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ELIJAH
An Ordinary Man
In Extraordinary Times

As Jesus suffered on an executioner’s cross, onlookers thought they overheard Him calling for Elijah to come help Him. Someone immediately went to offer Him sour wine to ease His pain. Others said, “Leave Him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save Him.” Why Elijah? Who is this prophet who made such an impact on the history of Israel that people were still talking about him hundreds of years later?

In the following pages, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, discovers insights in the story of Elijah that tell us a lot about our God—and about ourselves.

Martin R. De Haan II

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John Wayne was a movie megastar. In fact, film studios used to base their annual projections on his popularity. He was so bankable that his movies consistently drew crowds to the theaters in the 40s, 50s, and 60s—many of them filled with starry-eyed boys like me who watched the Duke's adventures breathlessly, imagining that we were riding at his side to save the day. John Wayne was an American hero.

There was something about the Duke, however, that I didn't understand until I was older. Wayne was not a great actor. Unlike Gregory Peck, who became lost in the character of whatever role he was playing, John Wayne was always John Wayne. Whether playing a Western sheriff, a World War II marine, or a modern-day detective, he was always himself—not the character.

This disappointing realization showed me something I didn't want to know. As a screen hero, Wayne was larger than life. But as an actor, he was just average. Being average in the garb of greatness was a hard concept for me to understand. It made me reevaluate my assumptions.

**A MAN LIKE JOHN WAYNE?**

This same tension hit me a few years ago when I studied the life of a great prophet of ancient Israel. I had grown up hearing Sunday school stories about Elijah. He too captured my imagination. As an Old Testament superhero, Elijah seemed to be able to do everything short of leaping tall buildings in a single bound.
The prophet Elijah brings to mind some pretty strong images:
• Boldly defying a king
• Raising a boy from the dead
• Calling down fire from heaven
• Riding to heaven in a fiery chariot

And the fact that such a man appears in the pages of the Bible also helps to make him bigger than life. It’s hard for me to imagine Elijah waiting for a bus or buying burgers at McDonald’s. Yet the New Testament makes a point of letting us know that Elijah was, after all, a very ordinary person.

A MAN LIKE US
The New Testament says that Elijah was subject to the same emotions and moods as the rest of us. Even though his life was marked by miracles, eight words help us identify with him. The apostle James said of Elijah that he “was a man with a nature like ours” (Jas. 5:17).

It’s possible that James was referring to legends that portrayed Elijah as more of a god than a man. So, while emphasizing that God has given prayer to help us in our weakness, the apostle made it clear that Elijah was someone like us. He had the same weaknesses and failures that tell the story of our own lives.

This prophet who engaged in so many amazing events in the Bible was, in fact, not Superman. He was, in a sense, every man. He experienced the discouragement, fears, and doubts that mark all of us from time to time. He pictures for us human frailty, spiritual dependence, and the great need for prayer in our walk with God.
**A MAN OF MYSTERY**

Elijah shows up abruptly in the Old Testament record of Israel’s kings, appearing on the pages of the Bible with minimal introduction—no lineage, no pedigree, and no résumé. First Kings 17:1 simply says:

*Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead.*

We can’t even be sure of what is meant by calling him “the Tishbite.” Some think this is a reference to Tishbe, a city beyond Jordan, in the tribe of Gad. The word *tishbe*, however, can also be translated “pilgrim or sojourner.” It could simply mean that he was homeless and wandering in Gilead before the Bible calls our attention to him.

The most we can be sure of is that Elijah is “of the inhabitants of Gilead.” Gilead was east of the Jordan River, inhabited by the tribes of Israel (Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh) who, in the days of Joshua, did not enter the Land of Promise.

This lack of background adds to the mystique of “Elijah the Tishbite.” Because he comes to us in obscurity, some writers have tried to fill in the gaps, speculating at length about his parentage, miraculous birth, and education in the school of the prophets.

What seems most apparent, however, is that the Scriptures use Elijah’s obscurity to emphasize that his significance is in his God, not in himself. His Hebrew name is *Eliyahu* (literally, *Yah is El*), signifying that Jehovah is God. As his story unfolds, we see the significance of his name—Elijah was sent to demonstrate to Israel that *Yah* (Jehovah), not Baal, is the one true God.

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A MAN FOR EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.” Emerson reminds us that our response to the conditions of our lives is more important than the nature of our circumstances.

