

Yahweh Elohim of Israel Liveth

“What doest thou here, Elijah?”

Nothing is known of his family, tribe or background. He appears suddenly in the record for the first time in 1 Kings 17. His first utterance is of condemnation and judgment upon Israel.

The period of his ministry appears to have been about twenty years—from about 870 to 850 bc. This is during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah, kings of Israel.

The ministry of Elisha who followed him appears to have been about twice as long—from 850 to 800 bc—during the reigns of Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz and Jehoash of Israel. Both these prophets were sent to the northern tribes.

The name Elijah means “Yahweh is God.” This was his great message in a time of corrupt idolatry.

The name Elisha means “God is Salvation”—completing the message. These two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, parallel the ministry of John and Christ in many ways.

There were four great periods of miracles in Israel’s history:

1. During the Exodus and wilderness wandering (the establishment of the nation).
2. During the time of Elijah and Elisha (the great crisis).
3. During the time of Daniel and his companions (the end of the Kingdom and beginning of Gentile times).
4. The time of Christ (new dispensation—end of the Law).

And the fifth is soon to come, the end of Gentile times and beginning of the Millennium.

As with Christ, there are three occurrences in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha of raising the dead: three is the symbol of resurrection. Also we find lepers healed, blind given sight, and multitudes fed.

But also there were punitive and destructive miracles. This first announcement of Elijah of the withholding of the rain from Israel, and the fire that he called down from heaven destroying successively the captains of fifty and their fifties.

In the case of Elisha—the bears destroying the young men who mocked him, and the leprosy put upon Gehazi.

Christ’s ministry was of a different spirit.

Elijah was one of the greatest characters of the Bible. He appeared with Moses at the transfiguration as a representative of all the prophets, as Moses was of the Law.

He and Enoch alone did not die, but were taken into the heaven by God because of a special relationship to Him.

He is mentioned in the New Testament more frequently than any other prophet; and he is to come again at the last day to rouse Israel again to God.

He is the subject of the last prophecy of the Old Testament, Malachi 4. The Old Testament ends with the prophecy of the coming again of Elijah.

James cites Elijah as the great example of the power and prayer of the righteous. Jesus cites Elijah and Elisha as illustrating the call of the Gentiles (Lk. 4:26)-

“Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, but unto none of them was he sent save unto Sarepta”

-that is, to a Gentile. And so with Elisha (v. 27)-

“Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none was cleansed save Naaman the Syrian.”

Elijah performed eight recorded miracles; Elisha sixteen-it will be remembered he asked for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah, and received it because he was faithful and fearless, and saw Elijah's departure right through to the end.

Elijah is very prominent in the New Testament, from the angel's announcement to Zecharias of John's birth, to James' reference to the power of prayer.

Elijah was the great arouser and reformer of Scripture-to turn the hearts of the children to the ways of their fathers.

John the Baptist, whom Jesus said was the greatest of the prophets, was another strange, wild man from the wilderness, clad in the same rough garments; and he came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Elijah paralleled John; while Elisha is strongly typical of Christ. Elisha means the same as Jesus-“God Saves.”

Elijah's ruling passion was uncompromising jealousy for the Lord God. He would tolerate no blurring of the issues, and no compromise with evil.

His great mission was to call Israel back to God-a mighty defender of God's Truth in a time of persecution and danger and wickedness in high places.

It was essential to God's purpose that such a man be raised at such a time-so he was raised up. He had come to arouse, to teach, to call out. Jehu who followed him was sent to purge and destroy without mercy.

Baal worship, like the world's current obsession, was glorification and worship of the lust of the flesh. Israel was fast sinking into utter Canaanite corruption and abomination, just as the whole world is today.

Elijah, the great Defender of God's Law, is tied in with Moses, the great Giver of God's Law-He fled to Sinai, the “Mount of God,” and fasted there forty days. He ascended to heaven at or near Mt. Nebo-Moses' burying place. Like Elijah, Moses fled to Sinai when he felt his mission had failed.

Elijah's first sudden appearance (1 Kgs. 17) was with a dread-ful message of judgment. It was a great crisis in Israel's history.

Ahab was the most wicked king Israel had (1 Kgs. 21:25).

“There was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.”

And in 16:33-

“Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.”

It was not just personal wickedness, but a systematic attempt to break down and corrupt the true worship of God-like today, a mixing of true and false-and mix Baal worship in with it.

Baal worship, brought in by Jezebel, beside having the prestige and power of the throne behind it, was very gratifying and appealing to the flesh, like the present corrupt modern philosophy of so-called freedom that is breaking down all the moral barriers; while the self-control of pure worship and obedience to God has always been humbling to the spirit and crucifying to the flesh.

