

Elijah, an Old Testament Preacher

By John C. Jeske

[Presented for the 1986 Pastors Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary]

I. DARK DAYS FOR ISRAEL

- A. political instability following break-up of the United Kingdom
 - 1. the North's geographical handicap
 - 2. frequent dynastic changes
 - 3. accession of Omri's dynasty

- B. religious apostasy
 - 1. calf-shrines: perverted Jehovah-worship
 - 2. Baalism: heathenism + hedonism
 - 3. moral deterioration of the nation

- C. phenomenon of prophecy
 - 1. divine revelation, a miracle of grace
 - 2. "schools of the prophets" provided for succession of prophets
 - 3. proliferation of miracles

I. DARK DAYS FOR ISRAEL

A careless and, I think, dangerous generalization one often hears is that our world today is more corrupt than the world has ever been, and that it's tougher to live as a child of God today than ever before. A study of the times of Elijah could very well make us less inclined to go along with that generalization.

The object of this five-part study is Elijah, and a grander figure never stood out against the Old Testament sky. On the one hand, he was a frail creature of dust, and feeble as frail. But in that jar of clay God gave us a priceless treasure. It's not a pretty picture that the Scripture paints of Elijah's ministry, because the times in which God called him to labor were anything but pretty. Elijah is consistently pictured as a rugged, rough-hewn man, clothed in a garment of scratchy goat's hair, standing up for the truth of God against idolatrous king and false priest.

Elijah was a wonderfully privileged man. In all of history only two men have been permitted to escape death; Elijah was one of those two. And then, centuries later, when, as St. Luke tells us, our redemption was about to be accomplished by Christ's departure which "he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem," and a companion was wanted to appear with Moses on the mount of Transfiguration, who was chosen? The sturdy preacher from Samaria and Kerith and Zarephath and Jezreel, the prophet with iron in his blood and fire for Jehovah in his heart. The last recorded words of Elijah were spoken to Christ. Elijah discussed with the Savior his great act of rescue.

Throughout the Scripture Elijah has the reputation of being a fearless and faithful messenger of the Lord. Do you recall the words with which the Old Testament closes? Speaking in the last chapter of the prophet Malachi, the Lord promised: "I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or

else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5f). What the Lord meant with those prophetic words was clarified by the angel Gabriel when he appeared to the priest Zechariah to inform him that his aged wife Elizabeth would bear a son. You remember Gabriel’s prophecy about that child: “He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:16f). That’s what the prophet Malachi meant to refer to when in the closing words of his prophecy he predicted that the Lord would send Elijah in advance of Messiah’s coming. Jesus testified to that when he told the crowds: “All the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Mt 11:13f).

Unfortunately Malachi’s prophecy about Elijah’s appearance in advance of Messiah’s coming was misunderstood by many of the ancient Jews. According to the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, Elijah would return “at the appointed time ... to restore the tribes of Jacob” (Ecclus 48:10). The rabbis took these words to mean that Elijah would return physically to this earth. It was this false notion that John the Baptist sought to counteract when representatives of the Sanhedrin asked him: “Are you Elijah?” He replied, “I am not” (Jn 1:21). He disclaimed being “Elijah *redivivus*.” In the Jewish community Elijah’s reputation followed him out of the Old Testament period right into that of the New.

Edersheim (*History of Judah and Israel*) has this to say about the man who’ll occupy our attention the next several Monday afternoons: “A grander figure never stood out against the Old Testament sky than that of Elijah. As Israel’s apostasy had reached its highest point in the time of Ahab, so did the antagonism to it in the person and mission of Elijah.... By his side other men, even an Elisha, seem small.” Studying the message and the ministry of Elijah will be worth our time.

We will, however, neither understand the man nor appreciate his work properly unless we understand something of the historical background on which Elijah carried out his ministry to Israel. Elijah was a prophet in the early and middle 800s B.C., and those were indeed dark days for Israel, for a number of reasons.

Perhaps the biggest reason was that about a half-century before Elijah came on the scene, the United Kingdom of Israel split in two. The strong united kingdom which under Kings David and Solomon had consisted of twelve tribes was torn by dissension and civil war. Elijah’s ministry was to the people of the Northern Kingdom, which at that time had its capital in Samaria and which took the name which had formerly belonged to the entire nation.

The Northern Kingdom was the larger of the two kingdoms but easily the less fortunate of the two—for a number of reasons. Geographically it was handicapped. For one, it was cut off from the religious center of the Jewish nation, the temple in Jerusalem. The Northern Kingdom was located closer to the world powers of Mesopotamia—ancient Aram (NT Syria), Assyria, Babylon and Persia. When enemy armies invaded across the Fertile Crescent, it was the cities of the Northern Kingdom which would first feel the heel of the invader. Still another feature of Israel’s geography that worked to its disadvantage was that it lacked the isolation which its southern neighbor, the kingdom of Judah, enjoyed and which was such a significant factor in its defense. Between Galilee and Samaria the Valley of Esdraelon extended all the way from the Mediterranean to the Jordan, providing a ready-made invasion corridor right into Israel’s heartland. By contrast, Jerusalem was comparatively isolated in the hills of Judea.

Another factor which served to the detriment of the Northern Kingdom, and which complicated Elijah’s work, was the fact that when the Northern Kingdom seceded from the kingdom of Judah it lost not only its capital city and its religious heart, but it lost the royal line of David as well. It was that dynasty of David, you will recall, which God had promised to sustain and support. As a result, throughout the 350-year history of the Southern Kingdom there was just one royal line—the house of David. The Northern Kingdom of Israel didn’t last nearly as long—only about 200 years (from the division of the kingdom in 931 BC to the fall of Samaria, its capital, in 722). But in its two centuries of life, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had 19 kings, plus one royal pretender, representing ten different families. Obviously, when you have such a rapid turnover on the throne,

one suspects foul play, and there was plenty of that in the Northern Kingdom. Seven of its kings met death by assassination, and one committed suicide. The result, obviously, was political instability.

During Elijah's time that political instability was temporarily checked by the accession to the throne of Omri, father of King Ahab. Omri was an ambitious, capable leader who made Israel into a strong nation. Omri's dynasty added some stability to a political situation which for 50 years had been little short of chaotic. Omri even went so far as to seal an alliance with the king of Phoenicia to the north by the marriage of his son Ahab to the Phoenician princess Jezebel. In harmony with this new drift in foreign policy toward Phoenicia, Omri relocated the capital from Tirzah to Samaria. Archaeology has shown that the new capital, begun by Omri in Samaria and completed by Ahab, had fortifications unequalled in ancient Palestine for excellence of workmanship. 1 Kings 22:39 speaks of the palace that Ahab "built and inlaid with ivory." Excavations at Samaria have unearthed hundreds of ivory inlays. Ahab maintained a second palace, a summer palace, at Jezreel. Politically, Ahab was one of the great kings of the Northern Kingdom. Religiously he was the worst.

Omri and son Ahab also showed a lively interest in military matters—notably the building and strengthening of Israel's fortress cities. In the Northern Kingdom's two major fortresses (Megiddo and Hazor) massive walls were built and elaborate tunnels were sunk into the rock to the springs beneath these cities, to guarantee the inhabitants a supply of water in time of siege. Offensive weapons were also developed. When a number of western nations formed an alliance to stop the advance of the Assyrian king, King Ahab contributed 2000 battle chariots (the tanks of that day)—an awesome striking force. According to 1 Kings 20, Ahab twice defeated the armies of the Arameans, his powerful neighbor to the north.

The dynasty of Omri lasted through three generations: Omri, his son Ahab, and his two sons Ahaziah and Joram. Unfortunately, the kings of this dynasty were the embodiment of everything God has specified that the king of Israel should not be. In God's model for his people the king was to be the shepherd who cared for and protected his people—first of all physically (against enemy attack), but primarily spiritually. One can draw an interesting contrast between David and Ahab. Even a king like David, the man after the Lord's own heart, was not above base conduct, but David acknowledged his sin when the prophet Nathan pointed it out to him. Ahab and his queen, however, were calloused to the obligations of God's covenant with Israel. They were far removed from the shepherd model of kingship. "Instead of bending before the chastening rod of the prophetic word, they tried to break the rod and destroy the prophet who wielded it" (LaSor, *OT Survey* 267f).

You can guess what implications this had for the prophetic ministry of Elijah. Ahab's reign is evaluated in the Scripture in these words: "Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam ... but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him" (1 Kings 16:30f). The years during which Elijah served as prophet were years of Israel's deepest apostasy.

Ahab did not introduce idol worship into Israel; the Northern Kingdom was based on false worship and dedicated to it from its very beginning as a nation. You will remember that when the breach between the two kingdoms became final, Jeroboam, the first king of the North, was concerned that his citizens might want to return to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. He therefore took steps to prevent that. He built worship centers in the far north of his kingdom, at Dan, and in the far south, at Bethel, where he set up golden calves. He transferred some of Israel's festivals to other seasons and chose priests from all ten tribes, instead of from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, as God had ordered.

The false worship Jeroboam introduced into Israel is sometimes called "calf worship." The term may be misleading. The famous American archaeologist W. F. Albright gives us this explanation: "Jeroboam represented Yahweh as an invisible figure standing on a young bull of gold. It is true that the golden calves have been assumed by most scholars to have been direct representations of Yahweh as bull-god, but this gross conception is not only otherwise unparalleled in biblical tradition, but is contrary to all we know of Syro-Palestinian iconography in the second and early first millennium B.C. Among the Canaanites, Arameans, and Hittites we find the gods nearly always represented as standing on the back of an animal or as seated on a throne borne by animals—but never as themselves in animal form" (*From the Stone Age to Christianity* 299).

Perhaps you will recall that after Aaron had erected the golden calf at Mt. Sinai he built an altar in front of the calf and announced: “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD” (Exodus 32:5). It’s important to recognize that the worship Aaron introduced at the calf shrine at Mt. Sinai was still worship of Jehovah, though it was perverted Jehovah worship. Aaron let them believe they could worship the God of Israel under the symbol of the golden calf. At Mt. Sinai, however, God made it clear that he wanted to be worshipped according to law and gospel. He is and wants to be worshipped as a God in whose big heart two emotions dominate. The first is his hatred of sin, an absolute refusal to compromise with it, and a determination to turn away from it by an awful act of judgment. God’s second emotion is a burning desire to restore himself to the sinner and to restore the sinner to his place in the heart of God and ultimately in the home of God. At Mt. Sinai, however, the Israelites indicated their dissatisfaction with this law-and-gospel kind of religion. They didn’t want to worship according to some abstract concepts; when they worshipped Jehovah they wanted something they could see. Aaron gave them something to see; King Jeroboam perpetuated this perverted Jehovah worship. During his reign that became the state religion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Under the kingship of Ahab a new and vile form of idolatry was introduced as the state religion of Israel—actually a dreadful combination of idolatry plus adultery, with which Elijah had to deal. This was Baalism. Now, to be sure, the worship of Baal had been practiced by the Canaanite inhabitants of the land long before the Israelites conquered and occupied their new homeland. Then, when Israel entered the land, fresh from forty years in the desert, she thought it was a good idea to learn agriculture from the people who’d been practicing it in Canaan for centuries. You know, “when in Canaan do as the Canaanites do.” Tragically, many Israelites followed the advice that if you want fertility, worship the great god Baal, and you’ll have all the fertility you want—for your land, your livestock, even your wife. At the time of the Judges, Gideon’s neighbors wanted to put him to death for destroying their Baal shrine (Judges 6:30). It seems that during the reign of David, the king after the Lord’s own heart, Baal-worship had been all but exterminated. But it came back two hundred years later with a vengeance, so that at Mt. Carmel Elijah said: “I alone am left of the prophets of Jehovah.”

How did all this come about? The Bible does not say that upon his accession as king of Israel Ahab adopted Baalism as his own religion. The names he chose for his own sons seem to indicate he at first remained at least nominally loyal to Jehovah. His first son was named Ahaziah (“Yahweh has grasped/possessed me”); his second was Jehoram (“Yahweh is exalted”). Ahab may have thought it was a wise political move for him to marry the daughter of the king of Phoenicia, the powerful nation on his northwest border, but he clearly got more than he bargained for. Jezebel comes off in the Scripture as an exceptionally strong-willed woman. It was she, not Ahab, who sent the threatening note to Elijah after the confrontation at Mt. Carmel. It was she who masterminded the vicious plot that cost Naboth his life. It was she who ordered that Jehovah’s prophets be killed (1 Kings 18:4). When Ahab built a temple for Baal in the capital of Samaria, this might at first seem to be no more than Solomon had done for his heathen wives in Jerusalem. But Jezebel was not satisfied just with worshipping her gods. This strong-minded woman succeeded in making the worship of Baal the state religion of the Northern Kingdom. A commentator remarked recently: “The corruption of Canaanite religion had long been seeping in (to the Israelite nation) from its Canaanite neighbors, but under Jezebel it was pumped from the palace with extraordinary pressure” (LaSor, *OT Introduction* 266). Jezebel imported to her court hundreds of false prophets dedicated to the worship of Baal and his female counterpart Asherah.

What was it that made Baal worship so attractive to this remnant of God’s people that Elijah later felt it had taken over the whole nation, and that he alone remained loyal to Jehovah? Baalism was an insidious combination of heathenism plus hedonism. An OT Introduction published several years ago gives this interesting description:

“Submitting to the worship of Baal was not unpleasant or distasteful for most Israelites. The idols of the Canaanite fertility god offered a tangible element to which they could tie their worship, while the festive occasions afforded opportunity to give full vent to their passions for

wine and immorality. Indeed, riotous drinking and sexual incontinence were a religious duty of Baalism. Baal was lord of the vine. Intimate relations with the cultic prostitutes (both male and female) were believed to encourage Baal to enjoy intercourse with his consort, thus insuring fertility for the whole land.” (LaSor, *OT Introduction* 266).

A century after Elijah the prophet Isaiah uttered this condemnation of the Israelites of his day: “You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags. The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion; they, they are your lot:” (57:5f). Perhaps it ought not surprise us when the people responded as they did to Elijah’s demand on Mt. Carmel: “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” And we’re told: “The people said nothing.”

