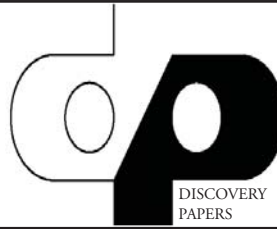


DAILY BREAD

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 5201
1 Kings 17:2-24
2nd Message
Steve Zeisler
September 17, 2006

We have begun an adventure: an encounter with the life of Elijah the prophet (1-2 Kings). In the last message (Catalog No. 5200) I emphasized Elijah's historical significance and how both the Old and New Testaments speak of his lasting influence. He continues to be an inspiration to this day in the traditions of both Jews and Christians.

However, we also know from the book of James that "Elijah was a man just like us" (5:17 NIV). If our imagination is captured only by the fiery consumption of an altar, a whirlwind ride to heaven, and standing with Christ and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration, we miss something about Elijah.

As we read these histories, we'll see that dramatic moments most often alternate with small-scale interactions, in which Elijah is not the one speaking for God to other people, but he is the one being spoken to by God; being taught to walk by faith. In such stories we'll find circumstances similar to our own. The story we'll look at in this message is one of these.

We serve a God who determines history, destroys idols, and rules the forces of nature, but his great work is to make saints; men and women who are like Christ. In Elijah's story we'll see some of the ways God does that work.

In 1 Kings 17:1 it is recorded that Elijah gave Ahab, the very evil king of Israel, an abrupt speech: "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." Then he walked away.

Drought is a crisis that takes time to build—in this case three and a half years. Elijah alluded to a showdown day in the future when he would speak again before the king ("by my word"). But in the interim we follow his journey into obscure regions.

During this interval we hear God's command to Elijah—calling him to mature in faith. God's voice directs Elijah to two places, the wilderness and a widow's home.

1 Kings 17:2-7:

²The word of the LORD came to him, saying, ³"Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." ⁵So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. ⁷It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Provision in the midst of deprivation

Elijah receives a two-part assignment: live in stressful circumstances and recognize divine provision. He's sent into the wilderness, to survive in the hard conditions of the drought he predicted.

If I were Elijah and I announced the failure of Baal the rain god, a rebuke of Ahab, and judgment upon the nation, I would then like to go somewhere that was drought-free, so that I would be exempt from suffering. But Elijah is not exempt from it. He is sent to a wilderness watercourse that will dry up as all the other streams will dry up, not to a place with a secret spring of water available only to him.

The Lord determines that ravens will provide for him. Think about ravens: they are carrion-eaters, not birds of prey. They would find carcasses that perished in the drought, in various stages of decay, and bring them to Elijah twice a day.

The circumstances are difficult. We sometimes wish God would remove us from such things, but he doesn't. One element of Elijah's faith formation is this: he can't minister to people in a broken world unless he's part of

the same world. Likewise, we must be able to speak about what God does for us in the midst of hard times, not just about triumph and blessing.

The church's witness has always been strongest in times of difficulty, plague, and upheaval when all the world suffered. Those who know Christ have one to cling to, one who meets them, one who "walks through the valley of the shadow of death" with them (Psalm 23:4).

I have a friend who was treated for cancer over the summer—a routine that involved gathering with others in a waiting room once a week. As my friend would speak to these new friends about their lives and his, and would speak of the comfort that God had given him, it made all the difference in the world that he was a patient, not just a visitor. He was there for the very same reason as these folks, he suffered the same discomfort they did, and he shared the same potential they had for a difficult future.

In addition to the experience of drought, Elijah is called to the wilderness. It seems that the Lord often chooses a wilderness experience for his children, in which they find themselves vulnerable and alone with God. In the wilderness we learn the truth about ourselves. We learn we are not great, competent, attractive, strong, and capable, but weak and inadequate.

But in the wilderness God's presence is magnified. We are smaller than we imagined, and he is larger. When there is no one else to talk to, his voice grows clearer. His presence is more keenly felt when he's the only one there. His provision is received gratefully.

Are we thankful for our circumstances, or are we whiny about them? The question is not what our circumstances are, but how we receive them. Is a drying brook and whatever ravens find for us enough? Can we be thankful, recognizing the provision of God? Do we receive the life we are given gratefully, knowing that God is doing something good, that he is there?

The voice of God directed Elijah to the wilderness, and following this experience he is called to another location to grow in faith.

1 Kings 17:8-16:

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” ¹⁰So 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.” ¹¹As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.” ¹²But 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.” ¹³Then 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. ¹⁴For 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.’” ¹⁵So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The 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.

Connecting with those who suffer

If there are lessons we can learn only in the wilderness, there are also lessons we can learn only when we are connected to people whose lives are filled with chaos, uncertainty, fear, and suffering. We would rather not be sent out to the wilderness by ourselves, stripped of all our strength and all that makes us feel good about ourselves, and most of us would rather not be too closely connected to people whose lives are really difficult. And make no mistake, this woman's life is really difficult. A telling statement is that she imagines this to be the last meal she will ever eat before dying. It is hard enough to be widowed and poor, but the drought conditions have made her life impossible.

We will do well to note that she lives in Sidon, the land Jezebel came from, the land where Baal is worshiped. Elijah is sent behind enemy lines, if you will, to the center of Baal worship (Jesus comments on that in Luke 4:25-26).