Without a bulwark of strength like Elijah to sound the trumpet-call, Baal worship would have been triumphant.

The trend was-like today, in the world and amongst many of those called from the world-instead of a clear-cut distinction, to try to make the two compatible-to emphasize the similarities, and minimize the differences between Baal-worship and Yahweh-worship.

Elijah's first recorded words are especially significant in this connection (1 Kgs. 17:1)-

“The Lord God-Yahweh Elohim-of Israel liveth.”

(Note that in the A.V. “as” is in italics-not in the original).

This was his great message, and the message of his name Elijah: his mission was to prove this. So is ours. There is a difference-a life and death difference-between Truth and Error.

“There shall not be dew nor rain these years.”

The Old Testament record does not give the length of the drought, but Jesus and James both give it as three and one half years. This is clearly typical of the three and one half times, the 1,260 years, that occurs in various prophecies.

The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11, whose period was 1,260 years (three and one half times) had-

“Power to shut heaven that it rain not in the days of their prophecy.”

Also in another application, from the Exodus of Israel to the return of Christ is three and one half thousand years. The Jews have been disobedient the whole time-there has been spiritual drought from the beginning.

At the end of the three and one half thousand years, Christ will come like Elijah, assemble Israel, force the issue, manifest the true God, and destroy all the false prophets of the flesh.

Verses 4-6: Ravens provided bread and flesh morning and evening. Bread and flesh are symbols of God's provision through Christ. We must “eat his flesh” and “partake of the bread of life” (Jn. 6:48-56).

The ravens were unclean birds. In Peter's vision, the unclean birds and beasts symbolized the Gentiles, and the extension of God's mercy to them.

Elijah, sustained by unclean birds, was to be sustained through the famine of Israel's wickedness by a faithful Gentile, the widow of Zarephath. Zarephath is close to Zidon, the center of the dominion of Jezebel's father. It is outside of Israel. Christ said of this (Lk. 4:25-26)-

“There were many widows in Israel, but to none was Elijah sent, but to a Gentile.”

Similarly, Jesus himself went to this same place and found a Gentile of great faith-the Syrophenician woman. She recognized that the Gentiles were dogs and unclean, but she sought in humility the crumbs of God's mercy that Israel so carelessly dropped.

The widow was in the bitterest extremity-about to prepare the last meal left for herself and her son, and then resignation to slow death by starvation. Elijah said to her (v. 13)-

“Make me a cake first.”

It seems cruel and selfish-but it was a divine test of her faith, with undreamed-of blessings in store if faith should prove true and strong, as it did on this occasion.

The woman showed great faith in serving Elijah first out of her last meal. But consider how much she received for so little! This is a picture of the salvation of God.

We must, in faith, freely lay our all on the line first. Then, and then alone, will faith be rewarded, and salvation extended.

The little that she gave in faith first was her all-and she gave it freely. That is the lesson. If we give all, freely, we shall receive a millionfold in return.

But we can't, in doubt or hesitancy, try it out just a little bit first, to see if it will work before we venture our all. Remember Ananias and Sapphira, who wanted to try it that way.

But the son of the widow died, and she cried to Elisha-

“Art thou come to call my sin to remembrance?” (v. 18)

She was conscious of unworthiness and had a sense of sin in the presence of this holy man of God. She felt his presence made her more responsible, and brought her sins into remembrance with God-

“Where much is given, much is required” (Lk. 12:48).

But the presence of holiness is to bless and not to condemn. Elijah restored her son to life, and she was comforted, and more deeply convinced of his divine appointment, and the truth of his words.

In the next chapter, the issue is joined between Baal and Yahweh. Israel is assembled at Mount Carmel, God is manifested in fire, and the prophets of Baal are destroyed.

Elijah ran before Ahab's chariot all the way from Mount Carmel to Jezreel. Here was the exultant apex of his zeal and triumph over Baal and for God.

But immediately, as he arrives at Jezreel, there was an abrupt and drastic change. He plunged in a moment from exultation to despair.

He had stood up alone against all the ruling power of Israel. He had fearlessly denounced the king to his face; forced a national showdown with the forces of Baal; and discredited and destroyed Baal's prophets.

Yet now he fled for his life, and hid, and had to be corrected and persuaded by God.

He, the great and zealous champion who had accomplished so much, and through whom the mighty power of God had been manifested; at whose word the heavens had withheld their rain for three and one half years-he gave up, and lost heart, and wanted to die-the great prophet who stood with Moses and Christ at the transfiguration.

There is both comfort and warning in this. He had done all he could-withheld rain-brought down fire from heaven-manifested God's power-exposed and destroyed prophets-still the evil power was in control and was totally unmoved by all the divine manifestation.