This was the appalling religious situation with which Elijah had to contend throughout his ministry. There were calf-shrines at the northern and southern borders of the Northern Kingdom, and shrines to Baal and Asherah on the hills in between. Obviously a cancer like this is going to contaminate the entire national body, affecting not only the religious life of the people, but every other phase of their lives as well, including their attitude toward their fellow men. Once I have refused to acknowledge Jehovah as the Lord of my body and life, I will convince myself that I have the right to determine also what my relationship to my fellow human beings is to be. It is the prophet Amos who sketches more vividly than any other prophet the moral deterioration which characterized the Northern Kingdom and which led to its early death. As you hear Amos describe the conditions in the North, remember: this is what Elijah saw day after day.

- Amos 2:6-8 This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.
- Amos 4:1 Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us some drinks!”
- Amos 5:11 You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain...You oppress the righteous and take bribes, and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.”
- Amos 8:4-7 Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?” Skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done. “

It’s wholesome for us to remember the adverse conditions under which some of God’s called servants have in years past had to carry out their ministry. As the closing chapters of 1 Kings sketch this picture for us, it becomes clear that we called servants of the Lord 27 centuries later have absolutely no business saying: “It’s harder to be a Christian today than it has ever been before!” There is no excuse for our pitiful whining: “We’ve got it tougher today than God’s prophets used to have!” Admittedly things are not as they should be in our congregations, but I haven’t heard recently of anyone selling his poor neighbor into slavery. You must confront the sin of adultery in your congregation, but at least it’s not practiced in Jehovah’s name, as part of his worship. And who of us could claim ever to have felt like Elijah: “LORD, I’m the only believer left, and now they’re trying to take my life”?

Those were indeed dark days for Israel. And yet it was on that dark background that Israel’s covenant God chose to display his amazing grace. As evidence of that, consider first of all the *phenomenon of prophecy*. God would have been justified in telling the Israelites: “Very well, it’s obvious you don’t want my Word. I

don't owe it to you, you know; I don't owe you a nickel. So why don't you jolly well see how well you get along without it?" And then have proceeded to slam the book shut. You'll remember that's what Jesus did to King Herod when he was on trial before that curious, careless king. St. Luke tells us that Herod hoped to see Jesus perform some miracle, so he plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. As a perfect human being, Jesus knew the rules of politeness. We teach our children to answer when you're spoken to. But Jesus was also the splendid, sinless Son of God, and he didn't dignify Herod's blasphemous blather with an answer.

What an awesome judgment of God on a person or a nation, when God no longer has anything to say! If that's the treatment Herod received, we're inclined to ask: "Didn't Ahab and the people of Israel deserve the same?" But instead throughout the half-dozen chapters that give us the record of Elijah's ministry the phrases occur repeatedly: "The word of the LORD came to Elijah ..." or "Elijah said, 'This is what the LORD says ...'" In that dark chapter of Israel's history God did not let his Word become extinct; he revealed it (*re+velare* = to pull back the veil) to a frivolous and wicked royal family and to the fickle people of Israel, bringing them important information (about the law of God and about the love of God) that they never in a million years could have found out by themselves.

Here, brothers, is the primary evidence of grace which God showed the Northern Kingdom through the ministry of Elijah. Instead of giving his people and their king the silent treatment, he continued to speak to them, even though they were largely apostate. It's evidence like this that helps us to define grace not just as God's undeserved love—in other words, getting something you don't deserve. Grace is that, but it's more. Grace is getting the very opposite of what you deserve. God did not in righteous wrath break off contact with Ahab and Israel, but mercifully continued to speak to them through Elijah.

God's grace never deals with us in terms of minimums. God provided a steady stream of revelation for Ahab and Israel from the lips of Elijah, but God did still more. At the very time when wicked Queen Jezebel was trying to silence the voice of divine prophecy in Israel by murdering the Lord's prophets, God arranged for a steady succession of prophets to make sure his voice would be heard. Although the majority of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom were through with God, God was not through with them; he still considered them a part of his people.

Make no mistake about it; this was a time of crisis in Israel; the very existence of Jehovah-worship in Israel was at stake. Prophets of the true God faced reprisal for speaking the Word of the Lord in opposition to the king. Some of the prophets of Elijah's time buckled under the pressure from the palace and contented themselves with saying only what King Ahab wanted them to say (cf. the 400 prophets referred to in 1 Kings 22). Other prophets resisted Jezebel's evil program and paid for their resistance with their lives. Others—at least a hundred that we know about—were driven underground.

In this darkest hour of Israel's history, we hear a number of references to the "*sons of the prophets*," also referred to as the "*schools of the prophets*." This is an OT phenomenon first mentioned at the time of the prophet Samuel, when we first learn of these prophetic guilds or companies where future prophets were trained. No mention is made of these prophetic communities, however, in the 200 years that had elapsed since the time of Samuel. During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, however, the office of the prophet and the schools of the prophets were more active than ever. We know of "schools" or "companies" of the prophets located at Gilgal and at Bethel and at Jericho. "Students" at these schools were called "sons of the prophets." Perhaps you remember that when the prophet Amos was opposed by the priest of Bethel, the chief religious officer of the Northern Kingdom, and ordered to go back to his home in Judah and prophesy there, he replied: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son. I was a shepherd and I took care of fig trees. But the LORD took me ... and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" When Amos claimed he was not a prophet's son he was not saying, "I'm not a preacher's kid." What he was saying was: "I'm not a professional prophet. I have received no training in the prophetic schools." At these schools young men engaged in study of the Word and in mutual edification; the prophets themselves may very well have been their instructors.

To summarize: here is additional evidence of the amazing grace of God at a dark hour in Israel's long history. When it almost seemed that the existence of Jehovah-worship was at stake, God saw to it that the ranks of his faithful spokesmen were constantly replenished. He raised up faithful witnesses whose hearts beat with loyalty to him and equipped them to let his voice be heard.

One more phenomenon of grace ought to be mentioned which occurred in conjunction with Elijah and Elisha, and that is the *proliferation of miracles* during their prophetic ministry. Although God has performed miracles at all periods of the world's history, we see as we study Scripture that there were especially three periods in which miracles occurred so frequently that many people of that day regarded them almost as commonplace. One of those eras was the time of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. A second was the time of Jesus' ministry and the establishment of the Christian Church. And what was the third? The time of Elijah and Elisha, that dark chapter of Israel's history, where the only light that softens the gloom is the light of divine revelation and miracle. Four miracles are recorded in 1 Kings 17, e.g. (Elijah at Kerith and Zarephath). Nine miracles are recorded in 2 Kings 4-5 (which describe Elisha's ministry). At this critical time for the church of God, God did not leave himself without witness. He not only saw to it that his authoritative voice was heard, but he also supported the preaching of that Word with miraculous signs and wonders. These would be *a rebuke to Ahab and Jezebel*, who resisted and rejected the divine Word and will. These miracles would be *an eye-opener for the unlearned and for the Gentile*, people like the widow at Zarephath, who would be impressed with the superiority of Jehovah over the god Baal she had learned to know from her childhood. And the miracles which poured from the Lord's hand in such profusion during the ministry of Elijah and Elisha would certainly serve *to reassure and support these men*, especially at those times when they were discouraged and disheartened. God not only sent them to do a difficult job for him, he supported their ministry and strengthened them for the task.

After this sketch of the historical background on which Elijah appeared and worked, we'll want in the remaining four sessions to take a closer look at what the Scripture says about Elijah's ministry. We have only about six chapters that deal with him—the last few of 1 Kings and the first two of 2 Kings. We therefore know really very little about Elijah and his work, but we do know enough to recognize that he was a giant of a man, spiritually speaking. There is much we can afford to learn from him, and we will be the richer for having learned it.

II. ELIJAH'S INAUGURAL SERMON, FLIGHT, AND RETURN

A. to Samaria and a confrontation with a wicked king

1. testimony to the true God
2. testimony against Baalism
3. testimony without apology

B. to the brook Kerith and the ravens

1. a time of discouragement
2. a time of strengthening

C. to Zarephath and a poverty-stricken widow

1. God was announcing his judgment on Israel's unbelief (Lk 4:24ff)
2. God was extending his mercy to a Gentile
3. God was equipping his prophet for a lifetime of ministry

II. ELIJAH'S INAUGURAL SERMON, FLIGHT, AND RETURN

As we begin our 4-part study of the life and ministry of Elijah, it may be well to remind ourselves that we know next to nothing about Elijah's personal background. All that we do know is told to us in 1 Kings 17:1: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab ..." We know only that Elijah the prophet came from the village of Tishbe in Gilead, east of Jordan, at the edge of the desert, away from all the well-known cities of Israel. We don't know who his parents were, which of the 12 tribes of Israel he came from, what training he received (whether he might possibly have attended one of the "schools of the prophets"), or under what circumstances the Lord first called him. The first time we meet him on the pages of the Scripture we see him making his way through the streets of rich, luxurious Samaria. Now he reaches the hill on which the beautiful palace of Ahab stood, with its rooms paneled with ivory. The very first word the Bible has to say about Elijah is *vayomer*. We meet the man speaking. That's our introduction to Elijah.

The royal palace which was the scene of Elijah's first official appearance was an impressive palace and fortress. (A century later it took the mighty Assyrian army three years to breach its walls). And I suppose we might have expected the rookie prophet, the former country boy from the little village across the Jordan, to be just a tad overawed in the big city of Samaria and in the royal palace, no less. I confess I wouldn't have been surprised to hear Elijah request an audience with the king and then to say, with all due respect: "Your majesty, I'm the new prophet in town; name is Elijah, I represent Jehovah. I'm afraid there's been a horrible misunderstanding somewhere. I've been hearing that a number of Jehovah's prophets have been put to death in Samaria, and I'm here to plead for tolerance."

That isn't at all what Elijah said to King Ahab. Elijah didn't have eyes for the expensive beauty of that palace. All he saw in Ahab's impressive capital and in his luxurious palace was a form of religion and a way of life which was an insult to God and a stench in his nostrils. Elijah had not visited the royal palace to secure an interview, with the purpose of building good public relations. Elijah was a prophet of the Most High, and he had appeared in Ahab's palace not to ask a favor but to make an announcement. This was his inaugural sermon, if you will. This was not an interview; this was a confrontation. Overawed? Intimidated? No way. He who made a practice of standing in the presence of God with a good conscience could stand anywhere else without embarrassment.

"As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew no rain in the next few years, except at my word." Note Elijah's words carefully. He began with an oath; this was solemn business, this announcement of God's judgment on king and country because of their shameful idolatry.

Notice, too, the names Elijah gave the God whom he represented. He's the LORD, and if you have Bibles open in front of you you'll see the name is spelled with all capital letters. This is that special divine name in the OT, the name we know as the Tetragrammaton, originally pronounced "Yahweh." It's the covenant name of God, his OT Savior name. It's a name which describes him, first of all, as *the God of absolute independence*. "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14). By contrast, we are little, dependent creatures; "in him we live and move and have our being." This God who exists independently of anyone or anything else is totally different from the gods Ahab worshipped. Baal and Ashtaroth were little tin gods patterned after human beings, with human emotions and passions and foibles.

Carry that thought of God's independence a step farther. Not only is Yahweh independent in his being, in his essence; his love is also independent. God's love to us is not dependent on our behavior. God's love doesn't need a reason. By contrast, Ahab's god Baal was said to reward his devotees who brought the appropriate sacrifices (sometimes animal, sometimes human) and worshipped according to prescribed ritual (sometimes including temple prostitution).

Yahweh's covenant name tells us one more important thing about him which sets him apart from all other gods. In contrast to the heathen gods who were often arbitrary and capricious, the God whom Elijah represented is *the God of absolute constancy*. Elijah referred to Jehovah as "the God of Israel." That name Israel had been claimed by King Jeroboam when he led the revolt against the royal house of David. The northern ten tribes illegitimately claimed to be Israel, but that didn't make them the true Israel or their gods the true God of

Israel. Elijah represented the true God of Israel, and he made no secret of that in his first appearance before Ahab. This was very likely the first time the walls of that palace in Samaria rang with testimony as forthright as that.

Martin Luther once made the statement: “You can’t pray the Lord’s Prayer without cursing.” The moment we say: “May your will be done:” we must add: “And may any will be broken which opposes your good and gracious will!”

In his brief inaugural sermon, therefore, Elijah not only stood up for the truth of God; he also opposed whatever attacked the truth of God and robbed God of the glory he’s entitled to. “There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

The god of Ahab and Jezebel, you will remember, was Baal, the god of the wind and the rain, the god who granted fertility to the inhabitants of Canaan. Now Jehovah had sent Elijah to say that regardless of what Baal said or did, there wasn’t going to be any rain or dew for a period of years, until God through Elijah gave the word. In a land of minimal rainfall, as Canaan has always been, it’s absolutely critical for agriculture that those few inches of annual rainfall fall at the appropriate time. And during the hot, rainless months of the summer, the heavy dew is necessary to keep the grapevines from drying out. Now here’s Elijah saying: “No dew or rain until I give the word.”

Through Elijah’s word God was challenging Baal’s power, actually his very existence. Baal’s specialty was sending rain and making farmers prosperous, and Jehovah said Baal wasn’t going to be able to make it rain. That was God’s decree, and there was nothing Baal could do to change this decree. Elijah had thrown a challenge into Baal’s face, and into Ahab’s as well. Any way you look at the first words of Elijah’s ministry, they’re hardly the recommended way to win friends for yourself. But, of course, that’s not what Elijah was after. Friendship evangelism was not what God had called him to practice.

A question might suggest itself here. Had God actually given Elijah advance information that a drought was ahead for the land of Israel? We have no record of any such special revelation, nor need we assume any. What the Scripture does give us is a significant statement of the apostle James, and from that it seems as though God had not predicted the drought to his prophet. Listen to St. James 5:17: “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for 3 ½ years.” This prayer must have preceded Elijah’s announcement to Ahab, for in I Kings 17:1 Elijah informed the king that what was going to happen was the very thing James tells us he had requested of God in prayer. Elijah knew that in Deuteronomy 11:16f Moses had warned Israel: “Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you,” Elijah’s prayer was in full accord with the revealed will of God.

