

Lessons From Elijah's Work

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 06-Nov-93; Sermon #100s

Have you ever done anything that you felt was especially righteous? Or maybe you gave your all in doing the work? Or have you ever really sacrificed in doing what you felt God wanted you to do and then had your work blow up in your face? Or then see no fruit from your labors? Or then see things were worse for you after your efforts than before you started?

Today we are going to look at a man and his work. He had an experience like this where he felt he had given his all in his zeal for God and he did not really see any good come of it. And we are going to see his reaction to all his pains and labors, and then see how God looked at all that he had done and the answer that He gave him after seeing the man's reaction.

The man we are going to talk about today is Elijah the prophet. He was known as the Tishbite and nobody knows where Tishbe was. Some say it could have been up near Galilee. But the Bible, in I Kings 17:1, says he was of the inhabitants of Gilead, and Gilead was the territory across the River Jordan on the east side of the Jordan and it belonged to Manasseh. So he might have been one of us. You never know, he might have been a Manassite. If anything other than a Manassite, he was probably a Levite, and he lived on the east bank of the Jordan River.

He is described in II Kings 1:8 as a hairy man who wore a leather belt around his waist. There is evidence from the Bible, particularly in chapter 19, verse 4 (it is kind of hidden in the translation), but there is a matter of circumstantial evidence that he was an old man during most of his prophesying, most of his ministry.

I Kings 19:4 He prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

When he said "I am no better than my fathers," it is really a Hebrew idiom that means, I don't deserve to live longer than my fathers. And you just assume that his fathers had lived to be fairly old men and here he had already reached their age and he did not feel he was worthy to live any longer. So that is circumstantial evidence that says that he was probably an elderly gentleman by this time.

He was a man of great accomplishment. Through as many years, he had done a lot. He founded three schools of the prophets, and one of my teachers at Ambassador College said that these schools of the prophets were ancient Ambassador Colleges where they trained ministers and people to spread the Word of God around Israel. There was one at Bethel, one at Gilgal, and one at Jericho at least. And there may have been others.

He had access to King Ahab just about any time he wanted to, except when Ahab and Jezebel were trying to cut his head off! And he was known to the kings of the surrounding countries because in one of the times that Ahab wanted to kill him, it says that that Ahab sent messengers around asking each of the kings to give Elijah up to him; and they had to take an oath saying that he is not in our country. So just about everybody for miles around knew who Elijah was.

But most importantly, God had used Elijah very much and very mightily. He had predicted a drought that would only relent when he gave the command for it to end. You will find that prophecy in I Kings 17 and it did not let up until the end of I Kings 18. He raised a boy from the dead and provided for the boy's family with food enough to get them through that drought. We know the drought lasted for three and a half years and probably he provided for that family for two years, a continuing miracle. With a whack of his cloak, he divided the River Jordan just like Moses had done. And then he walked over on dry land.

He defeated the prophets of Baal in an amazing display of God's power. He ran almost 20 miles from Mount Carmel to the gates of Jezreel and he beat Ahab, who had left before him, to the gate—and Ahab was in his chariot! So God had used him, given him His Spirit to make him do Samson-like feats. He ran about 20 miles and beat Ahab, who was being pulled by a horse, and

he was going fast because he was trying to beat the rain, which was about to make the Kishon Valley there up near Mount Carmel into a mud bath.

And we know that these things were done through God's power, not his own, but God had used him greatly. But as James said in James 5:17, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours." He was no more different than we are as human beings. He had his ups and downs. He did not always know the direction God was leading him. He became discouraged at his apparent lack of success and the lack of fruit from his labors. It got so bad that he asked God to take his life, which we just read in chapter 19, verse 4, because he felt that he was a failure, that he had not done the work that God wanted him to do.

So, let us take a look at this incident and see what God's reaction and reply was to him. I Kings 19 and we will read the first four verses to get all the background to this. Now, before we start, this is just after he had defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and he had beaten Ahab's chariot back to Jezreel. And on top of that, he had just stopped the drought. So he had three very large works of God that he had just completed.

I Kings 19:1-4 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." When he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough. Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

Here we see Elijah going through a range of emotions. Like I said, he had just finished completing those three great works. So he was on a high, if you will. He had just done a great work for God and he had seen the enemies of God, the prophets of Baal, defeated. And to him, it probably seemed like it was the beginning of a great surge in loyalty to God.

But what happens? The first thing he does is, he gets back and Jezebel puts a price on his head and he has to run for his life. But he really is not running for his life. That in verse 3 where it says that he ran for his life, it really means that he went upon his life. It does not mean that he left in fear because he had just seen God work through him and he knew that God would protect him. But what it means is that he was convicted (to use a word that has been used a lot lately), that it was the best thing to do and he was convicted that he needed to go and consult with God in the wilderness. It was not necessarily that he was hightailing it out of there because his life was at stake, although that may have played a little part in it. But it was an act of faith that he left and it was what he knew God wanted him to do, to commune with Him in the wilderness.

But once he gets there, once he gets to the wilderness, his attitude takes a wrong turn and he despairs for his life. He is, in a sense, wallowing in self-pity that nothing had been accomplished in all his great works. "Let me die. I can't stand this any longer," he said to God. He said, "I'm not worthy of any more of this." Let us read the next four verses.

