

Elijah – A God just like his

4th of a series: 1 Kings 19: Down but not out

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IT IS one of the most fascinating features of the Word of God that it moves from the broad sweep of the unfolding purposes of God to a close-up of one of the main characters involved. We think of Simon Peter as an obvious New Testament example, delineated 'warts and all', while some of his fellow apostles remain (to us) little more than names on a page.

One reason for this is surely that the kingdom of God is in his economy not only established through individuals, but within those same individuals as well. We need to remember that when we pray, 'Your kingdom come', that must include solitary personal prayer for the kingly rule of Christ to be worked out in our own hearts and lives.

Because the kingdom of God advances in the context of spiritual warfare, the progress of the battle depends not just on the strategy but on the good state of the troops and their equipment. When tank warfare was developing in World War I, British tanks achieved a spectacular breakthrough at Cambrai in November 1917. However, they had too short a range to exploit their advantage. If we may liken Elijah to one of God's tanks – apparently sturdy and steady – he had certainly seen spectacular breakthrough at Carmel; but does he have the staying power and the range to exploit the advantage to the full? Sadly, he trundles off on a skewed track, and we have to ask why.

'Elijah was a man just like us' (James 5:17); but 'he prayed earnestly' – Yes, he did, in 1 Kings 17 and 18. Ominously, there is no mention of prayer at the beginning of chapter 19, and when he does pray it is to say, 'I have had enough, Lord' (19:4). A crucial victory had been won (18:38); a mopping-up operation had happened (18:40), but the needed consolidation doesn't happen.

What's Gone Wrong?

Note the inter-related factors:

a. Exhaustion

Carmel must have been totally draining: Remember one definition of faith is 'Fear under control'. Elijah's adrenalin had been pumped dry. The mass execution that followed was a necessary but not a pleasant business and must have taken its toll of him.

Then, when Ahab went to have a square meal, Elijah went to pray (18:41-44). Whereas Ahab rode to Jezreel, Elijah ran

the 17 miles (18:45-46). He then runs from Jezreel to Beer-sheba (20 miles as the crow flies, and Elijah was no crow), and goes a further day's journey into the desert (19:3-4). No wonder he fell asleep (19:5): He was utterly exhausted. In such situations, Christians recall the incarnate Lord sympathizes with us from first hand experience – though no doubt Jesus' exhaustion was for entirely valid reasons (Mark 4:35-38). With Elijah's exhaustion went:

b. Panic (19:1-3)

Even for those who do not suffer from 'panic attacks', it is very easy to panic when exhausted. I write from experience: At a time of stress in ministry, I stood up to preach at the second of two morning services and stared at my notes again: My notes simply stared back at me. Unable to open my mouth I left the pulpit with some rapidity (The church wardens wisely played the recording of the same sermon from the earlier service: I am told the congregation listened as though it were the voice of the dead!). I know I was grateful for this incident in Elijah's life with which to identify – though I faced a Christian congregation, while he faced the fiercest of foes.

Had Elijah been on his way to Ahab and Jezebel to confirm the outworking in the nation's life of Yahweh's victory through his servant, and did he receive that message (19:2) en route? Jezebel wasn't going to allow the fact of her defeat to get in her way any more than the opponents of Jesus were going to allow the fact of the empty tomb to stand in their way (Matthew 28:11-15). The unregenerate human heart is indeed a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26).

Presumably Jezebel was not planning to kill such a powerful figure, but to drive him from the land – or why send a message first! Elijah forgot 'As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand' (17:1, NASB). Like Peter, he looked at the waves, or as Matthew 14:30 puts it 'He saw the wind'. It is hard, but crucial at such times to see by faith the invisible wind of the Spirit. We are called to be like Moses who 'persevered because he saw him who is invisible' (Hebrews 11:27). It seems unlikely that the example of Moses came into Elijah's mind at this moment!

There is also little doubt Elijah was suffering from a measure of:

c. Depression

As we know all too well in our disturbed society, believers are not necessarily exempt from this: That is surely one reason amongst many why the book of Job is in the Bible.

It may well be Elijah was the classic manic-depressive. As far as possible we all need to know and understand our temperaments, as given by God and as affected by the Fall. Many years ago Hallesby wrote a fascinating book in the

light of scripture *Temperament and the Christian Faith*. Although the categories Hallesby used are now severely dated, the book remains a fascinating and valid study. Here (19:4), Elijah felt like death.