We can paraphrase his prayer and his proclamation: “May the Lord’s will be done.” St. James’ statement tells us a couple significant things about Elijah:

1. He believed in the power of prayer and practiced it.

2. He was keenly conscious of sin and prayed for God to judge it by withholding rainfall for 3 ½ years. That meant that in the Northern Kingdom four consecutive growing seasons were going to be ruined. Remember, Israel’s agriculture was much more hand-to-mouth than America’s is. In ancient Israel there weren’t huge dark blue Harvestores standing all over the landscape. The drought Elijah predicted would soon threaten the economic life of the country and bring the country to its knees. Would we have had the courage to pray for that, as Elijah did? I don’t recall a prayer like that in our agenda, though I do recall prayers like “Grant prosperity to our nation, and keep war from our shores.” Elijah was a man absolutely committed to the will of the Lord, in this instance his will to judge the unbelief of a stubborn king and people.

How refreshing it is to hear a messenger of God speak with such confidence! Wouldn’t you admit it’s much more common today for a preacher to mount his pulpit Sunday after Sunday with the attitude: “I don’t really suppose this sermon will change anything”?

Here was confident preaching, and here was unapologetic preaching! Elijah was confident that although he stood alone in the court of Ahab, he was standing there as ambassador of the Most High, and that's no reason for feeling apologetic. By contrast, what an insult to God and his church that bashful brand of preaching is that hesitantly tiptoes forward and almost reluctantly suggests: "I may be wrong, but it seems to me that if you don't repent, after a fashion, and confess your sins, so to speak, you might all be damned, as it were." God had raised up Israel's king and Israel's people for his holy purposes, to live to his glory. But in reality they were turning God's plan for them topsy-turvy, and Elijah had to address that. As we undertake our prophetic task today, don't we see symptoms strangely similar? Instead of asking "How can my body and life serve God and people?" people have developed the unholy habit of asking: "How can I make God and people serve me? How can I use God and people to make me happy?" God is still looking for courageous 20th century Elijahs, who will speak the word of his law and the word of his love with authority.

Maybe Ahab laughed when Elijah predicted a drought in the name of the God of Israel. At any rate Elijah left the palace, and at the Lord's direction headed east across the Jordan, to the brook Kerith, one of the small watercourses that drain into the Jordan. The word translated "brook" in *nachal*, which is really a wady, a watercourse that flows only during the rainy season, when it may well become a torrent of water. At other times of the year the creek bed may be a dry wash. It was to this wady that divine revelation directed Elijah.

Can our ears distinguish what God was saying? He had pronounced a heavy judgment on apostate Israel and her royal family by removing the necessities of life—the rain and the dew and the fruits of the earth. Now in solemn judgment God had withdrawn a second blessing from the lives of his people, namely his prophet and the prophetic message. While Elijah was alone at Kerith he wasn't able to carry out the work for which God had originally called him: to let the voice of God be heard by the descendants of Abraham, the covenant nation. Now Elijah's only testimony was the testimony of separation.

That isn't an easy testimony to bring, is it? For a man dedicated to advancing the Lord's cause it had to be difficult to cool his heels for all the months he spent at Kerith, and we think that period may have lasted about a year. Surely the tedium of the situation must have gotten to him at times. To be deprived of human companionship for a year had to be unpleasant. And why? Largely because of the idolatrous whim of a king and his queen!

Additionally, Elijah was not merely a spectator of the drought he had announced, but a participant in that tragedy. He had to share in the common calamity. Maybe Ahab laughed when Elijah predicted that no rain or dew would fall. Well, Ahab wasn't laughing now. The grapevines, deprived of the dew that keeps them green during the hot summer, were withering for lack of moisture. The rainless summer, normally followed in Israel by the so-called "early rains" in September-October, was followed that year by a rainless September-October. The farmers couldn't plow land that was as hard as brass. Not a drop of rain fell in the equivalent of our December-January, when normally 50-75% of Israel's annual rainfall is recorded. And four months later, long about April-May, the so-called "latter rains" didn't come, the rains that normally bring the grain crop to ripening, that cause wheat and barley to head out.

Ahab wasn't laughing now, but neither was Elijah. He could very well have imagined that Ahab had spread the word that he, the prophet, was to blame for this national disaster, that he was the troublemaker. It has been suggested that this may have been the famine which, according to Josephus, was responsible for many small farmers losing all they had.

And yet Elijah dared not forget that it was not his idea to come to Kerith and hide there. It was the divinely revealed word of the Lord, the covenant God of Israel, which was responsible for his being at Kerith. Yahweh stood by his stalwart one during those many months while he was out of circulation.

For one thing, "he drank from the brook." The Lord saw to it that his faithful prophet did not suffer from thirst. Nor did he suffer from hunger. "I have ordered the ravens to feed you," God has said, and so it was. Although God often likes to use natural means to accomplish his purpose when they're adequate, God's words here suggest supernatural intervention. "The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening." "Bread" (Hebrew *lechem*) is a general term for food. Besides eating carrion, like all

scavengers, the raven has a wide and varied diet. In addition to the young of other birds and very small animals, they eat seeds, berries and fruit—enough, surely, to give Elijah at least a bit of variety in his diet. With each miraculous meal God was reassuring his prophet: “My plans for you have not been canceled. I’m going to provide for you until I lead you to another place where I have another assignment for you.”

In the meantime Elijah had perhaps twelve months to learn and relearn what Paul did sitting in prison for two years at the whim of the governor Felix, and what Moses learned while tending sheep for forty years: “Wait for the Lord” (Ps 27:14). “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:26). Most of us find waiting difficult; no doubt Elijah did, too, especially when, as the drought deepened, he noticed the water level of the brook declining gradually. During his entire stay at Kerith Elijah learned to trust. Each time God’s big black messengers appeared they brought Elijah only a half-day’s food supply. He had to trust that twelve hours later God would send them back with more. And as the water level in the brook dropped and Elijah had to put himself on short rations and to learn all over again what thirst is, he got additional practice in the difficult art of looking away from oneself and one’s own needs and preferences and focusing attention totally on God.

And one day Elijah’s loneliness, his inner tumult, his wonder about God’s plan for his future, and his accumulated frustration came to an end when once again “the word of the LORD came to Elijah: ‘Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.’”

Once again, here was a command from God which called for implicit faith. “*Zarephath*”—that was in Phoenicia, Jezebel’s home country, on the Mediterranean coast, northwest of Palestine. That meant that what was going to be Elijah’s new home was under the political control of Jezebel’s father! It was also a land which was the headquarters of Baal-worship, and which was therefore hostile to Elijah’s message and to his purposes. And “*a widow!*” She very likely needed a breadwinner instead of another boarder with whom to share her meager provisions. “Go at once to Zarephath!” Strange directions, indeed! It was not until months later that Elijah and the widow could both appreciate what the Lord had in mind. But when that day came, they—and we—can only say: “What a marvelous design!”

But the immediate problem for Elijah was how to get to Zarephath. That was a trip of maybe a hundred miles if he walked north along the course of the Jordan River to its headwaters, and then headed west to the coast (instead of taking the shortcut through the population centers of Galilee, thereby risking detection by Jezebel and Ahab). It looks like a 4-day trip, and if Elijah traveled by night, the problem of finding food and water may have been additionally burdensome.

When he arrived in Zarephath another problem faced him. How was he to recognize the widow of whom God had said: “I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food?” Like Abraham’s servant who was assigned the task of picking the right wife for Isaac, Elijah devised a test. “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” She may have recognized from his clothing that he was a stranger; would she respond? She did. But Elijah had an even more difficult test for her, one which would demonstrate conclusively to him that this was the widow of whom God had spoken. Would she risk her last means of support on this stranger, trusting in the promise he gave her: “The LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Your jar of flour, your jug of oil will not be used up until the LORD gives rain on the land’”? Pretty stiff test, wouldn’t you say, for a Gentile woman who as far as we know may have been a heathen, perhaps even a worshiper of Baal, and whose knowledge of Jehovah could only have been rudimentary? Would she give up her own and her son’s last meal on the word of a total stranger? God again assured Elijah that he was not leaving him without guidance.

Another unanswered question that may have bothered Elijah at this time was: “Why is God again taking me away from my work *in Israel?*” You will recall that the prophet Jonah was bothered by the same question and refused to follow God’s command. Surely you will admit that it’s not a normal thing for God to pull a prophet out of his customary field of labor. We don’t have to speculate at the answer to the question in this instance, because Jesus has answered the question for us. He did so in the sermon he preached in the synagogue of his home town in Nazareth. The account is recorded in Luke 4:24ff. That was the synagogue visit which ended when Jesus’ townspeople tried to push him off a cliff.

Listen to Jesus' words, spoken to the people of Nazareth who bristled when the hometown boy assumed divine authority to speak to them and even to call them to repentance. St. Luke, chapter 4: (Jesus is speaking): "I tell you the truth ... no prophet is accepted in his home town. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land, yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon" (4:24-26). Let's paraphrase Jesus' words to the worshipers in the Nazareth synagogue: "If you don't want to receive God's grace which I'm bringing to you, God can offer it to somebody else, specifically to Gentiles. God has done that sort of thing before. Look at what he did at the time of Elijah. God sent Elijah to Zarephath, to the home of a widow, and that visit was a distinct blessing for her in more ways than one. There were plenty of widows in Israel who could have used the help Elijah brought to Zarephath, but Israel had forfeited that help. Elijah was not sent to them. In fact, the very opposite was true. Not only was God withdrawing his blessing, he was actually announcing his judgment on the people of Israel by pulling his prophet out of the country. "It's Luther's metaphor of the *Platzregen*, the passing thundershower, all over again. "Ingratitude and rejection will force that Gospel shower to leave."

As Elijah had traveled from Kerith east of Jordan all the way to Zarephath on the north Mediterranean coast he could see the evidence of the drought. For perhaps a year now the sun had risen and set on cloudless skies over a parched and cracked land. And now Elijah knew Israel was in for another dose of the same. The God of grace is not mocked; a man reaps what he sows, and Elijah was the prophet through whom the sovereign Lord was going to teach some apostate Israelites that the God of grace does not permit people to wipe their feet on the offer of his love. To summarize: the period of Elijah's stay in Zarephath was bad news for king and people of Israel.

But those two plus years (1 Kg 18:1) were blessed ones for the household of the widow at Zarephath and for Elijah. The fact simply jumps out at you from the sacred text that during Elijah's stay at the widow's home God extended his mercy to a Gentile, one who, in Jesus' words, was not of his Jewish fold, but one whom he also had to bring so she could hear his voice. There are some absolutely fascinating details here which we're going to miss if we read the account carelessly. Let's pick up the thread when Elijah reached the city gate of Zarephath, saw the widow gathering sticks, and wondered if she might be the one the Lord had selected as his hostess for the next several years. How was he to find out?

Elijah made three requests of the lady, with each succeeding one asking more. The first was the easiest: "May I have a drink?" No doubt she recognized him as a stranger and courteously turned to go to the town well to get some water for him. As she was going Elijah made his second request, much more difficult than the first. "As she was going to get it, he called, 'And bring me, please, a piece of bread.'" This second request was a whole lot harder for the widow than the first, for a number of reasons. For one, the drought that was plaguing Israel would most likely have extended to adjoining lands as well, and food would have been scarce all over the Eastern Mediterranean. Then, too, even in the best of times, keeping food on the table has always been a problem in Phoenicia. Phoenicia is such a mountainous country that it doesn't have enough agricultural land to grow the food needed to feed its people. So how did the ancient Phoenicians feed their nation? For one thing, they built a merchant fleet and became the traders of the ancient world. One of the valuable commodities they exported was the one thing they had in quantity: timber—the cedars of Lebanon—in return for which they got food. Perhaps you remember that to get cedar for the temple he was building in Jerusalem, King Solomon offered the king of Tyre 125,000 bushels of wheat and barley, and 115,000 gallons each of olive oil and wine. And this wasn't just a one-shot deal, either, 1 Kings 5 tells us: "Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year." If food was hard to come by in the best of times, what would Phoenicia do in time of famine? And in particular, what would a poor widow do? The handful of flour she had left may very well have been imported grain, and expensive.

No wonder she replied to Elijah's second request: "As surely as the LORD your God lives, I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." Apparently she and her son had been

suffering from the famine and resultant malnutrition. Would she share what lay between them and starvation with a total stranger? Then came Elijah's third and most difficult request: "With your handful of flour and oil make a little cake and give it to me first, and afterward you can make something for you and your son." It's obvious that a handful of flour is going to make only a small cake, and this Elijah asked for himself. It surely must have sounded like what he was really asking for was: "Ma'am, would you take the bread out of your child's mouth and give it to me?" But then came the promise: "For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'" God's promise was all she had, but she received it in faith.

Can you imagine what an emotional moment it must have been an hour or so later when she returned to Elijah with the cake, and with tears in her eyes, handed it to him? (A related question: if you had been Elijah, could you have eaten it?)

Now came the moment of truth. The widow returned home to see if the promise from the God of Israel had come true. She walked over to her jar of flour and her jug of oil, looked into those two containers—and found exactly what the man of God had predicted. They weren't full, but there was as much flour and oil as there had been. God didn't give her a cupboard full of baking supplies, but there were enough ingredients for the next baking. And that's the way it was during the many months Elijah lived at her home. God surely extended his mercy to this Gentile woman. Those were pleasant days for Elijah in that humble home in Zarephath. Edersheim makes this interesting comment: "These were a happy, quiet resting time for Elijah—perhaps the only quiet happy season in all his life" (*History of Israel and Judah* V:196).

