ability. Paul says in Galatians that if we do so, "In due season, we will reap, if we don't faint." But the problem is, we tend to faint. We don't stay with it. We don't keep believing.

So Elijah is confronted with this great tragedy. The tendency would be to think, "What have I done? I have brought such grief into this woman's life!" I'm certain Elijah himself was grieved, as well. He must have loved this little boy. He must have played with him, and perhaps he had been very much like a father to him. Now the child is gone. But even this distressing circumstance is God's loving hand on Elijah and the widow. I am certain that Satan is at work in the situation, but God permits these things. He is ultimately responsible because he is sovereign, and he allows these things to happen for a reason.

There is nothing like death to make us take life seriously. It reminds us of our lack of power, our impotence. We face that ultimate fact day after day. No one can cope with death. We are preoccupied with it. Death is the great unanswered question for the world; and it was so at this time. No one had ever been raised from the dead, prior to this incident. No one had any hope of being raised from the dead.

There is a very interesting story in Canaanite literature called *A Tale of Aqhat*. Aqhat is a great hero in Canaanite thought. His greatness is personified in his bow. Aqhat had a bow that no one but he could draw. It was given to him by the gods. Anat, who is one of the goddesses, coveted his bow. (By the way, covetousness, in Canaanite

thought, was a virtue, not a vice.) She said, "If you give me your bow, I'll give you eternal life," and he laughed in her face. He said, "No one could give eternal life, not even the gods and goddesses. As for me, my hair will grow gray, I will die the death of all men, yea, I will surely die. He uses the same words that are used in Genesis, when God says of man, after he sins, "You will surely die!"

The people of Elijah's day had no hope. They were preoccupied with death, just as we are. Death does that to us. It makes us face squarely our weakness and our limitations. This is what Elijah had to face, and what the widow had to face. So Elijah took the child to the upper room, and he asked God to restore life; he stretched himself out on the child, and the child was restored. As a result of his faith, the child was restored to the family, and when he was brought back to the mother there was great joy.

What God is trying to do, throughout this account, is to bring Elijah and the widow and the people of that land to the end of themselves. It is only when we come to the end of ourselves and our hoarded resources, all our own reserve, that we begin to recognize our need and to count upon the Lord. And sometimes the Lord has to take us there. It is the only way he can get our attention and cause us to believe that he is trustworthy, he is faithful. He will make our lives productive. Ray Stedman passed out a paper to the staff this past week. I want to read just the last paragraph:

God has promised to meet every need of his children, but this he cannot do until we recognize our need, until we confess this need and cast ourselves upon his everlasting mercy. Doing this, we need not worry about whether he will find us fit to receive his help. In the old hymn words, "All the fitness he requires is to feel your need of Him."

That is all he requires--that we want him, that we need him. Then he can act. As another hymn, "Like A River Glorious" puts it, "Those who trust him wholly, find him wholly true." We can say what the widow says at the end of this experience. When she first met Elijah she said (verse 12), "As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread..." But at the end of this experience she says, "I know that you are a man of God." She came to love and worship and acknowledge the Lord. Furthermore, she says, "I know that his words are true." And if we trust him wholly, we likewise will find his words are wholly true.

Father, we honestly do not like these circumstances that you put us in that teach us how much we need you. But we have to say thank you because it is only through times like this that we sense our own inadequacy. We want to learn that you are true, so we are willing, Father, to be exposed to whatever you have for us. Teach us to walk with you and to count on you for all of life. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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