Elijah is an ancient showcase for such wisdom. There are only a few periods in the Bible when we see a wave of “sign miracles.” In most periods of history, the servants of God do not go around healing the sick, raising the dead, and calling down fire from heaven.

Yet Elijah, and his protégé Elisha, lived in one of those exceptional times. The miracles that distinguished their public lives paralleled the supernatural display of power that marked two other periods of history. In Israel’s supernatural exodus, the miracles of Moses had shown that God was delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt. Many years later, the miracles of Christ and His apostles would make it clear that the same God was delivering people of all nations and all times from the spiritual penalty and bondage of sin.

So what was happening in the days of Elijah that required such a supernatural display? The northern kingdom of Israel had begun to slide into the darkness of idolatry. In fact, spiritual conditions had deteriorated so badly that Elijah mistakenly thought he was the only person who still believed in the God of Israel (1 Ki. 19:10). In one of the darkest times of Israel’s history, God intervened to show Himself as Lord of lords and God of gods.
TIMES OF COURAGE
(1 Ki. 17:1)

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 years, except at my word.”

With these few words, Elijah stepped into the pages of the Bible, and right into the middle of a hornet’s nest. Israel’s economy was based on agriculture. Now, in response to Elijah’s prayer, God was about to withhold the seasonal rains. Why? As a wake-up call to His people. It was a moment of corrective judgment. Israel had fallen into Baal worship. The removal of rain in an already dry climate would be a crippling blow.

As the corrective hand of God fell upon His people, Elijah—a nobody from nowhere—stepped into the palace of King Ahab to speak truth in the halls of power.

AHAB’S SIN
The king of Israel had violated the first commandment of Moses. He was leading his own people back into idolatry.

This was not the first time God’s people would forget the One who delivered them from Egypt, provided for them in the wilderness, and led them into this Promised Land. From the days of Sinai and the golden calf to the time of Ezekiel and the idol-infested Holy of Holies, God’s chosen people were again seduced by the gods of the land.

In the 21st century, we may consider ourselves too enlightened to engage in something so primitive as idol worship. Yet, idolatry is nothing more than putting
something else—anything else—in the place of God. Bible teacher Gene Getz suggests that we do this today on several levels.

We have our:

- **Humanistic Gods.** This includes a wide array of people such as sports stars, musicians, and leaders.
- **Materialistic Gods.** “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Mt. 6:24 NIV), or the things that money buys.
- **Sensual Gods.** “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5).
- **Relational Gods.** Even something as wonderful as healthy relationships can become idols. Jesus warned, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:37).

God confronted Ahab about what Paul warns us against in Romans 1:23—worshiping the creature instead of the Creator.

**GOD’S RESPONSE**

*There shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word (v.1).*

Bible teacher John Whitcomb wrote, “Like a meteor suddenly flashing across the darkened sky, Elijah appears on the scene without genealogy, without historical background, and without warning. One thunderous judgment from heaven through his lips, and he disappeared without a trace!” (*Solomon To The Exile*, p.50).

Elijah’s message to Ahab had a strong precedent. Years before, Moses had warned that national
apostasy would cause the rains to cease (Dt. 11:16-17).

In the face of repeated warnings, Israel was unfaithful to her God. So, as promised, His blessings on the land would be suspended. Under Ahab’s watch, the land would experience more than 3 years of drought.

ELIJAH’S PRAYER
James 5:17-18 tells us that prayer was the means God used to signal and release these events of judgment. It’s amazing that a nobody like Elijah could have that kind of spiritual boldness and courage. He was a man like us, yet James says that remarkable results followed his prayer.

No mention is made of Elijah’s prayer in 1 Kings. But James tells us that he prayed “earnestly” for the rain to be withheld. And it was!

He also prayed very specifically. He prayed that it would not dew or rain—no moistening at all.

For 3½ years, God used the prayers of a man like us to confront those who had drifted away from His love.

Applying It
Elijah understood the power of prayer, and he practiced it—giving us some key questions to consider:

• Do we think that our effectiveness for God is dependent on our talents or position? Or are we dependent on God Himself?
• Do we see the true God as the one and only object of our worship? Or are our hearts and minds clouded by other gods?
• Do we live in the reality of the resource of prayer, through which God can do amazing things according to His will?
TIMES OF TRAINING
(1 Ki. 17:2-10)

Several years ago, sports-shoe maker Nike ran a series of ads themed, “What are you getting ready for?” One showed an NFL football player throwing himself down a steep, rocky hill. Another had a soccer player doing everything in life with his feet. The point? What we do today is getting us ready for something.