I Kings 19:5-8 Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came back the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.

Now, it is important here that we see that through this angel, God was giving Elijah very particular instructions and it is important for us to consider them in our own situation. We have seen a great work done by Mr. Armstrong through his over 50 years of service to God. But it really seems that very little fruit has been accomplished through that, very little fruit have been borne. In fact, we see the Worldwide Church of God crumbling, and not just in little pieces. We see it coming apart in great chunks. And I heard today from Mrs. Armitage up in Washington, DC that in the Pastor General's

Report they said that they are doing away with the foot washing next year at Passover. I am not exactly sure. That is by word of mouth so do not take me literally at this point until we can prove it. But she said that is what a former minister of the Worldwide Church of God told her. But we see Mr. Armstrong's work crumbling.

What does the angel tell Elijah to do in a situation where he felt nothing had been borne? He says, "Strengthen yourself with this food provided by God." He says, strengthen yourself with what we know spiritual food is, it is God's Word. He says, in a sense, stick your nose back in your Bible, get your strength from Me. So Elijah does, he has a right reaction. But then the next thing he does is typical of what we do as humans. He went back to sleep. Let us say he got an initial surge of God's truth and then he went back to sleep.

So the angel had to come back again and said, "Elijah, you need more than what you got because what you have to do is more than you can handle. So you better strengthen yourself because you've got to go 40 days and 40 nights on this food." And if you think of that in our sense, maybe He is preparing us for something more than what our strength will really allow us so He wants us to be prepared beforehand. He says, "You're going to do something that's beyond your normal abilities," meaning fast for 40 days and 40 nights. Only one person before this had done that and that was Moses and he had been sustained by God as well.

Then after being woken up the second time, Elijah got the point and he sought God at Mount Sinai on the strength of that food. He journeyed to Horeb, which is Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. So he finally got far enough that God could reveal to him what he was supposed to do.

I Kings 19:9-12 And there he went into the cave [that "a" should be "the," it is the actual cave that Moses was hidden in when God went by, according to tradition], and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." Then He [God] said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain

before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks and pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.

Finally, Elijah had come to the point where God could really work with him and give him a chance to do His will. Also Elijah was at this point far enough out of his wallowing and self-pity to be able to vocalize what he really felt. So he said, "I feel all alone and I feel persecuted. There's nobody to help me." He just felt isolated and driven by his enemies. So God said, in effect, "Let Me show you reality, let Me show you what's really happening here."

And so through these four things—the the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, as well as the still small voice—He shows Elijah something that he had never thought of before. Now, remember Elijah had done all these great, stupendous miracles: called fire down from heaven, he had raced in front of Ahab's chariot, he had resurrected a little boy. These were great works of mighty power on God's part. But God said, "I'm not necessarily in all these huge workings of power. I'm not in the earthquake, I'm not in the wind, I'm not in the fire. These great displays of power are effective for a little while. But guess what? I'm in the still small voice."

Now, what did that still small voice represent? I think what it means is that God does His most astounding work behind the scenes—working, giving His gifts, His grace in the lives of His people. That still small voice is translated in the margin here, "a delicate whispering voice." It is a quiet voice. It is in the background. It is another way of saying that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. You find that in II Peter 3:9. Or that God is working salvation in the midst of the earth. That is Psalm 74:12. He is not destroying, He is not out to destroy everybody. He is out to give them salvation.

And He is gently reminding Elijah that even though he did these great works for God and that God appreciated them, the real work was being done in the salvation of God's people. That is what God is really after.

I Kings 18:13-18 So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel has forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." [He is still stuck on, like, a broken record, he says the same thing. But God says, "Look, Elijah, I am going to tell you what I want you to do.] Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet [Elijah do not forget, even though I have sent you on this work, that you have got to do these other great things, anoint these kings and prophets.] Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So in the end, God got across to him that the better work was being done, maybe at these schools of the prophets that we talked about before. That there were 7,000 that He had called out to do a work for Him in that day. And I think it is interesting to think about us, that here we have been scattered, in a sense. We feel isolated, somewhat alone, we are a small group without much strength, and possibly God will give us a work to do.

But I think we should take to heart here this admonition that we always do not know where God is working or what He is doing. We are not omniscient. We cannot see everything that is happening. So there may be places where God is working that we just have no idea what He is doing and He has reserved that to Himself. But we have just got to let Him work and know that He is going to get something accomplished that we really cannot comprehend.

From this, Elijah was able to get up, because his faith and his hope had been restored. He knew that God was going to work through him again. Like I said, we cannot know where God is working except as we see the fruits of God's Spirit working. He is still working in that manner today. He has got that still quiet voice working quietly in each individual life. And we just have to let Him work. We know that God is really aiming for each individual to turn from their sins and become His sons and daughters. And a spectacular public work, even with stupendous miracles, signs, and wonders like Elijah had is not more important than the salvation of His people.

That is what He is really interested in. He wants sons and daughters. He is reproducing Himself as we heard Mr. Armstrong say time and time again. That is what is important.

So after we realize this, we can go on with what God has given us to do with renewed confidence that God is working with His people, wherever they happen to be. He will take our efforts, as small as they may be or as large as they may be, and even then He will use them far more effectively than we could do ourselves. So now we can push on in faith and hope, knowing, certain that God is in charge of His work.