But difficult days lay ahead. All of a sudden it must have seemed to Elijah that any good results of his ministry to the widow and her son were undone. She looked upon Elijah only as a messenger of judgment who had brought misery to the kind soul who had given him shelter. "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" (17:18). Here God showed by means of a second miracle how he extended his mercy to a Gentile. I have the feeling that raising someone from the dead is usually considered the ultimate in miracles. And that's what Elijah asked for when the widow's son died. Remember, too, that when he asked for this miracle, Elijah had no precedent. It was not quite as difficult for Elisha later on to ask God to raise the Shunammite's son to life, or for Paul to raise Eutychus. They had precedent for that; Elijah had nothing to go on except his trust in Israel's covenant God.

And so he took the child from his mother and carried him up to his room on the roof. He laid the child on his own bed and he prayed. He could have prayed downstairs in the presence of the mother, but Elijah wanted to be alone with God, since he was going to be asking for a great miracle. There simply is no precedent for this. Elijah wanted to be undisturbed, face to face with God. Then Elijah did something unusual, "He stretched himself upon the child." In a similar instance recorded in 2 Kings 4, Elisha lay upon a child mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. Nothing magical here, but Elijah and Elisha both knew God can use natural laws and human instruments to work miracles. He did that here, and the woman got her son back from the dead.

We don't know precisely what that widow's spiritual condition was at the time the prophet of Israel entered her household. But we surely do know what it was at the time he left. "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth" (17:24).

Through each of the three unusual experiences of Elijah which we've noted in our study today God was training Elijah, shaping him into God's kind of man for a very difficult kind of world. At the king's court he gave Elijah the courage to speak boldly, without fear or favor. Over the year Elijah spent at Kerith God built in him a solid trust that God's way of doing things might be unusual, but it is always the right way. Elijah never had his meals served more regularly than when the ravens were his waiters. He may have been lonely but he was never alone. Where God wanted him to be is where he wanted to be. How difficult it often is for us to learn that! If I don't find my happiness where God happens to have placed me, if I don't find contentment in the situation and under the circumstances God has selected for me, then I won't find happiness or contentment anywhere.

The experience with the widow's son at Zarephath surely must have impressed upon Elijah the importance of his life of personal devotion to God. And perhaps this would be an appropriate note on which to bring this devotional study to a close. You and I must know, as Elijah did, that we will be no better husbands, no better fathers, no better pastors, than we are Christians. And that emphasizes the absolute importance for the pastor of his life of personal devotion to God. Caring for his own soul has got to come ahead of everything else in his ministry, even his care for his flock. If the pastor is not concerned about his own faith, why should he be concerned about theirs? The fact that Elijah sought out a private room where he could talk to God about the miracle of raising the widow's son from the dead underscores what Jesus said about going into your own room and closing the door before you pray.

It is absolutely essential for God's 20th century Elijahs to find quiet time to spend with their God. All of us know from experience how easy it is to trivialize our ministry, to fritter away our time doing a thousand worthwhile but non-essential things, things that aren't going to be very important the day after Judgment. I have nothing against writing out certificates or attending to the household maintenance of the congregation, but if these matters crowd out my basic calling as a Christian, then I ought to face up to the fact that I'm majoring in minors.

God's OT prophets were known by different names. They're called "*prophets*," because they spoke for God. They're often called "*seers*," because God revealed his sacred secrets to them by means of vision. One of the most significant names is the one the widow of Zarephath used for Elijah: "*man of God*." The prophet was, in a singular sense, God's man—called by God, responsible to God for speaking a message from the heart of God to the people of God. A man of God—that's what you and I are for people. But if we as men of God are so busy that we don't have time to hear the voice of God, then we're too busy. We'll simply have to find time for that. And if we can't find time, we'll have to make time. And if we can't make time, we'll have to steal it from something else—TV watching, or sleep, or something. God's people have a right to expect that their man of God has listened to God's voice before he dares to mount a pulpit and announce: "This is what the Lord says." Shouldn't it be a matter of high priority on our schedules to set aside time to read through the Scriptures of the OT and NT each year of our lives? Is that impossible for us? It will, of course, take a planned reading program. But more important, it will take the determination to remain in close personal contact with God. Elijah's ear was open to the voice of his God. The Lord can do a lot with a man like that.

III. SACRED SHOWDOWN (1 Kings 18)

A. Prelude (vv 1-15)

1. The LORD keeps a promise to Elijah
2. Ahab's frantic search for Elijah
3. Obadiah's impassioned plea to Elijah

B. Confrontation (vv. 16-29)

1. meeting between king and prophet
2. challenging the people of Israel
3. putting Baal to the test and to shame

C. Miracle (vv. 30-40)

1. by fire
2. by sword

D. Aftermath (vv. 41-46)

1. raining

2. running

III. SACRED SHOWDOWN

The months that Elijah spent in the tranquility of the widow's household in Zarephath were a peaceful interlude, but that was not to last. I Kings 18 begins with the announcement: "The word of the LORD came to Elijah." And once again he who served the Lord listened to the Lord. This happened, we are told, "in the third year." If we take this to refer to the third year of his residence in Zarephath, then his stay at the brook Kerith lasted about a year.

During the years of the famine Elijah must often have wondered: "Is God's judgment of the famine having the desired result on the king and the people of Israel?" He must have wondered about that again when God now directed him to return to his homeland. But he was to be disappointed. Elijah's return was occasioned not by repentance in Israel but by the command of the Lord, who in sovereign grace determined to reveal himself once again to his people.

"Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." It was at Jehovah's command that Elijah had announced three years earlier: "There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years *except at my word*." Now Jehovah saw to it that it was at Elijah's word that rain would again fall. We note once again that when Jehovah gives a man a difficult ministry to carry out, he supports him in it.

"Go and present yourself to Ahab" was not the easiest command for Elijah to obey. To Elijah that must have seemed to be tantamount to saying: "Go and walk into a lion's den." He knew that he would face the deadly resentment of Ahab; he might also be facing a populace infuriated over the loss of their daily bread. Elijah knew all along, of course, that he'd be returning to Israel; he had to inform King Ahab when the famine which had brought the country to its knees would end. His stay in Zarephath had been pleasant and profitable. Humanly speaking, therefore, the prospect of tangling with Ahab and Jezebel once again was anything but pleasant.

When Elijah returned home he was appalled by what he saw; it was worse than he'd anticipated. I Kings 18:2 mentions specifically: "The famine was severe in Samaria." We've all seen newspaper pictures of Africans who've lived with famine for extended periods of time—you know, faces lined with suffering, eyes sunken, stomachs distended with hunger. This must have been what greeted Elijah when after 3 ½ years of drought and famine he returned to his homeland.

Elijah wasn't the only one who had seen that. Remember Ahab had been living in the very midst of the misery. When the drought had first started 3 ½ years earlier, when the rains had stopped falling and the dew had stopped settling on the vineyards which dot the hills of Israel, Jezebel had no doubt called in the prophets of Baal to reverse it. After all, her god Baal was the god of rain and fertility, wasn't he? But finally she and her husband Ahab had to admit: "That prophet with the rough clothing is responsible." And Ahab sent messengers throughout the land to find Elijah. How intent Ahab was on finding Elijah can be seen from the fact that he had searched not only throughout the land of Israel but throughout the neighboring countries as well and had even asked neighboring tribes and countries to take an oath that they had not found him.

Ahab's knowledge of the extent of the damage was not confined to reports that reached the palace. We're told that he and Obadiah, the administrator of his palace, actually traveled through the land and saw for themselves that the famine was severe. They saw a land which had once flowed with milk and honey but now resembled a parched desert.

But Ahab's tour did not lead him to repentance. He wasn't interested in peace with God; his big interest was grass to keep his horses and mules alive. And he had plenty of those. According to the annals of Assyrian king Shalmaneser III Ahab had a force of at least 2000 chariots, but what good is a battle chariot without a healthy war-horse to pull it? When Ahab's on-site inspection convinced him that his livestock was in danger, he

was not repentant. Instead he was angry as a wild bull, and he intensified his frantic search for the prophet who was responsible for this.

Ahab summoned Obadiah, steward of his properties. Obadiah is described as a devout believer in the Lord who had rescued a hundred of the Lord's prophets from the sword of Jezebel by hiding them in a cave and supplying them with food and water. The fact that a prominent official at Ahab's court was a believer in Jehovah raises some interesting questions which we may not be able to answer. How could Obadiah hold such a high position in the palace if Jezebel hated believers and killed every prophet she could lay her hands on? The possibility suggests itself that maybe we've got us another Joseph of Arimathea here—a man who served Jehovah, but secretly, for fear of the authorities. Or was he another Daniel? We know that 300 years later Daniel was so valuable a statesman at the Babylonian court that Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar were happy to have him around even though his religious beliefs were anathema to them. Why, those heathen kings were even forced to acknowledge publicly that Daniel's God was a great God. Whatever the situation was with Obadiah—and after this incident we never meet the man again—I guess his remaining faithful in the face of the vile idolatry and adultery that surrounded Ahab's court and capital just proves that it is possible to grow a lily in a manure pile.

As Obadiah, in obedience to his royal boss, was looking for pasture for the royal livestock, he met a solitary traveler covered with a mantle. He recognized immediately that this was Elijah but was shook when Elijah told him "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'" "What have I done wrong," Obadiah asked, "that you are handing your servant over to be put to death?" Elijah's disappearance earlier, when God directed him to the brook Kerith and then later to Zarephath in Phoenicia, and now his sudden reappearance in Samaria suggested to Obadiah that the Spirit of God was miraculously transporting Elijah about. The palace administrator feared that if he informed Ahab that he'd seen Elijah the king would be furious that a high court official had not detained the prophet. Obadiah would almost surely lose his position at the king's court, and very likely his life, too. "Elijah, must you expose me to such danger?" he asked. The prophet's answer satisfied him: "As the LORD almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today."

With that assurance from the prophet, Obadiah was willing to go before the king and announce: "Elijah is here!" The stage was now set for the confrontation between King Ahab and the prophet whom he hadn't seen for 3 ½ years. The king's greeting was: "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" Not a syllable of repentance there, was there? Right there was the cancer that had infected the nation of Israel. God had raised up this nation from scratch to be his very own, a people who were to proclaim his praise. But instead of living to his glory, this nation and its king were running away from Jehovah—some, undoubtedly, in ignorance, but the majority, including the king and his queen, willfully. The disease was terminal; 150 years later the nation would be dead. St. Paul said it: "A man" (or you could substitute 'a nation') "reaps what he sows."

Elijah replied to the king: "I have not made trouble for Israel. But you and your father's family have." It's clear that these two principal characters in the narrative diagnosed the nation's problem differently. Ahab saw the big problem as the prolonged rainlessness and the resulting famine, and he saw Elijah as the cause. To Elijah drought and famine were only a symptom of a much worse problem—that people God had designed for his glory were robbing him of his glory and giving it to another god who was not god at all. This sacred showdown had to come; it was the climax of 42 months of preparation.

Ahab was ready to do whatever he had to get rain. That accounts for his willingness to obey the commands which Elijah issued: "Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mt. Carmel. And bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." There's nothing particularly polite about Elijah's commands, issued to a man who was accustomed to give orders, not to take them. But Ahab was not in a mood to quibble. He was bargaining from a point of weakness; the country had to have rain. Besides, he could not possibly have foreseen how catastrophic the outcome of this showdown would be for Baal's cause.

Elijah wanted two groups of people present at the confrontation on Carmel: the people of Israel and the prophets of the Baal cult. Obviously all the people of the Northern Kingdom couldn't come. But the fact that

the king's invitation was necessary seems to suggest that leaders from all across Israel were summoned, people who were in a position to influence others. And so the royal couriers went out, to summon participants and spectators to Mt. Carmel.

The place designated by Elijah for the sacred showdown was a prominent ridge jutting out into the Mediterranean at the site of the present-day city of Haifa. No reason is given why Mt. Carmel was chosen for the confrontation; it surely was not centrally located. We're told later that Elijah rebuilt the altar of Jehovah which lay in ruins; that might seem to suggest that Mt. Carmel in earlier times had been a center of Jehovah worship, possibly in protest against the calf shrines. If Mt. Carmel was intended as a place for sacrifice it was illegitimate, because after Solomon's temple was built sacrifices were to be brought only in Jerusalem. Another possible reason why Carmel was chosen is hinted at by the fact that nothing is said about Baal's prophets building an altar for their sacrifice. The altar to Baal may very well already have been standing on the mountain. We wonder: had Mt. Carmel been a center of Baal worship?

When days later the large group had assembled, Elijah addressed the people of Israel: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." Elijah detected indecision on the part of the Israelites. There were some who had adopted the fertility cult as their religion and their way of life; they had thrown in their lot with Baal. There were others, however, who had not forgotten the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 3 ½ years of rainlessness had convinced them that perhaps they should return to Jehovah, since Baal hadn't been able to make it rain. Others hesitated, perhaps out of fear of Jezebel. As long as they were wavering (Hebrew "limping") between two opinions, they couldn't progress in their lives of loyalty to God. They were neither hot nor cold. That accounts for their disappointing response to Elijah's challenge: "If the LORD is God, follow him!" What was their response? "The people said nothing." Isn't that indifference appalling? "We'll wait to see how this turns out before we make up our minds." Only the powerful Spirit of God can reverse an attitude like that.

And so Elijah set the stage for God to display his miracle-working power. Both sides would prepare an animal for sacrifice, both would call on the name of their God, and the god who answered by fire would be recognized as the true God. From morning to mid-afternoon the prophets of Baal did everything heathen people were known to do to persuade their god to demonstrate his power. They exhibited some typically heathen notions: that the longer the prayer is the more effective it will be; that they had to do something (here it was a ceremonial dance) to induce a favorable answer; that the louder they prayed the more likely their prayers were to be answered; that cutting themselves and making the blood flow would help to persuade their god to answer. And so they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice.