What are you getting ready for? Whatever it is, training will be needed:

• Hours at the piano learning scales and practicing sonatas;
• Days in the hot August sun enduring two-a-day football practices;
• Years in a laboratory preparing for a career in medical research.

It seems that for much of life there are seasons of preparation. And the more intense something is, the more intense the training will be. This was true for Elijah as well. God had a plan to build more depth of trust and character into his servant. Bible teacher J. Vernon McGee wrote:

You get the impression that Elijah was a rugged individual, and he was. But there’s something else that should be said here about him—God had to train this man. God has always had a method of training the men He uses by taking them to the desert. . . . This is God’s method for training His men. Now He is going to take out this man Elijah and teach him several things he needs to learn (Thru The Bible, Vol II, p.283).

GOD’S DIRECTION
(vv.2-4)

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.”

Gilead was east of the Jordan River, so God was sending Elijah back home to a brook that was no more than a wadi—a seasonal stream that carries water only during the winter rains. Wadi Cherith seems like an unusual place for God to provide food and water during a 3-year drought. Perhaps there was a cave or a shelter there. We don’t know. What we do know, however, is that Wadi Cherith is in the teeth of the wilderness—a hard place to live and a hard place to learn.

Elijah would have to travel over 30 miles on foot through barren land to arrive at a less-than-hospitable place. But this is where God sent him. Elijah had much to learn, and the days of solitude would furnish much-needed moments of reflection and learning.

ELIJAH’S RESPONSE (v.5)

So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan.

Notice that God made promises to Elijah that were directly linked to his response: He obeyed God’s Word, believed God’s promise, and went to the Wadi Cherith. Undoubtedly, faith is always a critical issue in our relationship with God, and Elijah responded with trust and obedience.

Elijah made the long
trek to a lonely place and settled in there. It must have been an interesting first day at Cherith. Did he watch the skies, wondering if ravens would really show up? This was a new experience for Elijah. As German biographer F. W. Krummacher wrote:

Come, let us pay a visit to this man of God in his new dwelling place. Dead silence reigns, interrupted perhaps by the cry of the solitary bittern, while among the heath and juniper bushes broods the ostrich. All is wilderness and solitude. Not a human footprint is seen (cited by W. J. Petersen, Meet Me On The Mountain, p.37).

Imagine the isolation he felt. Alone in the desert, Elijah would learn of his God in this hard place.

GOD’S PROVISION (v.6)
The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. There at Wadi Cherith, God’s promised provision nourished Elijah. Notice how God provided:

• Ravens, voracious birds of prey, would never naturally relinquish their food. Perhaps God used these particular birds to impress upon Elijah the real source of his food so he would trust God for His provision instead of the birds themselves.
• Bread and meat twice a day (compared to the manna and quail in the wilderness).
• Water from Cherith. God provided in a way that was unique yet connected to memories of past expressions of His faithfulness. God always
uses the proper means to accomplish His purposes and training in the lives of His children. This is true whether those means are natural (Wadi Cherith) or supernatural (raven-delivered sandwiches). He remains Jehovah-Jireh, “the Lord that provides.” God's faithfully kept promise is part of Elijah’s preparation.

ELIJAH’S TRAINING (vv.7-10a)

And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. 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. Bible teachers believe that Elijah was in the wilderness for over a year. And even though food arrived daily, his anxiety level must have been rising. For as the drought continued, the river became a stream, then a creek, then a mere trickle.

This was part of God’s training of Elijah. Imagine what must have been happening to the prophet’s faith as the water level in the brook dipped lower and lower. God could have brought water from the rocks, as He had for Israel in the wilderness, but He didn’t. The water was running out.

Remember, Elijah was “a man like us.” How might he have responded:

• Wanting to panic?
• Wanting to give up and die? (as he later wanted).
• Wanting to reverse God’s judgment because it was affecting him personally?

This is all part of the training process. Elijah needed to know that he
could trust God far more than water—even in the desert, and even when the brook dried up. He needed to learn that:

*God knew all along that the brook would dry up.* It was inevitable. The wadi was dependent on the heavy rains of late autumn and early winter. And when those rains did not arrive, the brook disappeared.