Depression may indeed be outside our immediate control, but sometimes more under control is whether or not we 'wallow'; and in Elijah there certainly seems to have been:

d. Self-Pity (19:4,10,14)

In the nature of things, depression makes the sufferer very inward looking. Those not suffering in this way cannot easily identify fully with those for whom life has become a long, dark tunnel with no light at the end; but sometimes especially a solitary sufferer may seem resolved to travel the tunnel slowly and savour the darkness. In Luther's 'Letters of Spiritual Counsel' (SCM, 1955) is included the following 'table talk' (page 95):

'Solitude produces melancholy. When we are alone the worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evil. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no-one is so unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences. In short, when we are alone, we think of one thing and another, we leap to conclusions, and we interpret everything in the worst light. On the other hand, we imagine that other people are very happy, and it distresses us that things go well with them and evil with us'.

A part of the self-pity was the 'I-only-am-left' syndrome. What about Obadiah? And had Elijah noticed none of the 7000 whom the Lord had noted (19:18)? This can be a danger for those with a right zeal for orthodoxy in heterodox times: 'Only thee and me are sound, and even thee is a little unsound'. The Lord is not so careless of his cause as some (perhaps including Elijah at this point) may think.

Was there also a hint of:

e. Self-Seeking?

Why did Elijah go to Horeb (Sinai)? There is no record that the Lord had sent him (cf 17:3,9 and 18:1). As an Old Testament prophet, Elijah was certainly guided by the Word of God in a particularly direct way on other occasions, but not in chapter 19. Perhaps it was a healthy spiritual instinct that took Elijah to a place of so many spiritual associations to seek God; but perhaps it wasn't. Note the sequence of 19:9, 19:13 and 19:15a. Was Elijah at this point visualising himself too much as a second Moses? Donald Wiseman in his Tynedale commentary comments, 'The historian deliberately selects events which parallel Moses' (page 172); but was this parallel first in the Lord's mind, or just in Elijah's?

Had the 'mountain top' experience of Carmel not been enough? 'Elijah was still on the hunt for his big day', says William Still. But for Elijah on Mount Sinai, it was quite different from Moses' situation, even though the same cave may be being referred to (Exodus 33:18-34:9). All of us must be on our guard against self-seeking, even with a thick spiritual veneer, to the end of our days.

We must also ask: Wasn't there some persistent:

f. Self-Justification?

Compare 19:10 and 14. Perhaps Elijah needed to work the same things out of his system a second time; but perhaps he was not prepared to admit that he had taken a second wrong turning when he left the desert in verse 8. Perhaps the Lord had intended the food and drink to carry him back where he had come from.

In neither verses 9 nor 14 is Elijah actually answering the Lord's question. If he had been more honest, and he had been ready to get back on track a little earlier, might there would have been more for him to do in 'mopping up' Jezebel? So we too need to be on our guard against self-justification to the very end of life. John Scott has been heard to say in latter years, 'The last chapter can often be the hardest'. As those called to practise justification by faith as well as to preach it, we must as a consequence reject all self-justification in our own lives.

So if someone as apparently stalwart as Elijah can take a wrong turn in the battle, which way will the conflict go? The marvel is that God, as so often, makes this an opportunity for his grace to abound and to win the day:

What is God Doing About it?

a. He deals with the physical needs.

Elijah is given a couple of good meals: 19:5-8. What an amazingly caring God we have! We remember that amongst the everyday events with which the risen Lord allowed himself to get involved was getting a meal for his hungry disciples when they returned from a night's fishing (John 21:9-14). If we reckon, as many do, that 'the Angel of the Lord' (19:7) is the pre-incarnate Son of God, then we see a particularly marvellous parallel between events here and in John 21.

There is little doubt that some – perhaps many – of the spiritual and emotional and nervous problems which servants of God face would be at least much improved by more adequate food, rest and sleep. Sleep, as someone has said is 'balm of hurt minds, chief nourisher in life's feast'. Decisions to resign are generally not wisely made immediately before days off or holidays! Indeed, it could be salutary to conduct a survey to see if there is correlation between those who have left local church ministry in particular after finding the pressures too much, and those who have also persistently had inadequate holidays and free time. Whatever the word may exactly mean, it is worth noting that we are not very far into scripture before we read in Genesis 2:2 that God 'rested'.

b. He wants Elijah out of the desert (verse 7)

The desert was not a place for someone who was stressed and depressed. Someone may be reading this exposition for whom the message is: 'Get right away for a day off or a holiday'. For those in local church ministry, holidays at home are virtually a non-starter. It may be right to be praying about an actual move to another sphere, but it may be right to prove the Lord in present situations for somewhat longer than we sometimes wish. In one sphere of service, I had reckoned that a particular length of time in that work would be right: but I found in the end that the Lord kept us there

exactly double my earlier estimate!

c. He listens (Verses 9b, 10, 13b and 14)

A question starts the flow: The cork comes out of the bottle. There is surely a parallel with the way that the Lord listened to the outpourings of Job. We often refer to the patience of Job, but we need to refer too to the patience of the Lord in listening to Job!