But there was no response, and that does not surprise us. Idolatry is not only the depth of depravity; it's also the height of stupidity. The prophecy of Jeremiah contains an exquisite passage which points that out:

"The customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good." Jeremiah 10:3-5

A decorated post is really very neutral. What a ridiculous worship! And here we stand with Elijah: what is ridiculous deserves ridicule. Elijah's purpose in taunting them, however, was not to take a cheap shot, to poke fun at someone else. He had a higher and a holier purpose: to draw as clear a distinction as possible between Baal and Jehovah. Baal might be hard to contact, but not Jehovah. Baal might be pleased to see his followers mutilate themselves in an attempt to gain his favor, but not Jehovah.

At the time of the evening sacrifice Elijah got his turn. Since the evening sacrifice in ancient Israel had to be finished at sunset, it's obvious that the slaughter and preparation of the sacrificial victim had to begin in mid-afternoon. Elijah first of all repaired the altar of the Lord which was in ruins. For the repair job he took

twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob. The covenant nation was a unit, even though political action had divided it into two nations. What was about to happen concerned not only the Northern Kingdom but all twelve tribes.

Elijah wanted, by the clearest possible demonstration, to indicate that the God whom he represented, the God for whom he spoke, is the only true God. He would ask that God to send fire. Again let it be emphasized that we have no evidence that God had promised Elijah in advance to send down fire. Elijah, knew, however, that at other critical times in the history of the covenant nation God had performed this very miracle for which he was now asking. On the day that Aaron and his sons began their ministry in the tabernacle in the desert, e.g., God had sent fire that consumed the burnt offerings and the other offerings on the altar (Lv 9:24). When during the period of the Judges God called Gideon to lead Israel to victory over the Midianites Gideon prepared a young goat for sacrifice and, at God's direction, placed it on a rock. And we're told: "Fire flared from the rock and consumed the meat" (Judges 6:21). God repeated this miracle for the parents of Samson and again for David and again for the entire Israelite community on the day the temple of Solomon was dedicated.

Elijah's prayer, recorded in two verses of 1 Kings 18, takes about 30 seconds to speak. It may very well be, of course, that what we have here is a summary of a longer prayer that may have taken several minutes. By contrast, Baal's prophets had prayed for six hours or more. Elijah's prayer mentioned the name of Jehovah three times. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are named, to remind the bystanders of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs and their descendants.

Elijah's prayer made three specific requests of God. "Let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

To make the contrast between Jehovah's power and Baal's helplessness stand out all the more sharply (and really to load the dice against himself) Elijah commanded that his sacrifice be drowned in water. It's interesting to note, incidentally, what construction the negative critics put on this action. The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* calls Elijah's action "probably a rain-making device in accord with ancient sympathetic magic practices."

Do you see how much was at stake there on Mt. Carmel? The whole revelation of God, that's what. All that Elijah had testified, all that Moses and the prophets had spoken would have been wasted if God had not answered by fire. God's solemn declaration "I am the LORD; that is my name. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8) would have been shown to be a noisy but idle threat. But God was not about to let his gracious good plan go by default, and so in grace he acted. The miracle for which Elijah prayed happened before the eyes of prophet and people and false prophets and king alike. God, who has never dealt with the human race in terms of minimums, again went the extra mile. He who had given his chosen people so many and such abundant revelations, he who had spoken at many times and in various ways, now spoke again, first of all in a miracle by fire.

The fire of the Lord fell, and after it had burned out, all that was left were smoldering ashes and an empty ditch. Not only the animal sacrifice, but the 12 stones, all that water, all were gone. Fire that consumes stones and dirt cannot have been kindled by human hand. This was no magic; this was a miracle.

God's miracle had the effect Elijah had prayed for. He had prayed, "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that these people will know that you, O LORD, are God..." The Hebrew Elijah used for the name of God is not simply 'elohim but 'elohim with the definite article. When the Hebrew name for God has the article, the specific emphasis is on the true God. In other words: after seeing the miracle the people, who earlier had been sluggish and indifferent, responded: "The LORD, he is the true God! The LORD, he is the true God!" To turn a cold and indifferent heart 180 degrees around is a miracle, a miracle of grace.

Before the sun set that afternoon on Mt. Carmel there was another miracle, this one a miracle of judgment, a miracle by the sword. It's not difficult to imagine that the huge crowd on Mt. Carmel was silent as the fire of the Lord fell on Elijah's sacrifice. The silence was broken first by the people who at long last had come to recognize that the God of Israel is the only true God, in comparison with whom every other god is only

a counterfeit. But suddenly another voice was heard over Mt. Carmel, and that was the voice of Elijah. While many of the observers were standing in stunned silence, Elijah announced: “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away! They seized them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered them there” (18:40). It seems reasonable that if 450 prophets of Baal were killed there must have been two or three times that many spectators on hand to carry out Elijah’s directive. For these Israelite leaders to carry out the command to kill all those prophets of Baal wasn’t easy. They knew that Jezebel could in reprisal have them put to death. There’s only one explanation for this phenomenon. When people who only hours earlier had responded to Elijah’s call with silence (v 21) now are willing to take up arms against Ahab and Jezebel, the power of God has to be at work.

Would you say Elijah overreacted? Remember that he was the anointed representative of the God of Israel. Living in a nation which had acquired the unholy habit of saying no to God, Elijah had been called to carry out God’s expressed will. God had surely made no secret about what his will was in the case of prophets in Israel who fostered the worship of pagan deities. Why in the law given through Moses God had made this clear stipulation: “If you hear it said ... that wicked men have led the people astray saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’ (gods you have not known) then you must inquire .. and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town” (Dt 13:12-15). God made it unmistakably clear that anybody in Israel who seduced God’s people into false worship thereby forfeited his right to live.

Remember, too, that the ancient Israelites did not live under a democracy, but under an absolute monarchy. Israel’s theocracy was rule by God. As sovereign God he made his will known and expected explicit compliance. It was therefore not overreacting on Elijah’s part to put Baal’s 450 prophets to death, nor was it senseless bloodthirst. It was simply obedience to a clear directive from God.

There’s an unusual double conclusion to this account in 1 Kings 18. One element of this aftermath of the sacred showdown on Mt. Carmel we would have expected, because God had predicted it. The other element of this aftermath catches us completely by surprise.

After putting the prophets of Baal to death Elijah had a message for Ahab that the king had waited 3 ½ years to hear: “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” Note several things here. First of all, Elijah did not make this announcement until all of Baal’s prophets were dead, so that everybody would know that Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility, had played no part in sending this rain, which would restore life to a dying land.

Note also that Elijah felt no personal animosity toward Ahab. Throughout this entire episode Ahab behaved like a sullen and spoiled child. If we had been Elijah and had had to face that, his words might have stuck in our craw: “King Ahab, why don’t you have something to eat? You don’t have to worry about the drought any longer.” Elijah spoke them with perfect grace and sincere good will. He recognized that Ahab was still a key man in Israel. As king he was in a position to do a great amount of good for God’s cause. Unfortunately the reverse was also true, but Elijah didn’t let that discourage or dissuade him from treating the king with a courtesy he really had not earned.

There are several other traits of Elijah we want to note. When he prayed for the promised rain to fall, we’re told he climbed to the top of Carmel bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. That’s the posture of complete prostration—forehead touching the ground and face looking back toward his knees. Elijah had just concluded a day that could have made him proud, but he still remained humble. All day long he’d been in charge, giving orders, the center of attention. I suspect that if we had been Elijah that day, more than one or two of us might have entertained the thought: “You know, I’m really quite a valuable leader of God’s people. Today I rendered a valuable service to God.” Pride is insidious, especially for leaders in the church. They’re almost continually in the public eye, especially as they lead the public worship of God’s people. Alexander Solzhenitsyn described this human frailty accurately when he wrote: “Pride grows in the human heart like lard on a pig.” When Elijah prayed for the rain God had promised, his face was in the dust. Finally that’s the only proper posture of a man in the presence of his God.

Another trait of Elijah we'll want to note is his implicit trust in the promise of his God. Up front in 1 Kings 18 we heard God tell Elijah: "Present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." Elijah believed that promise and now told his servant: "Go and look toward the sea. Go to a higher point and look out over the Mediterranean." The servant returned and announced: "There is nothing there." Elijah sent the servant back again and again. You see, Elijah's firm faith in God's promise "I will send rain on the land" led him to persevere in prayer even though he saw no results. Elijah knew that rain simply had to fall, as testimony to King Ahab and his wicked spouse. He therefore continued to ask for it until it came. Listen to St. James speak about the man who prays: "When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6f).

Seven times Elijah ordered his servant to look out over the Mediterranean. As he prayed he was confident that the clouds that would bring rain should be rising. When on the seventh occasion the servant reported "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea," Elijah knew his prayer had been answered. And then he told Ahab: "You'd better start out for your palace at Jezreel, because if you don't, the rain will stop you." At the foot of Mt. Carmel the Brook Kishon flows east into the Valley of Jezreel. (Actually the Kishon is not really a brook but another one of these wadis so common in Israel). Elijah remembered, and perhaps you do, too, how at the time of the Judges God had routed an entire enemy army just by sending a downpour and letting the Kishon overflow its banks, bogging down the battle chariots of Sisera, the enemy commander. That was at the time of Deborah and Barak, and Elijah didn't want that to happen to Ahab's chariot, especially now that the sun had set and the king had a 15-mile trip ahead of him. Elijah spoke none too soon, because we're told: "Meanwhile the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, and a heavy rain came on."

Before we leave this fascinating chapter of the Scripture, something ought to be said about the miracle which concludes this account, a miracle which has eluded many Bible readers. It's recorded in a single verse. "The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel" (18:46). What an unusual conclusion to the sacred showdown on Mt. Carmel!

By the time night fell on that eventful day, Elijah had put in more than a full day's work. Remember that on Mt. Carmel he had stood alone. The sacred text tells us that he had repaired the Lord's altar which lay in ruins, that he had built a rough altar of 12 stones, that he had dug a trench around it, arranged the wood, slaughtered the bull and cut it into pieces and arranged them on the wood. In addition to the man's physical weariness, imagine how his two prayers (one for fire and the other for rain) must have drained his emotional resources, as he faced that hostile audience all along.

And now the closing verse of the chapter informs us that as Ahab drove to his palace in his chariot, Elijah ran ahead of him. Imagine that!—for a distance of 15 miles, in a torrential downpour, and after dark. Obviously Elijah had to have been empowered by God to accomplish that feat. In a chapter that's full of miracles, we've got one more here.

Why do you suppose Elijah did that? There may be more than a single reason. For one thing, it was a silent sermon 15 miles long to Ahab, a wordless appeal to the king to break with Baalism once and for all and to rule as a servant of Jehovah, who all that day had done such amazing things before Ahab's very eyes. As Ahab drove home in that torrential downpour, watching the prophet ahead of him, he surely had to be impressed with the remarkable representative Jehovah had sent to deal with him. Elijah was accompanying the king's chariot not to humiliate him, but to escort him, humbly to serve him. As he observed that prophet outside his chariot, running for perhaps three hours soaked to the skin, Ahab surely must have realized: "This man is not a troublemaker, as I accused him of being. He has not revolted against me, the king, but only against Jezebel's religion!"

Here's the message for God's 20th century Elijahs. Living as we do in an age characterized by so much mediocrity, you and I are called to march to the beat of a different drummer. We're not called to pray and to give and to work and to suffer as little as possible. What a tragedy when God's men are put to shame by people who invest themselves totally in causes infinitely less important than the Savior's work. We hear of ancient

Demosthenes trying to speak clearly while running uphill with pebbles in his mouth, in order to sharpen his public speaking skills. We hear of Michelangelo so totally occupied in painting the Sistine Chapel that he didn't get out of his clothes for days at a time. We hear of Handel hollowing out the keys of his harpsichord with incessant practice. One hears of these instances to total commitment to a task and the conclusion is inescapable: "Shouldn't God's men be willing to do more?"

Does our day-to-day performance in the ministry announce to people: "He does his work well enough to get by?" or "He does his work with a cheerful intensity which shows God and man that he means business?" Christ has no use for mediocrity. That simply dare not be the measure of our ministry. In the parable of the talents Christ puts laziness in the same category as wickedness. And listen to Christ's apostle urge the Corinthians: "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord!" (1 Co 15:58). Listen to him instruct his young coworker Timothy: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Ti 2:15).

Elijah would agree with that. On the day of the sacred showdown, Elijah not only went the extra mile; he went an extra fifteen.

IV. RELAPSE, REBUKE, AND REASSIGNMENT (1 Kings 19 and 21)

A. threatened and frightened at Jezreel (19:1-2)

1. Jezebel's intent
2. Elijah's reaction

B. discouraged and despondent at Beersheba (19:3-6)

C. rebuked and reassured at Mt. Horeb (19:7-18)

1. The Lord exposed and reproved Elijah's mistaken zeal
2. The Lord corrected Elijah's misunderstanding of the way he does his work
3. The Lord instructed Elijah about his future plans.

D. prophetic succession at Elisha's family farm (19:19-21)

E. stormy farewell to Ahab at Jezreel (1 Kings 21)

IV. RELAPSE, REBUKE, AND REASSIGNMENT

Anybody who studies the life and ministry of Elijah has got to be impressed with what an articulate and effective spokesman he was for the Most High. We can understand why the Scripture compares Elijah to John the Baptist, the greatest among men born of women. In the portion of the Scripture before us for study in this session (1 Kings 19 and 21), however, we once again find Elijah not doing what he did best. He was not preaching; he was running away. At this tragic hour in Israel's 200-year history, at this time of deep apostasy, Elijah was not pounding the pavement of Israel's population centers; he was off by himself in the desert -and not because God called him there, either. He chose to go there. "Why?" we ask.

1 Kings 19 supplies the answer. You will recall that we left Elijah exhausted and sopping wet in Jezreel, site of King Ahab's summer palace. He had accompanied the king to Jezreel, and there they parted company. We can imagine that the king ran inside the palace to share with Jezebel his queen the news about the sacred showdown that had taken place on Mt. Carmel, and we can also imagine that the queen was all ears. "Jezebel, you can't imagine what I saw this afternoon! With my own eyes I saw fire fall from heaven at the prayer of Elijah the Tishbite, consuming burnt offering and even the stone altar. The people fell to the ground and confessed Jehovah to be the true God. And, Jezebel, 450 priests of Baal are dead; their blood is flowing in Wadi

Kishon. They were laughed at as deceivers. And there's a lot of enthusiasm for Elijah; people look upon him as a prophet of the living God. He closed the heavens 3 ½ years ago, and now he has opened them again."