*God's care was not hampered when the brook dried up.* It would be easy for Elijah to assume that he had been forgotten by God. But he had to learn that he was dependent on God, not the brook.

*God was still in control, even when the brook dried up.* In fact, God was so in control that He totally disrupted the comfort zone that Elijah had become used to. Why? To stretch him in new ways.

When our comfort zone is shattered, it doesn’t mean that God has lost control. But it may mean that we’ve stopped hearing the voice of God because we’ve grown too comfortable.

Even as the water receded, Elijah stayed at the brook until he was instructed to go elsewhere (“Arise go” [v.9]). The lessons of trusting and obedience were being imprinted on his heart.

So God sent him from the wadi on a journey to Zarephath. What do we know about this town?

- It was 80-90 miles northwest of Cherith, on the seacoast in Gentile, not Jewish, land.
- It was in the heart of a land dominated by Baal worship.
- It was the homeland of Queen Jezebel, priestess of Baal, the god that Elijah had challenged.

He was moving from the frying pan directly into the fire. What would Elijah
find there? A widow to care for him. That's not very promising. Widows were normally the poorest of the poor. In a time of famine, they would be the first to run out of food, not the last. Elijah, then, is commanded to go into hostile territory to someone who will have nothing with which to care for him. Why? Because God is training His servant to walk by faith, not by sight—and nobody said it would be easy.

**Applying It**

What lessons can we learn from the “Wadi Cherith Training Center For Spiritual Service”?

- Sometimes God’s children suffer along with unbelievers.
- Sometimes when we think we are ready for Mount Carmel, God sends us to Cherith because we are not as ready as we think.
- Sometimes God’s hiding place isn’t an easy place.
- Sometimes the lessons we need to learn require that things get worse before they get better.

Welcome to Elijah’s world, as he personally experiences the power (and price tag) of spiritual training. Author W. J. Petersen writes:

> Sometimes we don’t understand God's dealings. We don’t know why we were sent to Cherith in the first place; we don’t appreciate the fact that God uses dirty ravens to feed us; and we certainly don’t understand why the brook has to dry up. The fact that we don’t understand is simply a sign that God’s educational process isn’t complete yet. He is still teaching us and we’re still learning (*Meet Me On The Mountain*, p.44).
TIMES OF FAITH
(1 Ki. 17:10-24)

Someone has defined “faith” with the acrostic, “Forsaking All I Trust Him.” That’s certainly what happened with Elijah. He had forsaken all to trust God. After he confronted King Ahab and ridiculed his idol, Baal, he ran into the wilderness. But he had to trust God to provide for him in a desolate place.

Elijah had learned that God could provide for him, but he still had to learn that God could do the same for others as well. Life wasn’t simply about Elijah—he had to see the needs of a world of others and respond with concern for them. Elijah would learn that lesson in Zarephath.

A WOMAN’S TESTING (vv.10-16)

God sent Elijah to the widow of Zarephath. For the next 2 years, he would be supported by her—even though she was poor. Here was a Gentile woman who believed in the Lord (“as the Lord your God lives” [v.12]). Now Elijah called her to trust God’s promise by saying, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel” (v.14). How would she respond to the command of God to take her last small morsel of food and make a meal for Elijah? (vv.11-13).

This had to have been a huge test for her. Think about it. Elijah requested a meal and promised provisions (v.14), but he didn’t give her any evidence that he could keep his promise. She had two options:

• Eat the last of her food, believing that death was imminent.
• Trust Elijah’s promise that God would provide.

She had just met Elijah. She had no proof that
God would keep Elijah’s promises. Would you give up your last meal? Remember: 
*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen* (Heb. 11:1).

The woman responded in faith to what she hoped for, yet could not see. “She went away and did according to the word of Elijah” (v.15). He asked her to feed him first, and when she obeyed, the God of provision blessed her.

God’s constant supply of grain and oil was a miracle. It pictures Jesus’ promise in Matthew 6:33, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” She put God’s purposes first, and God graciously provided.

**A FAMILY’S CRISIS (v.17)**

*Now it happened after these things that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him.*

How long Elijah had been living with the widow before her son became sick is uncertain. But in the meantime, God had been providing for all of them. Then the circumstances changed. The widow’s son fell seriously ill—so ill, in fact, that he stopped breathing and died.

There is no greater crisis for a mother than to see her child in danger. This widow’s only son was her one joy—and she lost him to an invisible enemy that she couldn’t fight against.