Note Psalm 62:8: 'Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.' Perhaps we are not as good at this as we should be, but the invitation is there. On the odd occasions when my wife needs to buy a milk jug, she always insists on checking first to see if it is a good pourer! We need to pray for grace that when we, like Elijah, have much we should be sharing with our heavenly Father that we are ready to pour it out. It is also a reminder that there are few ministries as crucial as an active listening ministry, undertaken in the Lord's name. Of course, for Elijah the solitary there was no such human listener available; one cannot but help wondering how he would have coped in any case if there had been.

d. He restores a balanced understanding of the spiritual life (verses 11-13).

The echo in verse 11a of Exodus 33:19 is surely deliberate, but the occasion is in fact very different. The Lord was not in the wind, earthquake, or even the fire, as he had been in the fire at Carmel. Indeed all three can be signs of significant divine activity: See, for example, Exodus 15:10 and Matthew 27:51.

But a life of walking with the Lord is not all wind, earthquake and fire: The Lord is saying 'Elijah, learn again to hear my word in the gentle whisper' (19:12), literally 'The sound of a gentle silence'. That is how it still is for those of us who have the word of the Lord in scripture. Much of receiving God's Word is steady walking, listening, trusting and obeying. Christians today may say: 'God has stopped speaking to me' or 'The Lord doesn't seem to be around any more'. What they are saying may reflect a real and legitimate concern, for grieving of the Spirit, or God choosing to 'hide himself' to test his children can indeed be spiritual realities; but on many occasions we may need to ask: Is the believer more interested in the Word or in dramatic side-effects?

e. He gives Elijah fresh work to do (Verses 15-21).

The Lord does always have fresh work for us to do, and finally in old age may shut us up to the most vital ministry of all: prayer. Here, remarkably, Elijah is to anoint a pagan king of a pagan country whom the Lord will use to discipline his people. As the sovereign Lord that is no problem to him! Elijah is also to anoint Jehu as the next king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor. Verse 18 is surely also a reminder that Elijah now needs to seek out the fellowship of the like-minded whom the Lord did have, but whose existence the over solitary prophet had found it all too easy to forget: 'He also had now to seek mutual encouragement among others who could help him in his mission', says Ronald Wallace.

Drawing the Threads Together

We are to know, walk with and serve the Lord in our generation; but here as so often in God's Word we are reminded that the growth of the kingdom continues until the end of time.

What will encourage our faith is to realise that our God is the sovereign Lord of all men, all nations and all ages – Hazael is finally in his hand and purposes as much as Ahab, or Jehu who finally dispensed with the evil house of Ahab. Our commission, like Elijah, is to bring the Word of God to our generation; under God to make provision for the raising up and training of men who will bring the Word of God to the next generation, and whose own lives will reflect trust and obedience in the word they proclaim. In Old Testament terms, we have Elijah calling out and training Elisha; in New Testament terms it is the apostolic injunction of Paul to Timothy: 2 Timothy 1:13,14; 2:1-3.

The successors of Elijah and of Paul are also to be men who know what it is to stand in the presence of God, to bring God's Word equally faithfully to ruler and people or to widow and child, who have themselves to learn to live by that Word; and although sometimes like Elijah they may falter or stumble, there will be those who will pray until the purposes of God are accomplished.

A Concluding Contrast

While this present series of studies concludes at this point, we must not fail to notice a remarkable contrast at the end of Ahab's and Elijah's lives, reflecting the different paths they had followed.

In 1 Kings 22:34-38 Ahab died in a manmade chariot, representing failed human achievement, a life and an eternal destiny thrown away – and he died 'As the Word of the Lord had declared' (verse 38). Ahab could not escape the authority of the divine Word.

In total contrast 2 Kings 2:3 records the prophetic Word of the Lord with regard to Elijah's departure; and in verse 11 we have the marvellous fulfilment. Here is no manmade chariot, but the Chariot of the Lord of hosts to ensure his servant is taken safely home – transport and chariot provided for him by grace – free of charge, and no fare to pay!

We cannot therefore be surprised that, for the reassurance of every believer in every generation, there is one more sighting of Elijah recorded in the pages of scripture. For whatever assortment of reasons Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3), the most fundamental reassurance is this: That because the Lord of Glory went to the Cross of Shame for every true believer in the living God, both before and after his incarnation, we may know without a doubt that every one is taken safely into the presence of that same Lord Jesus Christ. And, with all our earthly work and attendant struggles over, that is as Paul reminds us in Philippians 1:21 'Better by far'.

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