The miracle on Carmel simply had to have made an impression on Ahab, and Jezebel noticed that. In a way we can see some parallels between King Ahab and King Herod (the one who many centuries later, at his wife's instigation, had John the Baptist beheaded). Like Ahab, Herod was impressed with God's messenger, but his wife did not permit him to act on his convictions. Like that other queen, Jezebel wanted to remove her husband from the influence of God's prophet, and she knew exactly how to go about doing that.

Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them" (namely, like one of the prophets of Baal who had been killed). These words seem to suggest that Jezebel was not really contemplating assassinating Elijah. It wasn't that she would've had any scruples of conscience about doing that; somehow she had managed to square it with her conscience to kill the Lord's prophets prior to the showdown at Carmel, and later she would mastermind the killing of Naboth and his sons. If she had wanted to kill Elijah at this time, wouldn't she have sent an executioner instead of a messenger alerting Elijah to the danger he was in? Be that as it may, Jezebel was successful in removing Elijah from contact with her husband.

"Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" (1 Kings 19:3). How shall we evaluate his action? Some have seen in Elijah's flight just plain common sense. Discretion is the better part of valor. According to this logic, a dead prophet isn't going to do much good for the Lord's cause. "Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion," the book of Ecclesiastes tells us.

As much as one would like to give Elijah the benefit of the doubt, one is hard put to do that here. Really he played right into Jezebel's hand by leaving the Northern Kingdom and heading south—way south. We'll be hearing that when he finally did stop running he heard the Lord's voice asking: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The question surely implies that Elijah fled without specific authorization from the Lord. "Aren't you supposed to be up north upholding my cause?"

When Elijah fled without the Lord's permission and indeed against the Lord's will, he took all hope of Israel's spiritual renewal with him. Prospects for spiritual improvement in Israel were really quite good at the time Elijah hit the road. The contest on Carmel could hardly have gone better. The people were impressed and restated their loyalty to Jehovah. That surely could have been the start of something good, but nothing was going to come of it as long as Elijah had fled the country and wasn't around to lead the renewal. What would the faithful few in Israel say when they heard that their spiritual leader had bailed out, had run to save his hide? If their champion had not stood firm in the evil day, how could they be expected to stand? Elijah had been concerned about his life. By the same token, didn't the faithful in Israel have just as good reason to be concerned about theirs? The word reached Jezebel that Jehovah's followers had put Baal's prophets to death and Jezebel no doubt put a price on their heads.

Surely there's a message for us in Elijah's flight. If such a sturdy and stalwart servant of the Lord could fall so hard, you and I have little reason for thinking: "It couldn't happen to me!" What are you and I but jars of clay, dirt plus the breath of God? Elijah probably rationalized his flight. No doubt he had convinced himself it was the sensible thing to do. Haven't we lived with ourselves long enough to realize that when we've made up our minds to do something, we'll usually manage to find some justification for the action? There's warning here for any man of God.

But there's comfort for us here, too. Frail children of dust we are, and feeble as frail, but, for one thing, we're not alone in our frailty. The things written aforetime were written for our learning. We're not alone in the company of the frail ones. There are some men of considerable stature in that group, and the list is long: Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David and Elijah and Hezekiah, to name just a couple of the Old Testament members of the club. It's comforting to know, too, that the Lord of the church didn't reject Elijah because he was frightened by Jezebel's threat and ran.

My, how he ran! He traveled first to Beersheba, at the southern edge of the Kingdom of Judah, perhaps 100 miles south of Jezreel. There he no doubt thought he was safe, outside the domain of Queen Jezebel and

under the protection of good King Jehoshaphat. And yet even there Elijah was not happy, but discouraged and despondent. He left his servant in Beersheba and all by himself went a day's journey into the desert where he asked God to let him die. "I've had enough, LORD; take my life." And no doubt he was sincere in praying that.

But sincerity is no safeguard, no guarantee that our viewpoint is correct. God answered his prophet's prayer the same way you fathers would answer the foolish request of a child of yours. God gave his discouraged and despondent child something better than what he asked for. Elijah lay down under the broom tree (I confess I like the sound of KJV's "juniper tree" better except that it wasn't a juniper) and fell asleep. A wise heavenly Father in his tender mercy gave his child the precious relief of sleep.

After Elijah woke from his nap he had a surprise waiting for him: food and drink, provided by an angel whom God had sent to minister to him. "There by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals." What tenderness on God's part! He not only supplied Elijah with food, but with fresh, warm food—probably the first warm meal he'd had since leaving the widow's home in Zarephath. And on top of that, this meal was served by an angel, no less! Considering the seriousness of Elijah's action (running away from his call, jeopardizing what had taken the Lord 42 months to achieve, standing in the way of God's plan) the Lord treated him remarkably gently. Elijah certainly deserved a stiff reprimand, and probably a dishonorable discharge from the Lord's service, but the Lord said nothing about his sin—at least not now. There would be time later for rebuke, but the Lord didn't wish to add to Elijah's emotional turmoil and deepen his despondency.

It might be worth a minute or two - and a ponder or two - to analyze the reason behind the situation Elijah found himself in. Obviously he had panicked when he got Jezebel's warning note, and he took off. But is it possible that there was more involved than fear? He had been so courageous at Mt. Carmel, standing alone against so many. It has been suggested that Elijah's physical condition may have contributed to the series of bad decisions he made. There can be no doubt that the man was physically exhausted after his 15-mile run to Jezreel. That would have tired even a man at the peak of physical fitness. And then Jezebel's note came. If the exhausted prophet had postponed his decision until he'd had a good night's rest, and until he'd had time to talk the matter over with God in prayer, might things have looked different to him? A long hard journey on foot, looking over his shoulder to see if Jezebel's hired gun was gaining on him was about the last thing this tired prophet needed now. I kind of suspect that some of the brothers here may have learned the hard way that late-night decisions are not always the best ones. For a congregational voters assembly to make important decisions when the hour is late and the men present are tired and tempers are frayed may lead somebody to say something he's later going to regret or to actions that might not seem nearly as wise the following morning. (I recall serving a congregation that had the rule that no new item of business could be introduced at a congregational meeting after ten o'clock. My recollection is that it worked wondrously well).

But we're dealing here with historical realities, not with what might have been. Elijah was at Beersheba, on the southern border of the Kingdom of Judah. But even that was not his final destination. The angel of God brought him food again, and in the strength of that he continued his journey south. He traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. Horeb is Mt. Sinai, in the heart of the Sinai Peninsula. Can you believe that? This discouraged prophet had now traveled 300 miles on foot, most of it through inhospitable desert country. KJV calls this "wilderness," but please don't think of it as the kind of wilderness Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett used to roam around in. This was rocky and trackless wasteland, hot by day and cold by night, a place where a man can easily become disoriented.

For anybody to head out south from Beersheba on foot and alone is terribly unwise. (19:3 tells us Elijah had left his servant behind in Beersheba). And for anybody to journey into the desert of Sinai alone and on foot without supplies of food and especially of water is downright suicidal. It's clear that Elijah wanted to die. When he had left Jezreel he ran to save his life. Now he wanted to lose it.

Since he knew Palestinian geography, he knew that even if he did miraculously survive in the desert he'd be of precious little value to God as a prophet in the desert of Sinai. Elijah's prayer, "Take my life!" was clearly outside of the will of God. Elijah had sinned by running away from God and was now caught in sin's entanglements. He found himself arguing with God, justifying an action he knew deep down was wrong.

Even though Elijah was through with life and with the ministry, it so happened that the Lord was not through with Elijah. Now note the exquisite method God chose to reverse the situation, to turn the prophet around 180 degrees.

At Mt. Sinai Elijah went into a cave, where he spent the night. It was there that once again the word of the LORD came to him. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “What’s a messenger of God doing 300 miles away from where he’s supposed to be, and in a cave at that?” It was an embarrassing question, and God repeated it a bit later when Elijah failed to give a satisfactory answer.

Elijah replied: “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too” (19:10). Elijah’s answer says a number of things about the prophet, none of them particularly flattering to him. Keil points out that Elijah expressed not only the greatest despair as to the spiritual situation in Israel, but also a carnal zeal which, like the sons of thunder in the New Testament, would gladly have called God’s vengeance down on all idolaters in Israel. There may be in Elijah’s words a tacit reproof that God had done nothing to check this deplorable situation but instead had permitted the situation to deteriorate to the point where Elijah was the only true child of God left in all of Israel. Elijah spoke as it all was lost, and really there was little reason for him to go on with life.

They say that if you stick your nose in limburger cheese, the whole world stinks. That was Elijah’s problem here. In his physical and emotional depression he had overlooked the evidence God had shown him in recent weeks that he wasn’t the only believer God had left. Elijah had, e.g. met Obadiah, who at the risk of his own life had spared a hundred of the Lord’s prophets by hiding them in caves from the revenge of Jezebel. Elijah had forgotten the enthusiastic response of the people to the sacred showdown on Mt. Carmel—first acknowledging Jehovah as the one true God and then putting Baal’s prophets to the sword.

But in between those two embarrassing questions (“What are you doing here, Elijah?”) God gave Elijah an object lesson, which consisted of three tremendous displays of natural forces. As far as we know, not a word of explanation was spoken while these displays were going on, but not a word needed to be spoken; God got his point across.

Elijah may have interpreted the Lord’s patience with him during his 300-mile trip south as indicating the Lord’s approval. But the Lord had not approved of what Elijah had done and instead rebuked him. At the same time he corrected Elijah’s misunderstanding of the way God ought to do his work. God told Elijah: “Go out” (namely, out of your cave) “and stand on the mountain. I’ve got something to show you.” Then a powerful wind of tornado force tore the mountain apart. It dislodged rocks and sent them crashing down the mountain. God’s second display of power took the form of an earthquake. The mountain which had shuddered when the tornado struck now shook even more violently. Cracks opened in the crust of Mt Sinai. The people on the Nimitz Freeway in San Francisco when the earthquake hit would very likely agree that few experiences cause terror quite like having the earth move beneath your feet. After the earthquake came fire. Elijah seemed to be surrounded by fire; he must have felt like an animal trapped in a forest fire. In the trackless desert there was, of course, little to burn. But 600 years earlier Moses had seen a fire at Sinai which didn’t require fuel, either.

No doubt Elijah would have been very happy if God had seen fit to use any one of those three destructive forces on Jezebel. Elijah would have thought it appropriate if a tornado had blown her to kingdom come, or if an earthquake had scared the daylights out of her and blown away any inclination ever again to persecute the Lord’s cause, or if a fire from God had reduced her to a little pile of charcoal. But Elijah was not thinking God’s thoughts. With each of the three terrifying power displays the significant statement is made: “But the LORD was not in the wind ... he was not in the earthquake ... he was not in the fire.” Those three were terrifying phenomena of judgment, but that isn’t how God does his real work (revealing himself to people, winning their hearts, making them his children, and keeping them in his family).

To be sure, the Lord has been known to use some pretty forceful methods. He once opened up the earth to swallow Korah and his bunch of rebels. Elijah himself had been involved in some pretty extraordinary acts of ministry in which God’s awesome power was plainly evident. Calling down fire from heaven in that showdown

on Carmel and killing 450 prophets of Baal is spectacular, by any definition. But that's not the Lord's customary way of winning people for his family. Such spectacular displays of power aren't the way God gets his real work done. They are at most messengers which precede his coming, celestial 2x4's, if you will, by which God gets people's attention. The Savior has come not to destroy men's lives but to save them. He is, after all, the Savior, not the Crusher.

After witnessing those awesome phenomena of judgment Elijah heard a gentle whisper (Hebrew: "A quiet, small voice"). The power by which God saves sinners lies in a quiet word, which people like Jezebel and her false prophets can contradict and shout down. God emphasized the same truth through his prophet Zechariah: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty."

This was both rebuke and instruction for Elijah. He needed to be reminded that God can get his work done without spectacular displays of power. The reverse side of that coin was that Elijah was not to draw the conclusion that just because God had not sent ten legions of angels to interrupt Jezebel's threat God must have lost interest in his cause or in his prophet Elijah.

The Lord did indeed have plans for this discouraged prophet, and he now instructed him about those plans. He first repeated the question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" In response Elijah for the second time recited his little piece about how he'd been zealous for the Lord but that now he was the only one left. To that the Lord had several things to say. "Elijah, you're very much concerned about conditions up in the Northern Kingdom - the unbelief of the people and the wickedness of the royal family. Elijah, so am I.

"And because I am, Elijah, I want you to head north again, and anoint Hazael king over Aram." Aram was Israel's neighbor to the north; in NT times it was known as Syria. That new Aramean king Elijah was to anoint would be God's scourge against the house of Ahab and the nation of Israel. Wars more desolating and humiliating than any that had preceded would sweep over Israel. God continued: "Furthermore, Elijah, I want you to anoint Jehu king over Israel." But why anoint a new king over Israel when Israel already had a king named Ahab? Jehu, the new king, would be the Lord's minister of vengeance ("hatchetman" would perhaps be a more accurate term) to wipe out Ahab's dynasty and to destroy Baal-worship in Israel. With these two royal appointments God assured Elijah that he would take steps to curb the forces of evil that were so obviously at work in Israel. God's vengeance on Ahab and Jezebel would come, but not right now, and not by the hand of Elijah.

God continued to speak. "And finally Elijah, you've just about given up on your work as prophet. I haven't, Elijah. I want that work to continue, so I'm authorizing you to anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet." The mission of Elijah was to be continued in Elisha.

"Oh, and one more thing, Elijah. You see yourself as all alone, the only loyal believing child I've got left in all of Israel. Your eyes misled you, Elijah. You aren't all alone. I've got 7000 in Israel whose knees have not bowed to Baal. To use the Apostle Paul's words, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. But those 7000 need a pastor, Elijah. They've got a tough row to hoe. Now I want you to get back up where you belong." It was a chastened prophet who left Mt. Sinai and retraced his steps, to resume the work he had abandoned.

