

Elijah: A Man Just Like Us – A God Just Like His

2nd of a Series: 1 Kings 17: 2-24 – In the Front Line

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Near where we live is a road called King George VI Avenue that sweeps down the side of the South Downs in Sussex. That name brings back memories from early childhood – of pictures of Britain’s King during the Second World War. He was almost invariably wearing military uniform. No doubt he did this for several reasons: to emphasize he was both King and commander-in-chief; to show he identified with his troops; and that he expected the whole nation to be on a military footing.

The stance of George VI serves as a partial illustration. The Lord is also our Commander-in-Chief. He wants troops for the spiritual Front Line. but the Front Line does not necessarily imply dramatic leadership or glamorous work. To be edging through no-man’s land or sheltering in murky trenches isn’t dramatic, and certainly isn’t glamorous – but it is essential, and so are the spiritual equivalents.

The life of Elijah is supremely God setting before us his ability to preserve his Word (and to manifest its power in both salvation and judgement), and to continue his work when all is against it, until in the fullness of time the Word made flesh is manifested amongst us. But it is also a call from the Lord our King, our Commander-in-Chief, to be ready for the Front Line; and our weapon (as with Elijah) is the Word of God in the power of the Spirit. Elijah might have stayed tucked away in Tishbe. It would have probably been much easier, but in his case he would have known and proved the Lord less, and he would have been much less useful to him. We too must be ready to go (or to stay) as the Lord in some way directs. The lights may be red, amber or green – sometimes changing in quick succession, and sometimes getting stuck (so it appears) on what seems to us at the time the wrong colour!

So what did it mean to Elijah, and what does it mean to us, to be in the ‘Front Line’?

1. In the Front Line, we are caught up in spiritual warfare

When Elijah was called to be a prophet in the 9th century BC, everything was at stake amongst God’s peo-

ple spiritually – as everything humanly was also at stake because of Naziism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Did Elijah have any lingering hope that the Word of God through his ministry would strike fear into Ahab’s heart when he heard it, and that he would repent? After all, that is what was to happen through Jonah’s ministry in Nineveh (see Jonah 3 and 4) – to Jonah’s surprise and indeed chagrin. But there was not change here: Ahab’s response is not recorded, but our firm impression is that Elijah did not stay for a cup of tea with the King. As ever, God’s Word softens or hardens. A ministry where all men speak well of it may have lost its cutting edge. Jesus himself said he had not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). However, we need to take great care that it is the sword of the Spirit that is piercing and perhaps dividing, and not our own sharp tongues or angular behaviour.

Of course, we know perhaps more explicitly than Elijah that what lay behind the activities and hostilities of Ahab and Jezebel and the Baal worship were evil, demonic powers. It is not that an idol is anything: ‘but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God’ (1 Corinthians 10:20). The excesses of some zealous believers in spiritual warfare should not lead to our neglecting the reality.

In fact, for Elijah at this stage, the fiercest battles lay ahead, though no doubt he (like us) longed for some foreshortening of the conflict – just as when the Great War of 1914-18 started in August, many anticipated an end to it all by Christmas. In spiritual terms, Ephesians 6:10-20 remain both always true and always relevant. Perhaps a prayerful re-read of that too familiar passage would shed fresh light on many present situations.

The conflict will certainly include times when the world (aided and abetted by the demonic) reckons it has seen the defeat of the people of God. What did Ahab think when Elijah vanished as fast as his prophet’s sandals could carry him? Although Ahab was unable to lay hands on him (18:10) it was no doubt a matter of ‘good riddance’: the king had seen him off, and that was that – until the drought started to bite. What did the enemies of Jesus think when he was crucified? To them, of course, it was the end of ‘that deceiver’ (Matthew

27:64). However, we know that even on the tree of agony and shame, Jesus ruled and reigned, and defeated Satan on our behalf (Colossians 2:15). When the world reckons us down and out, we still fight from victory and not towards it.