On the face of it, we say, “That’s not fair. She did everything right. She trusted, obeyed, had a servant’s heart. What more could she do?” If we think that trusting and obeying God exempts us from problems, we’re
mistaken. God is not a genie in a bottle who does whatever we want at our bidding and at our convenience. God is totally good and all-powerful, but we don’t control Him. He doesn’t give us a blank check to spend as we see fit. Both Elijah and the widow had to learn that God is in control—and so must we. We must recognize and trust the purposes of God, even in the painful crises of life.

A MOTHER’S PAIN (v.18)

So she said to Elijah, “What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?”

Look at the inner battle raging in her heart:

Anger. “What have I to do with you, O man of God?” Sadly, in times of pain, we often lash out at those closest to us—even those who have done much for us. It’s as if she said, “I wish you had never come.”

Guilt. “Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance?” This came from her suspicion that the proximity of a prophet enabled God to see her sins more clearly.

Blame. “And to kill my son?” We are not told why she thought God was judging her, but she was sure that her son’s death was payment for her sin.

A PROPHET’S COMPASSION (vv.19-23)

And he said to her, “Give me your son.” So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed (v.19). Notice how tenderly Elijah responded to the heartache of this woman.
He took the boy “out of her arms” and carried him to his own room where he could be alone with the boy and with his God.

**Elijah’s Prayer.** Look at Elijah’s prayer to God:

*Then he cried out to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?” And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, I pray, let this child’s soul come back to him” (vv.20-21).*

He prayed, pleading for mercy for this grieving mother. His first prayer (v.20) expresses his compassion for the widow who, after the famine, now had to suffer the loss of her child. In doing so, however, Elijah also displayed a mix of emotions.

**Elijah’s Confusion.** He was puzzled, openly questioning God about His purposes. Remember, Elijah was a man like us (Jas. 5:17), and we too are often confused by life. The good news is that God doesn’t reject our honest questions. It’s our arrogant demands that He refuses.

Even in the midst of his confusion, we see in Elijah’s second prayer (v.21) the evidence that he is learning to grasp the greatness of God. How? Consider this: Elijah was asking God for something that had never before happened in human history. There is no recorded instance from Genesis to 1 Kings 17 of God ever raising someone from the dead. Elijah was asking for something new in human experience. Why? Because he believed in a God who could do the impossible.

*Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah;*
and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives!” (vv.22-23).

God’s Answer. The hopes of the widow and Elijah were rewarded. Life returned to the boy. Imagine her joy as the woman saw her son—alive again! God’s purpose was now evident. Her sin was not the issue. God’s purpose was to stretch her and Elijah’s trust in God.

Applying It
It’s true that we can’t control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to what happens to us.
• In times of crisis, are we learning to face anything that might be weakening our trust in God?
• In times of crisis, are we learning to trust in God’s will, not only for the future but also in the present?
• In times of crisis, are we learning to look to the power of the God of resurrection?

TIMES OF CONFLICT
(I Ki. 18:20-46)

Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (Jn. 18:38). People are still asking that question today. The issue was the same in Elijah’s day—the people had rejected the God of truth for the lies of the gods of the land. Truth had been lost in a culture of idolatry. In the time that had elapsed since the prophet had left Zarephath, the stage had been set for the
ultimate showdown. The time had come for the lies of the false gods to be exposed to God’s truth—on the idolatrous high place of Mount Carmel. On Carmel, the priests of Baal and Asherah—850 in number (v.19)—stood in opposition to the God of Israel and His lone representative, Elijah.

THE ISSUE IS CLARIFIED (vv.20-21)
So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. And Elijah came to all the people, and said, “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people answered him not a word.

Elijah opened with a direct question: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people answered him not a word.

We can truly serve and worship only one God with our whole heart. It’s the basis for our eternity. Where will we place our trust?

Notice the crowd’s silence: “The people answered him not a word.” They didn’t know how to respond. It’s dangerous to waffle on eternal issues, so Elijah demanded that they decide whom they were going to follow.

THE CONDITIONS ARE SET (vv.22-24)
Then Elijah said to the people, “I alone am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let
them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord; and the God who answers by fire, He is God.” So all the people answered and said, “It is well spoken.”

Elijah proposed bringing the matter to a test, and then he set the rules of engagement:

Select An Animal. Elijah allowed the priests of Baal to choose one of the two available bulls. He would use the other.