He had been fearless; but he fled, lonely and discouraged. Something was wrong in his outlook. He was very jealous for God, but took the whole matter too personally. He had counted on and set his heart on reform.

James says Elijah was a man "of like passions" as we. How true this was! There are no automatic heroes. We tend to expect the old prophets to be automatically and effortlessly strong, as if they were some super race.

This is how we excuse ourselves from manifesting the enduring, suffering faith that they manifested.

But the weak-and God can only use the weak, those who have sufficient wisdom to recognize their weakness-the weak are made strong and kept strong, only by constant effort, constant prayer. This is the record of the faithful.

"Out of weakness they were made strong."

This, and this alone, is how they-

"Subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of aliens" (Heb. 11:33-34).

But Elijah in his despair got things a little out of proportion. He took too low and narrow a view. There are no failures with God. All is foreseen, All is part of the plan. Most of the problems are just to develop us.

God was still in control-His plan would succeed. The whole weight of the problem did not rest on Elijah's shoulders. He was still just a servant of God, just to do what God said, and leave the concern about the outcome to God.

But we find God was very gentle and compassionate with him. God fed him and showed care for him and gave him time to come to himself, and manifested Himself to him in both power and love.

God gave him not just food as such, but a fresh, hot cake baking on the coals-food still bearing the evidence of living, loving preparation and care.

All have these periods of reaction and discouragement, especially after a great effort and a great manifestation of zeal that suddenly is ended, perhaps unexpectedly and not entirely satisfactorily.

It is very comforting to see how the great characters of Scripture have had their times of stress and spiritual exhaustion, and to see how God has borne with them and brought them through-to labor in joy and zeal again.

“He requested that he might die” (1 Kgs. 19:4).

He was taking himself too seriously. He was presuming to tell God what was best.

He had had a job to do and had done it. It had not turned out as he had expected, but there are no mistakes with God. Only God can judge what is success and failure. Present, external results mean nothing.

And only God knows when a servant’s work is done. Some have prayed to live when it was time to die. And some have prayed to die when it was time to live.

Both were misguided and unwise, and forgetting that God always knows best, and it is best to leave everything to Him. Only God Himself knows what He expects and what He is working out in us.

Disappointment seems to have been the great problem. He expected great results from great effort, and there were none.

Who are we to get discouraged if things do not go as we planned, or if there seems to be a lack of results in our efforts-just as if our puny little efforts really meant anything in the vast scope of eternity?

He ran away-right down through Judah-to Horeb (Sinai) where God had manifested Himself in power and glory, and where the holy covenant had been made between God and the people through the great mediator Moses-where the nation had been born in glory and in hope.

Why did he run there? Because it seemed like everywhere else there was evil and corruption and failure. There was a place of holiness, away from it all, the Mount of God.

“What doest thou here, Elijah?” (1 Kgs. 19:13)

Who told you to leave your post of duty, just because of your personal feelings? What happened to your work for God-your joy and zeal and faith in the Lord?

And there was a mighty wind, and an earthquake, and a consuming fire, but God was not in any of these. These are destructive things. God uses them, but He is not in them.

These are but the negative side-necessary because man is evil, and evil must be punished and destroyed. Man in his folly forces God to bring evil when He desires to bring good-

“Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly, therefore the Lord bringeth upon them the great river, the King of Assyria” (Isa. 8:6).

We foolishly force God to punish us.

But God is love. God is in the still small voice-the gentle voice of a loving Father’s instruction and comfort for His children. This is the real essence of the purpose. The other-the wind, the earthquake, and the fire-is but the passing background of travail through which the still small voice is leading many sons to glory.

Elijah should have known this. It was the seven thousand in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal that counted. They did not show in the general evil picture, but they were there and God knew them. All others were but dross.

We can see why Elijah, in his discouraged flight, should be drawn to Sinai-why God would lead him there.

He was taken right back to the beginning, the glorious beginning, and was shown a broader view.

He was assured that sin would be punished, and that the purpose would not fail, and that a faithful successor should carry on his work, and Elijah would know that that work would go on and on in the earth-the still small voice of holiness and victory amid all the wind and earthquake and fire of evil and failure.

Jehu was the earthquake, as Hazael king of Syria was the wind, and Elisha was the fire, and the seven thousand faithful were the still, small voice.

If we but keep the right perspective, we can never get discouraged, we can never think of failure. In God's sight there was no failure.

There is never more than a remnant, but that remnant is all-important to God, and He is ever watching over it, though it may sometimes appear that He leaves it alone in the darkness, as He appeared to leave Job-to test him to the uttermost and bring him forth like gold.