He is sent to this woman who is in desperate straits. The ravens were his first source of supply, and now God tells him that this woman will become one who supplies what he needs.

She speaks of God as “the LORD your God,” as Elijah’s God, not her own. I wonder if she believes anything much. Then she is given this very peculiar assignment from a person speaking with the authority of God, knowing things that she doesn’t know, speaking of a future that she can’t imagine. He tells her to feed him first, and then she can eat. It’s hard to know what she thinks. Is she just resigned? “I’m going to die anyway. This will only advance it a day. What difference does it make? I may as well give him the food.” Or maybe she feels just a little bit of hope. Maybe this man knows something. Maybe he’s seen something that she hasn’t seen.

I think that if she closed the door to him and prepared the bread for herself and her son, there would not have been any more. But she responds to the call and feeds Elijah first, and then she goes back and sees that there is enough flour and oil to make some bread for her and her son that day. The next day there is just enough to feed them for another day. She returns the next day and there is just enough for that day.

Elijah is being formed in this. Elijah is discovering that as he cares for someone else, he is being fed and they are being fed. God has wrapped up blessing with vulnerability. They are all learning to trust God every day. They are all seeing a miracle—it is never extravagant, but always enough for one day. Elijah is discovering God’s love for those in need. Elijah will be sustained, and the woman and her son will be sustained. He will be changed, and they will be changed and God will be praised as a result of these events.

1 Kings 17:17-18:

¹⁷Now 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. ¹⁸So 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!”

Becoming like God

This is a terrible moment. So much that is good, beautiful, simple, and hopeful has developed. Each day as they eat together, the three of them become greater friends, we can well imagine. Elijah, seeing God’s love for these people, loves them himself and now the boy has died, and the accusation falls on him. “It’s your fault! If you had never come here, we would have died together as poor people have always died. I would never have had my hopes raised. I would never have imagined a future for my son and myself.”

She says something even more painful: “Your presence has awakened God’s awareness of my sin.” When something terrible happens, the first thought is that our iniquity, our failure, and our unrighteousness, that we thought was covered over, is back out in the open. “My son has died because I’m a sinner.” This woman is now feeling guilt and pain, and she’s pointing a finger at Elijah, saying it’s his fault.

1 Kings 17:19-24:

¹⁹He 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. ²⁰He called to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child’s life return to him.” ²²The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. ²³Elijah 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.” ²⁴Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

How is Elijah formed in this experience? Why did God let the son die, at least temporarily? Isn’t he teaching Elijah about his own heart for people? The Spirit of God is prompting him to pray these things. The Lord doesn’t endorse tragedy. He doesn’t kill children for the unrighteousness of their parents, imagined or real. So

Elijah calls to God, “You’re not like that—this shouldn’t happen! Do something!” By the end of the day Elijah is discovering that his heart is like God’s heart, that in his prayers he’s becoming like the one to whom he’s praying. God put him through this event to teach him love, to teach him a burden for those who suffer like this and Elijah will be ready to do this powerful ministry. He has been shaped inwardly to see the world the way God sees it, to connect himself not only to the living God in the wilderness, but also to the hurting people of the world.

Baal’s power is being broken steadily in all the stories of Elijah. The rain has stopped because God says so. The prophets of Baal are going to be destroyed in a terrible and staggering display of power from heaven followed by their execution, as we’ll see later. Baal’s power is being broken. This woman would have hoped at one time that the idol would save her, and now she doesn’t at all. Now she knows the one who tells the truth. She is herself a worshiper of God. The idols of the world can’t answer, but the Lord God can and does.

What conclusions can we draw? Elijah is not the one who decided, “I need a wilderness experience.” He never said, “I need a widow experience.” It was God’s initiative that put Elijah in the circumstances where he would learn and become who he ought to be.

God will take the same initiative with each one of us. By the Spirit, through the Scriptures, through the voices of our friends, and through circumstances God will speak: “Today, this is the assignment. Here’s where you should go. Here’s where you should serve. By these means I will shape you and make you a different person.” He will speak to us, direct us, and indicate what’s important to us.

The problem is, we don’t listen very well. Failure to listen probably has at least two things at stake. One of them is that we’re listening to too many other voices. Other people have plans for our life. Our pleasures, our goals, and our demands have a voice and we’re listening to them. We’re not listening to the voice of the one who would make us who we are supposed to be, and who we long to be. If we can’t turn down all the other voices, we aren’t going to hear his voice.

But perhaps even more importantly, we can’t hear God’s voice unless we’ve already agreed to obey him. We can’t say, “Lord, give me the plan, and I’ll edit it a bit; give me the script of what you have in mind for me, and I’ll pick the parts that I really think will work, and we’ll come up with something.” No, the only way to really hear the life-shaping word of God is to have already said before we attempt to hear him, “Lord, whatever you say, I will hear it, believe it, and act on it.” It’s a prior willingness to go where God sends us that allows him to make it clear. That’s a choice we can make as well. Whatever the path for us is to be, whatever the work of God in our life is, whatever he will say will grow clearer to us, and our lives will change. As Elijah was, we’ll be made ready for the important things ahead.