As Elijah headed north he could no doubt see the change in the landscape. The heavy rain which had brought the long drought to an end had begun to green the parched desert. Farther north, farmers were again working in their fields. Elijah passed the borders of Judah and came to the tribal territory of Issachar (west of the Jordan, south of Galilee), the tribal territory in which Ahab's summer palace was located. Elijah traveled to the fields of a man named Shaphat, who must have been one of the 7000. He had given his son the name Elisha ("my God is salvation)." Shaphat must have had a large farm, because twelve yoke of oxen (in our culture that would be twelve tractors) were plowing his land, eleven guided by the hands of his servants, one by the hand of the owner's son. This is our introduction to Elisha. As was the case with Elijah, we also know very little about Elisha's background. We don't know if Elijah had ever met Elisha previously. The important thing is that he knew him now. He took off the rough cloak which he wore, which was apparently his badge of office, and threw it over Elisha's shoulders. Elisha knew what that meant. He slaughtered the oxen, and using the yoke and

the plow as fuel, roasted the oxen for a farewell feast, and kissed his parents good-bye. One would have to call that a complete break with his past vocation.

Elijah's response to Elisha's request upon leaving his parental home may strike us as strange. Elisha had requested: "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye." Elijah responded: "Go back; what have I done to you?" This was not criticism; Elijah simply wanted to assure Elisha that he was not being forced to follow. Serving as the Lord's prophet had to be his own conviction and choice. It did not take Elisha long to make up his mind. Immediately after the farewell banquet "he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant" (19:21) for the remaining years of Elijah's ministry.

God's hour had now struck for Elijah to part company with Ahab. Listen to the capsule description the Scripture gives us of that wicked king; "There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel" (21:25f). It was only by the grace of God that Ahab's path through life so often intersected with Elijah's. Those points of intersection could have been a source of great blessing for Ahab. Unfortunately they were invariably embarrassing and distasteful for him. It goes without saying that the meetings with Ahab were extremely difficult and unpleasant for Elijah. Let's review the last of those confrontations now.

The 21st chapter of 1 Kings begins with little indication of the tragedy about to take place. "There was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the (summer) palace of Ahab."

We can understand why Ahab would have wanted a summer retreat at Jezreel, overlooking the beautiful Valley of Esdraelon, at the foot of the mountains of Gilboa. The mountains of Gilboa, immediately to the south, were densely wooded, and we can imagine that for Ahab to have acquired the vineyard adjacent to his palace property would have enhanced its beauty, as well as its value. The problem that confronted Ahab, however, was that the same conditions that made the vineyard attractive to him made it attractive to its owner. Besides Naboth, the owner, had additional reason to decline to sell. Piety to God who had given him the land, and reverence for his fathers, who had passed the property down to him, forbade him to sell or to trade the vineyard away. His words must have grated on Ahab's ears: "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." There was that hated name again, "Yahweh," "the LORD." Ahab was both irritated and frustrated. It seemed to the king that he was being forever opposed by Yahweh—if not by his prophet—the one wearing the rough garment of hair,—then by his followers.

Although Ahab viewed this as pretty formidable opposition to his plan for acquiring the vineyard, his queen had no such misgivings. "Cheer up!" she said. "I'll get you the vineyard." Her plan was to order the elders of Jezreel to proclaim a day of fasting, a day of national humiliation and prayer, as if some great sin lay upon the city which needed to be repented of if God's judgment were to be averted. As yet the people of Jezreel were unaware of any great sin. For that reason Naboth was set in a prominent place, and false witnesses accused him of having blasphemed God and the king. Perhaps those false witnesses claimed to have heard Naboth, at the time he refused to sell his property, pronounce a curse upon Ahab. Such a curse would have been regarded as an act of blasphemy not only against the king but primarily against God, whose authorized representative the king was.

Oriental justice moves quickly, and the punishment for blasphemy was speedily carried out—death by stoning. The property of the person guilty of blasphemy and treason would naturally be deeded to the crown, especially since Naboth's sons were also stoned to death, leaving no survivors to claim the property.

What Ahab and Jezebel were unaware of, however, was that the death of the Lord's saints is precious in his eyes. The Lord had seen the gory goings-on in Jezreel. He alerted his prophet Elijah to what had happened and commanded him to deliver a message to Ahab. When Ahab went to inspect his newly-acquired property, there once again was that man whom he had last seen running through the blinding rain. Elijah was the last person Ahab expected or wanted to see, and the king's first words show that he knew why Elijah had come. "So you have found me, my enemy!" Elijah's reply emphasized that what he had to say was not the result of

personal enmity but of Ahab's flagrant rebellion against God. Not only would doom strike Ahab personally, but it would strike his royal line as well and doom it to extermination. "This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!" "And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel." "I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel. Not only would Ahab and his wicked queen die violent and ignominious deaths, not only would their royal line be removed from the throne of Israel, their family would die out and they would be left without descendants.

What a stormy farewell address of God's prophet to the king of Israel! What a series of crushing blows! The words of Elijah went straight to Ahab's heart. The sacred historian reports: "Ahab tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly." This led God to relent in carrying out his decree of judgment. Ahab's royal line was permitted to remain on the throne for one more generation before God completely cut it off

One of the things that makes reviewing the ministry of the prophet Elijah so fascinating is that it's almost like looking in a mirror. Even a cursory review of the two chapters of the Old Testament that we've looked at today shows us two negative reactions of Elijah which each of us has experienced.

Elijah hoped to be instrumental in leading the backsliding nation of Israel back to the faith of their forefathers. A noble goal for one's ministry, to be sure. But how did he react when the results of his ministry didn't match his hopes? Elijah was down. He felt unpopular, unwanted and terribly alone. And those negative emotions were not imagined; Elijah felt them very keenly, very deeply. And yet they were unnecessary and unbecoming a man of God, because in his conceit he imagined his lot to be worse than it really was. And the situation didn't improve for Elijah, either, when he holed up in a cave. Could that be the reason for some of the dissatisfaction we feel in our ministry? Have we assumed the mantle of martyr? You know the attitude: "With the whole world against me, I'm lucky I don't have a persecution complex."

In his distorted perception of the realities of his ministry, what did Elijah see as the solution to the problems that bothered him? He wished God would step in with a demonstration of his power and really put the fear of the Lord into Ahab and Jezebel. Does that come pretty close to home? Haven't we also caught ourselves thinking: "God, with a flick of your little finger you could do something about this problem which is causing me so much grief! A couple well-chosen miracles could open people's eyes and turn them around."

And then we hear God speaking to us in a soft, gentle whisper: "My son, I haven't ever overwhelmed anyone into my family with a miracle of awesome power, and I don't propose to start now. But I do offer you some well-chosen miracles for the work you want to accomplish. Take the incarnation for starters. I sent My Son to take on a human body so that in him I could love a whole human race and win them back for myself. You want me to perform a miracle, my child? Miracles don't come any bigger than the resurrection, which guarantees that Jesus Christ was not a failure, that he did in fact reconcile a sinful race to God. What happened Easter morning guarantees that your ministry in Christ's name will not be in vain."

But we won't hear that message as we stand outside our private cave waiting for wind and earthquake and the fire of God's majesty to shake up some people who are giving us grief. We'll hear that message only as our ears are attuned to the gentle whisper that sounds from his Word.

V. ELIJAH'S LEGACY

A. to the house of Ahab

1. fearless rebuke to Ahab's son and successor Ahaziah (2 Kings 1)
2. Letter of warning to Ahab's son-in-law Jehoram (2 Chronicles 21:12-15)

B. to Elisha

1. assurance that the prophetic office would continue

2. assurance that God would equip him with the requisite gifts
3. Triumphant home-going in whirlwind and chariot of fire

C. to US

1. as Gentiles
2. as pastors
 - a. God will make use of sinful men for his ministry
 - b. God will direct our ministry only through law and gospel
 - c. God will bless the faithful preaching of his word with results

V. ELIJAH'S LEGACY

If we could plan the course of our ministry, we would not program periods of storm and strife for ourselves. Who of us likes conflict? Now remember that Elijah was made of the same clay we are. He didn't look forward to stirring up opposition any more than we would have, and yet that was a large part of the prophetic ministry God designed for him. Elijah was a prophet of fire. Now we'll be reminded that he was a prophet of fire right down to the end. We don't have a continuous history of the closing years of Elijah's ministry; we have only four glimpses of it.

The book of Proverbs informs us: "A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children" (13:22). As we now look more closely at the way Elijah's ministry wound down, we see that he left a legacy to those who survived him, and we want to examine it.

Elijah left a legacy, first of all, *to the house of Ahab*. By the time the closing chapter of Elijah's life was written King Ahab was dead, cut down in battle by the arrow of an Aramean soldier. Ahab was succeeded on the throne of Israel by his son Ahaziah, a worthless character who "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (1 Kg 22:52). Fortunately he ruled for only two years. He followed in the footsteps of his mother Jezebel by worshipping Baal, thereby provoking the Lord God of Israel to anger.

2 Kings I records the one contact Elijah had with King Ahaziah. We're told that this young king had had an accident. He had fallen through the lattice of an upper room in the palace and had injured himself in the fall. Perhaps he'd been standing on a balcony when the support gave way and he fell to the ground. We can be sure it was his mother Jezebel who directed him to go to the priest of Baal in the Philistine city of Ekron to learn whether he'd recover from his injury. Translated literally, "Baal-Zebub" is "lord of the flies." The name referred originally to the Canaanite god who was supposed to send or to avert the plague of flies. We learn here that he was also given credit for being able to predict the future.

Elijah, who had left Mt. Sinai at God's command and had resumed his prophetic ministry in Israel, was of course unaware that the king had been injured and that he had sent messengers to a heathen god to ask advice. But this offense was so flagrant that God informed Elijah of it and instructed him to intercept the messengers and to give them a message to carry back to their king.

God considered the kings of Israel to be shepherds whose divine assignment it was to care for the physical and spiritual welfare of the covenant people of Israel. As the shepherd of God's people the king was not only to protect the safety of God's people from, say, invasion by hostile armies but, more important, to protect their faith against false religions which surrounded ancient Israel on all sides. In order to evaluate Elijah's reaction to what Ahaziah did, we'll have to remind ourselves what an absolute catastrophe for Israel the accession of Ahab, Ahaziah's father, had been. Up to that time the religion of the Northern Kingdom had been perverted Jehovah-worship. Now Ahab—thanks to his wicked queen Jezebel -introduced Baalism, which was nothing but raw heathenism plus dirty sex.

It is not surprising that God reacted to Ahaziah's provocation as sharply as he did. For Israel's king to send to a foreign deity for information was tantamount to saying that Israel's God was inadequate. The official

who was under solemn covenant to protect the faith and the lives of God's people, leading them in the ways of God was misleading them, by word and example.

King Ahaziah got an answer to his inquiry, all right, but it wasn't the answer he expected. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, whose honor had been attacked, ordered Elijah to intercept the royal messengers and give them this message to take back to their king: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub? Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'" Instead of the lying voice of Baal's priests, Ahaziah heard the voice of the living God.

And he was furious. After he had determined it was Elijah who had sent him this sharp preaching of the Law, he twice sent contingents of fifty soldiers to arrest him and to bring him back to the royal palace, probably to be executed. In both instances fire fell from heaven and destroyed Ahaziah's soldiers.

The question has been asked: "It's one thing to punish a wicked king for his unbelief, but wasn't Elijah overreacting by calling down a firestorm from heaven to wipe out a hundred men who were only obeying orders from their commander-in-chief?" It's a fair question. To answer it, it will be helpful and instructive to note the commands that the respective captains of the contingents of fifty soldiers gave Elijah. The first one said: "Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'" The captain of the second group of fifty gave Elijah the command: "Man of God, this is what the king says: 'Come down at once!'" Along with their king, those soldiers were defying God by trying to arrest Elijah and bring him to the capital to silence his warning voice once and for all. The title they gave Elijah shows they knew he was a prophet of Jehovah, yet they showed little respect either him or for the God he represented. True they were under orders, but finally we must obey God rather than men.

That harsh message of judgment was Elijah's legacy to the members of the house of Ahab. From Elijah's clear and courageous testimony they had to learn the hard way that God is not mocked. C. S. Lewis put it well when he said: "Really there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who have learned to say to God: 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says: 'Thy will be done.'" "Very well, have it your way. You want to be without me; now be without me!" Ahaziah, son and successor of Ahab on the throne of Israel, heard that message. That was his legacy from Elijah.

Strangely enough, another royal relative of Ahab, this one a son-in-law, received a similar legacy from Elijah. This was Jehoram and, oddly enough, he was king of Judah in Jerusalem. Jehoram was the son of good king Jehoshaphat. Although he was a good king, Jehoshaphat made a misguided attempt to reunify the divided tribes of Israel. As a first step he gave his son Jehoram in marriage to Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. The result was predictable. 2 Chronicles 21 tells us: "(Jehoram) walked in the ways of the king of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for he married a daughter of Ahab. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD"(21: 6).

For that he got a letter of warning from Elijah. "This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: 'You have not walked in the ways of your father Jehoshaphat or of Asa king of Judah. But you have walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and you have led Judah and the people of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves, just as the house of Ahab did. You have also murdered your own brothers, members of your father's house, men who were better than you. So now the LORD is about to strike your people, your sons, your wives and everything that is yours, with a heavy blow. You yourself will be very ill with a lingering disease of the bowels, until the disease causes your bowels to come out' (2 Chr 21 :12-15).

Jehoram learned that the consequences of his disobedience to his holy trust would be severe: further defeat in war, which would cost him his wife and sons, and a disease which would lead to his death, an awful death. After a lengthy illness Jehoram died in great pain. Elijah's legacy to the house of Ahab was not a pleasant one to administer, but it was an inevitable one. God will deal with people in mercy if possible but in judgment if necessary.

