

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible and Miracles: Elijah and the Feeding by Ravens

Things aren't what they used to be! Imagine a small group, who as children had seen the united kingdom of Israel, in all its glory under King Solomon, now as elderly grandparents living under the wicked king Ahab. The nation was disunited and idolatry to the gods of Baal and Ashteroth was rampant. No, things were definitely not what they used to be, in Israel, but then that is not all that different from how things are in our country today.

The story of Elijah is one that many of us may have heard countless times before from childhood. Who of us has not, at one time or another, secretly wished to be like Elijah? Standing up fearlessly for God, achieving great things for God, the spiritual centre of attention. And yet, as we meet Elijah, it is in a place of anonymous solitude and protracted hardship. Now who of us still dares to be like Elijah?

We read in 1 Kings 17:1-4: "And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these three years, except at my word.' Then the word of the Lord came to him saying 'Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.'"

From the start we see Elijah standing up to the mighty monarch Ahab, boldly declaring that, due to Israel's idolatry, there would be no rain for the next three and a half years. I have the impression of Elijah, whose name translates as 'my God is Jehovah', as a man who was all action, up-front and fearless, one who spoke his mind, not counting the personal cost, one who thrived on the spiritual combat with evil, happy to be in the thick of things. And yet God comes to Elijah, not to encourage him to bigger battles in the public eye, but to get himself to the back of beyond, into obscure anonymity. There Elijah was to suffer for sins not his own, along with the rest of Israel, lonely, frustrated and impatient. We might think of this episode in Elijah's life when he stayed by the brook Cherith, fed by ravens, as one of pastoral tranquillity. Here was a demonstration of God's miraculous provision that could be more romantic than to be fed daily by the birds, living by the bubbling brook in a verdant countryside?

Nothing could be further from the truth! Cherith, whose name means 'a cutting place', was a desolate, hard ravine in the middle of the wilderness, where temperatures regularly top 40 degrees centigrade. By the end of the drought period, its water must have been foul and foetid. It must have been offensive at first to Elijah to be fed by ravens, those unclean birds. And what sort of food would they have brought him if not carrion, meat from carcasses long dead, further victims of the drought? No, his time at Cherith would have been one of hardship and intense solitude, daily depending on others for his very survival. If we look at a map we will see that Cherith is not far from Tishbe, Elijah's hometown. God had told Elijah, therefore, to go home for there he was to learn to become the person that God could use, the man who could one day stand up on Mount Carmel and survive.

It has often been said that God has far more to do in us than through us. This was what Elijah was going to learn and this is what we can learn from Elijah. Interestingly Elijah is described in James 5:17 as a man with a nature like ours, a man just like us. He did not start off as a fearless follower; that sort of behaviour can only be learned from experience. Elijah's training started on home soil in obscurity. That is where God would have each one of us start. Those who are going to achieve great things for God must first learn to be dependent on God at home. And what do we mean by "at home"? Simply in the family environment, and at my local place of work, and in the street where I live, and in my local neighbourhood. In many ways this is the hardest place to live for Christ in a way that honours Him. Day in, day out, month by month, we are seen for who and what we really are. In the routine of life I need to be truly dependent on God, seeking only to honour Him in what I do. It's relatively easy, where I am not known, to get up and do something for the Lord Jesus when all eyes will see or hear my service, and thank me for it. But how about week in and week out when nobody notices, except to criticise and results do not go my way? Am I still able to wait for God there and to carry on where He has put me? I ought to be the sort of neighbour who is readily given a key to someone else's house or asked to mind their children. I ought to be the sort of worker who consistently works as hard as possible, to as high a standard as possible, with no thought of financial reward. I ought to be the sort of family member who willingly denies my own wants and desires for the good of others, and who makes it a point to ensure that the Lord is present in the house daily through prayer and reading His word. It is hard for sure. This is our cutting place, where God will cut away my selfish ambitions to leave Him with something more pliable to work with. Nor should this hardship come as

any surprise. In John 16:33, Jesus promises that “in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”. In essence these are the lessons that God taught Elijah at Cherith. Just as His strength was able to keep Elijah, so too God’s strength is sufficient for each one of us who dares to “go home” and live for God there. Interestingly, whilst many a meandering stream would have long ago dried up during the drought, the very hardness of the Cherith ravine probably ensured that it remained free flowing for so long. Very often the hardness of our personal circumstances ensure our being kept in dependence upon the Lord Jesus, whilst many with more affluent and easy circumstances have long ago lost that living relationship with Him. Let us then, not immediately attempt to get out of difficult circumstances, but graciously accept them as evidence of the care of a loving Father, and give Him thanks for them.

Cherith, however, was not the end of God’s lessons for Elijah, only the beginning. So we read in verse 8: “Then the word of the LORD came to him saying, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you”. So he arose and went to Zarephath.”

For a fleeting moment Elijah’s spirits must have soared. Activity at last, things were bound to be on the up. Then he heard what God was telling him to do. He realised that he was still on his way down. He had thought things could not get worse Now they were about to do so. We need to remember how very different from our society and culture was that of Elijah’s. God was telling him to go and depend upon a foreigner, and a woman at that, and to cap it all, a widow! Everything here grated at Elijah’s self esteem. It went against the grain of his manhood. Exodus 22:22-24 show us clearly that even in the hardest of times, widows were to be cared for and provided for. And yet here God was telling Elijah to become dependent upon, a burden to, this widow. It is to Elijah’s great credit that he went straight away. He had spent about three years learning that he was nothing. Now he was going to learn that his God was everything. Here in Zarephath for a second time, he would experience God’s miraculous provision. Zarephath was deep into enemy territory, close to the home town of the hated queen, Jezebel. Its name means ‘a refining place’. After the great cutting of Cherith, God was going to polish off the rough edges of Elijah’s character before Elijah would be ready for service. So Elijah finds the woman and calls to her, asking her for a drink of cool, refreshing water. This she was happy to provide for the stranger. But on her way Elijah then asks her for a small piece of bread to eat. Now he was asking for too much. Water from the community well was one thing, of little personal cost, but bread of her providing was altogether different! We can so often be like the widow! We are happy to give in general terms, but when it comes down to my time, my emotions, my spiritual strength, or my money then it is a different matter. King David, many years earlier, had asked Araunah the Jebusite “Can I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing?” In similar vein, Paul could commend the Macedonian Christians who gave beyond their ability to do so, despite their deep poverty. We ought to be ready to hold lightly the resources that we have, whatever they may be, always ready to give them to the One who gave Himself for us.