Prepare A Sacrifice. The priests would ceremonially prepare the animal and place it on the altar. But they were not to put fire under it. This was the key. Fire was needed for a burnt offering, but this was the test. It had already been proven that Elijah’s God controlled the rain (1 Ki. 17:1)—now the priests would see that He could also rain fire.

Pray. Elijah told the priests to call on Baal, and he would call on the Lord. The God who answered by fire would be the God who would be worshiped by all. Elijah seemed to give them the advantage by making it a test of fire, for Baal was the sun-god, the god of fire and weather.

The people responded that it was a reasonable proposal, and the test began.

THE PROPHETS ARE HUMILIATED (vv.26-29)

So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of...
Baal from morning even till noon, saying, “O Baal, hear us!” But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made (v.26).

**Their Desperation.**

The prophets of Baal prepared their sacrifice and called out to their god for fire. Their efforts were divided into two segments:
- “From morning even till noon” (v.26), they pleaded for divine fire. “Then they leaped about the altar.” What a scene! Still there was no answer, causing Elijah to mock them (v.27). They continued . . .
- “When midday was passed . . . until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice” (v.29), dancing about, cutting themselves with knives, praying, and acting in bizarre ways.

Since Baal was the sun god, they perhaps hoped that at noon, as the sun was at its zenith, the fire would fall on their sacrifice. But their hope turned to despair, and they began to act like lunatics. The result? “No one answered.”

**Elijah’s Mocking.**

In the meantime, Elijah began to build his case for the true and living God by mocking the priests’ feeble attempts at getting Baal to respond. Notice how he exposed Baal’s limitations in verse 27:
- “Cry aloud”—yell and make more noise. He can’t hear you.
- “For he is a god”—you worship him, but he isn’t listening to you.
- “He is meditating”—he may be so deep in thought that you need to get his attention.
- “He is busy”—he may be occupied with someone else’s problem or even “relieving himself” (NLT).
• “He is on a journey”—he may have left his house. Call him and bring him back.
• “He is sleeping and must be awakened”—Baal is too weary to help you. No voice was heard, and no fire was sent. Baal’s prophets had failed the test.

ELIJAH’S PREPARATIONS ARE MADE (vv.30-35)
In verses 30-35, Elijah took charge:

He Summoned The People (v.30a). Elijah wanted the people to see what God was going to do. So they left the prophets of Baal and watched him closely.

He Repaired The Broken Down Altar Of God (vv.30b-31). There had previously been an altar to Jehovah on that location, probably built during the time of the judges.

He Dug A Trench Around The Altar (v.32). The ditch was made broad and deep.

He Had The People Drench The Altar With Water (vv.33-35). This was done to prevent any suspicion that there was fire hidden under the altar. The altar was repeatedly soaked with water to put the miracle beyond question.

So with all the preparations made, Elijah began to pray.

ELIJAH’S PRAYER IS GIVEN (vv.36-37)
Elijah’s prayer in verses 36-37 was brief. It included statements of:

Identification (v.36a). “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.” The Lord was still their God, even though they had left Him and gone after idols.

Vindication (v.36b). “Let it be known this day that You are God in Israel
and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word.” His actions were for God’s glory, not Elijah’s validation.

Explanation (v.37). “Hear me, O Lord, hear me.” The repetition expresses the burden in his soul.

Notice that Elijah didn’t say, “Send fire.” This was truly a prayer of faith. He was trusting God for the outcome so completely that the actual request went unspoken. He didn’t ask for fire, but he did ask for God to be honored.

GOD’S POWER IS DISPLAYED (vv.38-46)

Fire Fell (v.38). “Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.” The fire didn’t come from the altar.

People Fell (v.39). “Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!’” The people “fell on their faces” at the sight of God’s power and acknowledged that Jehovah alone is the God of Israel—not Baal. In reverence for God and in astonishment at the heavenly fire, they turned from their idols and worshiped their God.

Prophets Of Baal Fell (v.40). “And Elijah said to them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!’ So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there.”

Rain Fell (vv.41-45). “Now it happened in the meantime that the sky fell down from heaven, consuming the sacrifice, wood, stones, water, dust—all of it.

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became black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy rain” (v.45). God's chastening had done its work, and the people had returned to the Lord. The drought was over.