2. In the Front Line, we have to learn to trust and obey God's Word ourselves

It is often easier to give God's Word to others than to receive it ourselves. Even greatly gifted and greatly used spiritual leaders have to learn to trust and obey God's Word for themselves: The apostle who called thousands to repent on the Day of Pentecost had only just learned, before the risen Lord himself, what repentance and forgiveness were really all about. As a young Christian, I used to think that preachers I heard had totally taken on board personally the Word they were bringing. Having now served in the ministry very failingly for many years, I know it to be otherwise from hard personal experience!

So Elijah, having delivered the Word of God to another has to continue to receive it for himself (17:2-5a), and that in a situation of crisis and danger. He was probably not a man greatly given to looking in a mirror, but he did know what it was to look into the mirror of the Word of God and act on it (James 1:22-25). The fact that, as a prophet, God's Word was revealed directly to him did not mean that he did not have to learn trust and obedience just like every other believer.

How is it that sound, apparently spiritual Christians – including pastors – come 'unstuck'? The answer must be that they cease to receive the Word themselves in penitence, trust and obedience. The attendant at the petrol station may switch on the pumps for hundreds to fill their cars, but still run out of fuel himself a mile down the road.

3. In the Front Line, we have to learn to prove the guidance and the provision of God one step at a time

Just one step was made plain (17:3-4). Elijah needed only one, and so do we, but we would like more. Some motoring organizations can provide a whole series of maps to provide a route for a complete journey: We wish God would do the same, but he is too wise for that.

See how the Lord dealt with Elijah: He took him back east of Jordan to his home territory: Tishbe is on the River Kerith. Perhaps Elijah had played in this ravine as a boy. The surroundings were therefore in all probability familiar: How kind of the Lord! But now Elijah couldn't actually go back home – a reminder perhaps that he could not live in the past. Nor should the Christian or the church of the 21st century. We are to learn from the past, but not live in the past. Living in rural Kent as a small boy, certain woods and fields were deeply

imprinted on heart and memory. When I went back, they were always the same – until the Great Storm of 1987. The change in the landscape brought a palpable moment of insecurity. Elijah would have known Moses' final word to Benjamin: 'Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders' (Deuteronomy 33:12).

So what did the Lord show Elijah at this time? At least three things.

First, that he is the sovereign Lord of everything and so is well able to provide, even through the birds of the air. Yes, it was a basic diet, but necessities were met. Perhaps Elijah quoted Psalm 34 to himself, especially verses 8-10 – written by David 200 years before, when he was driven out by another king.

Second, he learned that our lives need to be freed from warped views and prejudices. It was ravens, members of the crow family that the Lord used to feed Elijah. Crows were unclean, unfit to eat (Leviticus 11:15, Deuteronomy 14:14): Elijah was not told to eat them, but to eat what had been in their beaks and they fed on carrion and offal. Many Christians have inbuilt prejudices to overcome, including social, cultural and racial. No doubt the Lord was preparing Elijah for his ministry to one Gentile woman.

Third, and above all, the solitary Elijah had to learn of the sufficiency of his Lord in the loneliness of the ravine. As Lance Pierson says, 'There are times when God tips us out of the nest', but no doubt Elijah found it was true that spiritually the wings of the eagle were even more significant than the beaks of the raven, for 'I carried you on eagles' wings' (Exodus 19:4).

Then it seemed that the provision of God was failing (17:7). Why didn't the Lord keep that one stream flowing miraculously? Elijah was himself now suffering as a result of the word of judgement he had spoken! The answer is that God's people are not necessarily exempt from the sufferings of their fellow beings at times of crisis. Read again of Cambodia in Don Cormack's *Killing Fields, Living Fields*.

But then the next one step was revealed (17:8-9). How kind of the Lord, yet also how searching of the Lord! Elijah's journey involved a 100 mile journey, which was, according to J. O. Sanders, 'Through country combed by Ahab's minions'. Sidon is what we know as Lebanon, so the woman was indeed a Gentile, so (as indicated earlier) that may have meant more prejudice for Elijah to overcome. Further, Zarephath means 'smelter's crucible', which is highly suggestive.