So the widow protests that she has only enough for one last meal for herself and her son before they die. Now we can see the value of Elijah’s training. He is not, like we might have been, panicked by her lack of resources, having already learned about God’s ability to provide abundantly. Calmly he reiterates his desire for bread and after that the woman can do as she pleases. Elijah’s basis for faith was in God and was not dependent on his external circumstances. And yet so often we let the poverty of our circumstances influence what we consider we are able to do for God. We allow the immorality of our society to influence our understanding of God’s word and thus we beggar ourselves. We let the lack of other Christians with a similar vision of service for God dissuade us from humbly obeying His call to serve. Hudson Taylor, who so wonderfully served God, particularly in China, is reputed to have said often “God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack supplies”. How vital it is that we practise the truth of Matthew 5:33: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you”. Elijah’s dependence upon the woman was to be to the blessing of them both. Elijah would be fed and the woman would be provided for, physically and spiritually. And so the woman takes her first faltering steps towards an understanding of Elijah’s God. She does as he says “and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.”

One may be forgiven for thinking that here, with two people obviously where God wanted them to be, doing what God required, things would go well. Calm times and easy circumstances have never been, however, a sure sign of God’s approval. So it is that the woman’s son becomes sick “and his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him”. How his death must have seared the spirit of the woman, crushing, suffocating the shoots of developing faith. Understandably, and yet unjustly, she lashes out at the one nearest to her, Elijah, accusing him with the cry, “Why me?” Words can never really answer that question. And yet how beautiful to hear Elijah, with a calm patience learned at Cherith, say to the woman “Give me your son”. He too would share the hurt. He too would feel the loss as he identifies himself with her. In Leviticus 21:1-4 we read that, for a godly Jew, it was prohibited for anyone, other than family, to touch a dead body. Knowing this, Elijah still takes the child in his arms and carries him to his room and puts him on his bed. The widow’s pain would be his pain, and he would bear the cost. Elijah sensed that surely, this could not be the end. He intercedes with God on the boy’s behalf, identifying himself totally with the corpse. So we return to the Epistle of James and see how true are those words, “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”. Then we read “the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived”. God would have the woman to accept not only

the good things from Him, but to accept Him as the giver. So we see that faith springs to life in the widow as she proclaims, "Now by this I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth". God's miraculous provision had been experienced by Elijah for the third time.

Elijah had humbly submitted his will to God, going where God directed. What tremendous good came from that as the woman was preserved and brought to know God. In just the same way, God can work such good through us as we humbly place ourselves at His disposal. Through outwardly hard and perhaps distasteful circumstances, as we follow His leading, we can be the potential source of great help to others. Need our prayers be any less effective than Elijah's? Not for one minute. The promise is still the same. Take time to read Hebrews 10:19-25 to see what, with boldness, we can achieve for our Lord Jesus. Let us all hold fast to what the Bible teaches even when others fall away! So often we can bend what the Bible has to say to fit our circumstances and beliefs. Just as Horatio Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye, and saw nothing, so too we ensure that we find nothing that would cause us to have to change our behaviour. And yet God's word remains the same. His standards are absolute and do not bend to accommodate a society that is increasingly amoral. Let us consider one another even in a world that only seeks to please itself! If only everything I did was such that it set a positive example to others; my neighbours, workmates or family. When the young children were brought to Jesus, the natural inclination, and obviously that of the disciples, was to send them away. Children can be so noisy, demanding and so full of questions. And yet Jesus welcomes them, considering their needs, and the needs of their parents, before His own. There need be no doubt as to how He wants me to behave. And let us not give up the assembling of ourselves together even when others find their time too full! It is all too easy to allow the pressures of life, or petty differences, to stop us from enjoying the company of fellow believers, and in so doing we are all the poorer.

I still remember a conversation I had nearly 15 years ago regarding the early days of the Church. Something was said then that struck me powerfully. "One reason why the Church grew daily", my friend said, "was because it met together daily". There must be some truth in this. And yet how often we limit our fellowship to once a week, on Sunday, or perhaps one other evening during the week. Fellowship is so rich and varied an experience. It ought not to be restricted to just the formal occasions when we meet together for a particular service. Perhaps if we met together more, in what could be described as a social setting, then we would avoid some of the problems that can occur in our lives. Elijah had undergone the hard cutting experience of Cherith. There must have been times when Elijah just wanted to get away, to give up, to please himself. And yet he didn't. He persevered, and kept on going, alone but faithful to His God. True to his name, he stayed where God had put him, waiting until God's voice came to him again, and told him to leave. Then he had endured the refining influence of Zarephath. Three times Elijah had witnessed the miraculous hand of God at work in his circumstances. I wonder was Elijah also aware of the miraculous change within his own life? Now he was ready to be used by God. Only now was he ready for Carmel.

Precious Lord Jesus, give each one of us the grace and courage to endure whatever circumstances You may bring into our lives. Through them enable us to be a people that You are able to use to the good of others and to the glory of your wonderful Person.

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