**Applying It**
What lessons can we draw from this amazing event?
- Matters of truth are not settled by majority vote but by God’s Word.
- Sincere and even passionate commitment to the wrong things can be self-destructive.
- Matters of truth and error need powerful, and often uncomfortable, moments of confrontation.
- Discovering the truth about God requires us to make decisions about our faith and the gods of our own culture.

**TIMES OF FRAILTY**
(1 Ki. 19:1-18)

Few emotions so quickly expose the frailty of men and women as the emotion of despair. When we are battling with our own hearts—regardless of the reason for the struggle—we can find ourselves in a life-and-death war. Despair, that darkest of human emotions, can woo us, entice us, and even destroy us. Sometimes we meet it...
- at our job, when we don’t get what we think we have earned;
- in our family, when our expectations remain unfulfilled;
- in our church, when we are inevitably disappointed with frail, flawed people. It's one of the toughest battles a person ever faces, and Elijah would fight this
battle in a cave. Remember, Elijah was a man like us—and nowhere is this more obvious than now, as he is caught in the clutches of despair. Here, he becomes a man we can relate to because Elijah’s greatest battle was fought, not on Mount Carmel, but in a cave at Horeb—not so unlike situations we have all been in. This battle now was not against Baal but against himself.

**THE ROOTS OF DESPAIR (vv.1-2)**

Ahab told Queen Jezebel what happened on the high place of Carmel: The prophets of Baal (which she had brought to Israel) were dead, and Baal had been overthrown. Her answer? Jezebel sent a message to Elijah, “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.”

In other words, “You will receive the same treatment you gave my prophets—execution.”

What was Elijah’s response to Jezebel’s threat? He fled. Amazingly, the same Elijah who only days before had defeated the prophets of Baal now ran from this woman. The one who had said, “If the Lord is God, follow Him,” was now fleeing in despair. What contributed to his despair?

**Success.** There’s often a letdown following moments of great success. In the afterglow of victory, it can be difficult to face the challenges of normal life.

**Fatigue.** Fatigue often follows intense periods of stress, especially when accompanied by physical exhaustion. This is the “post-Carmel” Elijah—spent, fatigued, and, as a result, vulnerable.

**Disappointment.**
It’s likely that Elijah was disappointed with the people. On Carmel, they shouted, “The Lord, He is God!” Now, they would probably allow him to be killed. At times, despair happens when people don’t behave as we think they should.

Loneliness. This is the burden of leadership. In his book Elijah: A Man Of Like Nature, Theodore Epp wrote:

A leader is a lonely man. . . . Driven on by a burning desire to achieve goals that to others seem visionary or impractical, they are looked upon with suspicion by the run-of-the-mill crowd. Men who lead are certain targets for the biting barbs of criticism (p.119).

These are the roots of Elijah’s despair. Weary, just off the mountaintop, disappointed, and alone. Elijah had waited 3 ½ years for one glorious day of triumph—and now he was burned out and alone. How did this “man like us” respond to the despair that was creeping into his heart?

THE RESPONSES OF DESPAIR (vv.3-4) Look at the downward steps he followed—steps that would only deepen his sense of despair. His path was understandable, but totally wrong.

Desire For Escape (v.3a). “And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah.” Elijah had fled 100 miles to the southern desert. But the grass wasn’t any greener there.

Every day, countless people try to escape—with alcohol, drugs, pleasure. Yet none of us escapes our problems by running from them. We are our biggest problem.
Desire For Solitude (v.3b). “[Elijah] left his servant there.” Loneliness breeds loneliness. Wanting greater solitude, Elijah left his servant, and went on alone.

Desire For Death (v.4a). “And he prayed that he might die, and said, ‘It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life.’” Sometimes, under stress, death looks like the only way out. Notice that this is Elijah’s fifth recorded prayer. He prayed, and . . .

- rain stopped,
- a son returned to life,
- fire fell from heaven, and
- rain returned after 3½ years of drought.

All of the first four prayers were answered, but not the fifth. This last one was self-centered. Elijah had lost sight of the power of God. This caused his heart to view death as better than a life of trusting God.

Desert Of Self-Pity (v.4b). “For I am no better than my fathers!” Do you hear him, this man like us? Few things are more tragic than someone filled with self-pity. Elijah felt:

- Everyone else is at fault.
- I am the victim.
- Life is unfair to me.
- I never get ahead.
- I never get a break.

It’s easier for us to identify with Elijah here in the wilderness than on Mount Carmel. Here under a broom tree (v.4) he was more “normal.” But God wouldn’t leave him there.