Elijah was told to head for the heart of Baal-worshipping country, and Jezebel's father was somewhere up the road! This was good faith-testing, faith-stretching stuff – good to read about but nail-biting to go through. Nor did things look very promising at the start (17:10-12). The personal or church situation into which the Lord has brought you may look very discouraging – at present. The same is true of an Indian pastor I know in South Africa. While moving to what

was in any case a particularly tough city centre assignment, the furniture van was hijacked. He and his wife lost everything (yes – *everything*). Yet now he has been used to build up a remarkable work of God – and they have a delightful, peaceful home. The beginning of a new chapter in the Lord’s plan is not the end of a chapter – although it sometimes seems that way.

4. In the Front Line, we learn to identify with people, and never to forget the value of the individual

When the brook dried up, no doubt Elijah identified with the people as a whole. But now he is called to identify with, and to minister to, one Gentile widow in her need. We need to be very cautious about the attitude we can find in Christian ministers (including, it may be, in ourselves) that somehow it is possible to rise ‘above and beyond’ ministry to the ‘ordinary’ individual, in and through the ‘ordinary’ local church. We need to be very cautious about those who love the platform more than they love people; and about those who seem to want to climb a hierarchical ladder more than to stoop to the humble and needy in their distress. There are those who pontificate on church politics, but never explain the way of salvation to a lost sheep. It was for me a good discipline to go straight from what some might call a significant Christian meeting to make a needed visit to an inmate in a local prison. Which, I wonder, was the more significant in the eyes of the Lord? Elijah at Zarephath is called to a Christlike ministry before Christ’s coming (See Matthew 15:21-28, Luke 4:26; 7:11-17, James 1:27.)

How did Elijah minister in this situation? Essentially (are you surprised?) by the Word of God and prayer. In verses 13-14 (including the promise, miraculously fulfilled, that ‘the jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry . . .’) we have the Word of God; in verses 20-21, we are told Elijah ‘cried to the Lord’ as he prayed over the body of the widow’s son.

The marvellous raising of the boy from the dead is one of only eight such incidents in Scripture, and we know that miracles appear chiefly in clusters in Scripture. In Warfield’s celebrated phrase, ‘Miracles do not appear vagrantly’. Miracles are not the Lord more at work, but differently at work: After all, in his Son, God is ceaselessly ‘sustaining all things by his powerful Word’ (Hebrews 1:3). When the Lord uses a human agent in particular miracles, it is generally to say that that miracle is a ‘sign’ to draw our attention to the pivotal ministry of the individual concerned in the unfolding plan of God. So the ministries of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles are authenticated for all who have eyes to see.

In fact, however, there are three miracles in 1 Kings 17, and the third is the greatest. The widow’s turn of phrase in verse 12 is unusual for a Sidonian, and may well indicate a measure of spiritual insight already: ‘As

surely as the Lord your God lives . . .’. The next stage is indicated in verse 18: Although, as De Vries says ‘Her sins must remain her own secret’, it seems there is a measure of conviction here. By verse 24 she is surely (as we would put it) a converted person: ‘Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth’. Her very healthy reaction is not ‘You are a miracle worker’ but that the word of the Lord through Elijah is ‘the truth’. It is just such a miracle (the greatest after the resurrection of Jesus) that is constantly repeated each time an individual enters the kingdom of God. It may be that some who long to see miracles as prevalent now as at certain periods of biblical history could be in danger of neglecting the priority of the miracle of the new birth, and of the one lost sheep being found.

So, in the midst of all Ahab’s huffing and puffing, the Lord continued to work out his plan for the eventual coming of his Son. If, at this stage in God’s plan, Elijah had stayed at home, his life would have been easier and quieter, but – as we thought at the beginning of this study – he would have known the Lord less and proved him less, and would have been less useful for his kingdom.

Unaware of who he was, a young lady remonstrated with Bishop Taylor-Smith, Chaplain-General in the 1914-18 War: ‘Why are you not out at the Front?’, ‘Madam,’ he replied, ‘If you look at me sideways, you will see I am out at the Front!’

The Lord’s call into the spiritual Front Line has not changed.

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