Elijah's legacy to his spiritual son Elisha was of quite another kind. One of the worries that had bothered Elijah was that God's little flock was becoming virtually extinct, that he was the only believer left, and that when he died God's cause would go under. One of the things Elijah left to Elisha was the assurance that the prophetic office would continue. Elijah's last days on earth were spent with Elisha visiting the various schools of the prophets—in Gilgal, and Bethel, and Jericho - to strengthen the young men who were training for their

prophetic ministry there and to bid farewell to these important young men. We don't know if these training schools had continued in existence from the time of Samuel two centuries earlier, when we first hear about them, or if Elijah had revived them. But in either case positive steps were being taken in Israel to insure that they would be a steady supply of young men who were dedicated to letting Jehovah's voice be heard, and who would counter the lying claims of Baalism with the truth of God. This assurance had to bolster Elisha's confidence as he contemplated the task of being Elijah's successor.

He got further assurance when he and Elijah reached the west bank of the Jordan river. God had made it clear to Elijah that he was to be taken to heaven from a spot east of the Jordan. He therefore took off his loose outer garments rolled it up so as to make a sort of staff, and struck the waters of the Jordan, and they parted. What precious assurance to Elisha and to God's messengers of all times that the very power of heaven stands behind God's spokesman! God is absolutely committed to having that work continue.

Elijah realized that he was soon to leave this earth. He also knew from experience how alone and unqualified for the task Elisha would feel. Elijah therefore asked him: "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha answered: "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." Was this a presumptuous request? Was the student asking for twice the spiritual endowment his teacher had received from God? Hardly. You will recall that in ancient Israel the firstborn son received a double share of the father's inheritance. This is what Elisha was asking for: a liberal and abundant share of spiritual gifts that would make him a real, full heir of Elijah's prophetic spirit. But that wasn't Elijah's to give. Only God can designate who his servants are to be and what measure of his gifts they will bring to the task. And so Elijah gave Elisha a sign which would determine whether God would approve Elisha as the right heir of Elijah's prophetic ministry or not.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours." When, moments later, Elisha did see Elijah taken to heaven, he got another portion of his master's legacy—the assurance that God would not only continue to call men to the important work of prophet in Israel, but that he would equip them for the task to which he calls them.

God assured Elisha of that in still another way. After Elijah had been taken up, Elisha took Elijah's cloak, rolled it up, and again struck the Jordan, to enable him to pass back over to the west bank. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked, not in doubt or hesitation, but in assurance of his divine commission. When the waters parted, the sons of the prophets said: "The Spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha!" Israel was able to recognize its new prophet. It could hardly have been made more clear to Elisha: God never calls a man to do a job for him without at the same time equipping him to do the job.

More than a half century of ministry lay ahead for Elisha (from the reign of Ahab, 874-853 BC, through the reigns of Ahaziah, Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and into the reign of Joash, 798-782 BC). Any way you look at it, that's a long haul. But throughout that long ministry there was one more facet of his legacy from Elijah that must have served to encourage him, and that was his last glimpse of his master. As Elisha and Elijah were walking together, suddenly a chariot and horses of fire separated them, and Elijah was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. It's not stated expressly that he went in the chariot, only that he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. Elijah went to heaven without seeing death. What a memory for Elisha this must have been! What a splendid tribute the Lord paid to Elijah's ministry!

It's really quite pointless for us to inquire how Elijah could have entered his heavenly home without dying, with his mortal body intact. St. Paul's words about God's changing our vile body by the power by which he's able to subdue all things to himself apply here. Without passing through death, Elijah's mortality was swallowed up by life, and his perishable nature clothed itself with the imperishable.

Elijah's legacy to Elisha had immediate and positive results on Elisha. To be sure, he lamented the departing of his friend and master. "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Elisha saw in Elijah not only his spiritual father but Israel's strength and protection (through his prayer, his advice, his warnings, his miracles). Elisha was right about this, even though King Ahab had not realized or appreciated

this. Elijah had been a source of blessing to the country. Elisha realized this, and understandably felt a keen sense of loss at his master's departure.

But he didn't sit there on the east bank of the Jordan and stew in his grief. The legacy he had received from his spiritual father had a positive result on him. He immediately took up the mission entrusted to him. As we have heard, he performed a miracle to divide the Jordan's waters so he could cross over to the other side. And in the closing verses of the chapter we see him active in the cities of Jericho and Bethel, at Mt. Carmel and in the capital city of Samaria. "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children," the sacred writer has told us. Elijah's legacy to his spiritual son was a goodly and a godly one.

But Elisha was not the only spiritual son Elijah had. Our Lord has assured us that the gospel will be preached down to the last day of this world's existence. We have our Lord's promise for that, and that means that in grace he will continue to call people as his messengers and tell them: "As the Father has sent me I am sending you." It is that common calling which we share that has brought us together in the blessed fellowship we have enjoyed during the weeks of this Pastors Institute. The very purpose of our assembling has been to grow in our understanding of our prophetic office and our proficiency in it. Elijah has a legacy *for us*, too.

He has left us a legacy, first of all, as Gentile prophets of the Lord. In Old Testament times, that would have been an unthinkable concept: a Gentile prophet. Elijah would very likely have shuddered at the very thought that somebody outside the covenant nation of Israel would presume to represent the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Is it possible that we have forgotten how unusual it is that we Gentiles should serve as messengers of the Savior who once declined the request for help from a Phoenician woman by saying: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"? The New Testament ministry will have come upon evil days if we Gentiles can blithely and flippantly assume the right to speak publicly for God, perhaps under an excuse something like this piece of doggerel I came across recently: "God is a gentlemen through and through and in all probability Lutheran, too."

Brothers, you and I are what we are because Israel rejected God's truth. Elijah was sent to Zarephath because through that action God was sending the message loud and clear to a wicked king and a wicked people: "If you don't want my word I can take it away and give it to somebody else who will appreciate it." Centuries later, at Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas emphasized the same truth. When their preaching was being interrupted by their Jewish opponents and they themselves were being subjected to abuse, Paul and Barnabas boldly stated: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). You will also recall that St. Paul made a big point of that in the 11th chapter of his epistle to the Romans. Speaking of the people of Israel Paul says: "Because of their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles" (11:11). In the first place, that's wonderfully good news. We who were strangers to the covenant of promise have been made members of God's family on an equal basis with Abraham and Moses and David.

But St. Paul made another application of that in Romans 11. "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches.... They were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid" (Romans 11:17-20). Elijah realized what an unusual thing it was that the word of God should be taken from the people of Israel and given to a Gentile widow in Zarephath. As spiritual sons of Elijah we will hold the word with trembling hands. We are, after all, wild branches grafted on to the tree.

As we have surveyed, if only briefly, the ministry of Elijah, we have seen certain other truths that constitute a rich legacy from him to us. We now not as Gentiles but as pastors. The ministry of Elijah teaches that God will make use of sinful men in his ministry, and that when God wants a particular man he wants him. You will remember that at one point in his ministry Elijah wanted out, but God refused to hear of it. God had other prophets he could have chosen; we know of Elisha and Micaiah. These men were available, but God wanted Elijah. When you want salt, sugar won't do.

God chooses his spokesman in sovereign initiative and in pure grace. “You did not choose me,” Jesus told his disciples, “but I chose you” (John 15:16). It wasn’t that God needed Elijah or that he needs us to do his work, but that he has chosen to use human instruments. One has to be impressed with the tremendous amount of effort God expended in refitting the human beings whom we meet on the pages of Scripture for his service rather than discarding them. Even though Elijah really had forfeited any right to represent God as his spokesman, God repaired him and used him.

And when God chooses to use a man he can do wonderful things through him, even something as marvelous as performing miracles. God has done this so often that to our jaded eyes it may no longer seem worthy of note. Those of you who are parents know that God has used your bodies to pass on the gift of life to another generation. When on the pages of Scripture we observe Peter’s behavior at the coal fire, when we hear him call God as his witness that he was not a disciple of Christ, we’d be ready to bet a nickel that that man wouldn’t, couldn’t be of much use to God and to the church. And yet after God had repaired and renewed Peter he performed miracles through him. Your faith and mine has been encircled by the fact that God recycled and reused Peter. Why, two of the most beautiful passages in the entire New Testament came from the lips and the pen of that man who once denied being Christ’s disciple. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (I Peter 1: 18f).

This awareness that God can take the unlikely human instruments and use them to perform miracles that enhance his glory is part of Elijah’s legacy to us. It’s one thing to confess our belief in God’s power, as we do every time we confess the First Article of the Apostles Creed. But it’s quite another thing to live in the continual confidence that God will put his awesome power to work through us and on our behalf. Elijah knew, of course, that the God he served was almighty, but his ministry sagged when he doubted that that vast supply of divine power was present and available for him. Remember that the impressive outpouring of miracles at the time of Elijah and Elisha was so abundant that only two other periods in all of world history can be compared to it—the time of the exodus and the time our Savior walked on our planet.

Still another part of Elijah’s legacy to us relates directly to the way God uses his limitless power. At one time in his ministry Elijah was suffering from third degree burnout. And why? Because he thought God should have intervened in might and majesty and taken overt action against the enemies who were causing his prophet so much grief. It was then that Elijah learned the lesson you and I need to learn, and that is that God will direct our ministry only through law and gospel. How often, especially at times of stress (whether that be that physical persecution or a time of financial stringency in the congregation) how often we’re tempted to think that our welfare (either our personal welfare or that of the congregation) is our primary concern, or that shoring up the congregational structure must be our primary goal. If you were asked right now: “What would be the most wonderful thing that could happen to your congregation this week?” What would you answer? Honestly now, are you tempted to answer: “If a check were to fall into our laps from heaven, big enough to solve our financial problems”?

God had to remind Elijah, and Elijah can teach us that such an impressive external show of his power is not the way the Lord of the church directs our ministry. He didn’t direct Elijah’s ministry by blowing Ahab and Jezebel out of the water with a wind of tornado force, or by shaking the bejabbers out of them with an earthquakes, or by threatening to burn them to a crisp if they didn’t toe the line. He directs our ministry with a gentle whisper, with a message which our enemies can oppose and shout down. Whatever good has been accomplished in and by the Christian church down through the centuries has been achieved when sinners have, first of all, been confronted with their sin. And that means more than making sure that every sermon we preach includes a general statement to the effect that we’re all sinners who fall short of the glory of God. Elijah confronted sin pretty explicitly. Sin is not like a light case of the spiritual measles; sin is more like cancer of the bone marrow. And you don’t treat cancer with Vaseline and Band-Aids.

Whatever good has been accomplished in and by the Christian Church has been achieved when sinners have been confronted with the awfulness of their sin and with the marvel of God's plan for reversing the dreadful course of sin. Elijah made his dent on his generation by preaching law and gospel. It will be no different today. A congregation's financial structures may be ever so sound, if its people are not living in faith in the law (that's contrition) and living in faith in the gospel (that's repentance) that congregation has work to do. Our legacy from Elijah helps us to see that there is no quick fix for the problems that we face in our prophetic ministry. The rich man advised Abraham that if poor Lazarus were sent to his five brothers, that would bring those brothers around, would lead them to repentance. Again, the quick fix.

What would be the most wonderful thing that could happen to your congregation this week? My crystal ball isn't all that clear, but wouldn't reviewing Walther's *Law and Gospel* and passing your insights on in an adult discussion group rank somewhere right up near the top?

God will bless such faithful ministry with the appropriate results, and here is still another part of our legacy from Elijah. God has not promised his church a steady string of victories. The history of the New Testament church was not an unbroken string of one triumph after another. The law properly preached will convict of sin. The promise of God's grace in Christ will create faith. The good news of God's love will create an answering love that will respond to the Spirit's call to dedicate all of life to God's glory.

Elijah preached in the full confidence that God's power would be released through the word of God that he preached. Is that note prominent in our preaching? Or do our hearers sense a note of defeatism in our ministry? Do we resemble the old hound dog who'd gotten his tail stepped on so often that after a while he no longer bothered to lift it out of the way when someone walked toward him? As we mount our pulpit Sunday after Sunday, is our philosophy pretty much this: "Well, I suppose nothing much will come of this, but maybe if I throw enough mud at the wall, some of it has got to stick?"

Elijah was confident of divine power for his mission. One of the saddest experiences a pastor can have is to preach in a church where the members have ceased to expect God to work. And one of the saddest experiences a congregation can have is to have a pastor who really doesn't expect his ministrations to change much of anything. It's enough to make the angels weep. Elijah was confident of divine power.

Elijah's confidence in the power of the word that he preached was not disappointed. There were then, as they will always be, those that will remain faithful. Although Elijah couldn't see them, there were 7000 at his time. Seven centuries later there were the Marys and Josephs and Elizabeths and Zechariahs and Simeons and Annas. In later centuries God raised up the people who passed the word down to us—and I'm not thinking so much of pastors and professors, but of godly fathers and mothers in every generation whose faith was nurtured and sustained by a steady diet of law and gospel. The church today is richer for that.

And so we leave our study of the life and ministry of Elijah. Few men in the Scripture stand taller than he, especially at that sacred showdown on Mt. Carmel. H.H. Rowley, a British scholar, summarizes well the strategic role Elijah played at a critical time in Israel's history.

"Often in the history of the world great issues have depended on lone individuals, without whom events would have taken a wholly different turn. Yet few crises have been more significant for history than that in which Elijah figured, and in the story of the Transfiguration he rightly stands beside Moses. Without Moses the religion of Yahweh as it figured in the Old Testament would never have been born. Without Elijah it would have died." (*Elijah on Mt. Carmel* p. 219)

The church of Jesus Christ doesn't have much to worry about as long as her leaders are at their posts, with eyes open to see how the Lord is chastening his church, with ears open to hear his call to repent, with hearts ready to believe his promise of pardon and of power. My brothers, at the high points of our ministry, as well as at the inevitable and unglamorous low points, learn to listen, as Elijah did, for the voice of Jehovah, the God of absolute independence and of absolute constancy. He will say to you exactly what he said to Elijah: "Be what I have made you—my man on my mission!"