THE REMEDY FOR DESPAIR (vv.5-18)

Notice how God dealt with Elijah. He used a blend of tough confrontation and tender compassion.

Comfort And Care (vv.5-8). “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” (v.8).
God provided Elijah with food and rest to care for his fatigue. Elijah asked for death, but instead God brought him a meal to keep him alive. Sometimes, what we need more than anything else when we’re in despair is rest and refreshment. Without that, we don’t have the strength needed to recover. So, in renewed strength, Elijah traveled for 40 more days, stopping at a cave at Horeb.

**Confrontation With God (vv.9-14).** This occurred in two stages:

**A Powerful Question (vv.9-10).** “The word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” (v.9).

This is a key question. God had sent Elijah to Samaria, Cherith, Zarephath, and Carmel. But He hadn’t sent him to Horeb. “Why are you here?” A superficial answer could have been, “I fear Jezebel.”

But the real answer is seen in Elijah’s words of verse 10: “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.”

In other words, “I’m here because I’m unappreciated and full of self-pity.” This is a far cry from his bold proclamation on Carmel.

**A Surprising Encounter (vv.11-12).** “Then He 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 in 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.”

God sent messengers from nature—fire, wind, and an earthquake—to remind Elijah that God is God, and that Elijah is not to be ruled by despair. The still small voice of God spoke, and that’s when Elijah hid his face. He expected the power of God, but he was met by the Person of God. In this place of quiet communion, Elijah was . . .

- reminded of God’s power,
- reminded of God’s character, and
- reminded of God’s love, mercy, and peace.

**Call To Help (vv.15-17).** In verses 15-17, God told Elijah to get involved in the needs of others. He was told to anoint two kings and to train his own replacement—Elisha.

One key to getting perspective on our despair is to get involved in other people’s lives and become concerned for them. An 18th-century writer, John Simpson, put it this way:

The only hope for persons in such circumstances is to come out from their lonely haunts, and to be actively employed in some useful and benevolent occupations. . . . to set about doing something which will require muscular exertion, and which will benefit others. Hence God directed Elijah to quit his present lonely abode, which only increased the sadness and irritation of his spirit; and so He gave him a commission to execute (cited by W. J. Petersen in *Meet Me On The Mountain*, p.120).

The challenge is to get our eyes off ourselves, for only then can we clearly see the needs of others. It's
been said, “I cried because I had no shoes; then I met a man who had no feet.”

**Clarity Of Truth (v.18).** “Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Elijah needed a dose of reality to help blast him out of his despair. Our point of view is rarely accurate when seen through despairing eyes. Elijah needed to wake up and see things as they were—not as he had painted them to be. He was not the only faithful servant of God after all—he was just the only one hiding at Horeb.

Just like Elijah, we love the big wins and the stirring victories. But what about the silent battles of the soul? Elijah thought he was strong, but he had to learn how weak he was and how desperately he needed God. We need to learn that too.

**Applying It**

God graciously rebuilt Elijah’s life out of the ashes of despair and would use him once more. What lessons are here for us?

- Being dedicated to Christ doesn’t immunize us from discouragement or despair.
- Fatigue can make us more susceptible to despair.
- We need to invest our energies in others, instead of being absorbed in our pain.
- Communion with God is the only way to maintain the spiritual strength necessary for the battles of life.
- We need to learn to rest in God’s gracious care.
“THE TIME IT IS TODAY”

The musical group The Association sang “The Time It Is Today” in the 1960s, calling young people to live for something more than themselves—to make a difference in the world in their own generation. That same call comes to followers of Christ today. We are given this moment in time to represent our God in the world. And, like Elijah, we live in extraordinary times.

We can take comfort in the fact that when a great man was expected to ride to the rescue, God chose an average man—Elijah. This ordinary man, armed only with the resource of praying to an extraordinary God, was God’s instrument to impact a generation.

We have seen that Elijah was far from perfect, however. He struggled with the same things we face. That encourages me. If God used a nobody from nowhere like Elijah, perhaps He will use people like us. The challenge, however, is not to pursue greatness but to make ourselves available to our great God’s desire to work in us and through us.

If you don’t know the God who loves and cares deeply for every person on earth, I’ve got good news: His love has been fully extended to you. We read in John 3:16, one of the best-known verses in the Bible:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The promise of eternal life is offered to ordinary people by this extraordinary God. Will you accept His free gift? The time—it is today.

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