

Elijah, the Man of God

by Arthur Goodwin

Elijah arrived on the scene without introduction, and twenty-two years later he departed in a chariot of fire. During this time he was God's man in Israel and for the greater part of it he was in direct conflict with the king of whom it was recorded that he "made an idol and did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Ki. 16:33). His name was Elijah, which means: "My God is Jehovah", and the appellation Tishbite is added to it. This latter name is somewhat mysterious, and there is no real authority for defining it. It may have been the village in the land of Gilead from which he came, but some have said that it simply means "the stranger".

Certainly it is as such that he appears in Scripture for the first time, for it simply says in First Kings 17:1: "And Elijah the Tishbite who was of the inhabitants of Gilead said unto Ahab". His departure is the very antithesis, for in Second Kings 2:11 we read: "And it came to pass as they still went on and talked that behold there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire and separated them, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven".

Confronting King Ahab

Ahab was the seventh king of Israel and not one of them had been obedient to Jehovah; indeed all had followed in the footsteps of the first king, Jeroboam, of whom it is constantly said that "he made Israel to sin". In all his wickedness he was aided and abetted by his equally wicked wife Jezebel. It was to this king that Jehovah sent His prophet Elijah and equipped him for the great task that he had to carry out, that of proclaiming God's great displeasure for his and all Israel's wickedness. To this end he was endowed with the power of God, and this is made clear in his very first words to the king. He confronted Ahab and immediately said: "...as the Lord God of Israel liveth and before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (1 Ki. 17:1). It was a small thing for the servant of God who was used to standing before Jehovah, now to stand before Ahab and proclaim his message of warning. He was even emboldened to say "according to my word", not Jehovah's word although of course it was indeed that.

God's confirmation

Additionally the Lord was pleased to confirm his ministry by miracles, some of which were directly brought about by Jehovah Himself and others through the instrumentality of Elijah. For instance, the drought which Elijah predicted began immediately, and he was then told by God to resort to the brook Cherith where he was fed by ravens and drank of the brook (1 Ki. 17:3). His provision was both plentiful and regular.

Then he was told to go to Zarephath and lodge with a woman (1 Ki. 17:9). He asked the woman to bake him a little cake which despite the fact that it would use up all her resources she did. From then on the cruise of oil and the barrel of meal never failed. But as is so often when the Lord works, the outcome of that which He initiates is far superior to the original request or circumstance which brings it about. It was so in John 4 where the Lord requested a drink from the woman of Samaria, but which led on to the Lord providing the woman with "living water ... that will be a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:10,14). Then, in the case of Elijah, the son of the widow woman died, but the prophet restored him to life, and it was by this that the woman recognised that Elijah was indeed "a man of God" (1 Ki. 17:24).

Miracle worker

The Gospel of Mark depicts our Lord Jesus as the perfect Servant and in Mark 1:22 we read that He spoke with authority, and additionally He worked many miracles. So it was with Elijah and the point we learn from this is that when the Lord sends out His servants He does not send them on their own charges, but fully equips them with all that they need to carry out His work.

In First Kings 18 we have the well-known account of Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal upon Mount Carmel. Jezebel the Queen was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sidonians, and she had done more to replace the worship of Jehovah with the worship of Baal than any of the previous kings of Israel. She had slaughtered the prophets of Jehovah, and it is recorded that four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal together with four hundred prophets of Asherah ate at her table (1 Ki. 18:19). It is true, however, that Obadiah the governor of Ahab's house who was a faithful follower of Jehovah, had hidden one hundred men of the prophets of the true God (1 Ki. 18:13); and God later revealed to Elijah that he had reserved seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Ki. 19:18).

But the ruler's and the nation's wickedness had now reached such a zenith that Jehovah was about to challenge the whole people. The challenge would be: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Ki. 18:21). In First Kings 17:3 Jehovah's command to Elijah had been: "Hide thyself". But when we come to chapter 18:1 the command is: "Go, show thyself". In modern parlance and without wishing to be irreverent, the time for a showdown had come.

The sin of idolatry

And so once again Elijah went to meet Ahab, only to be greeted with the words: "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Ki. 18:17). What a question, what impertinence! Had Ahab no knowledge of Israel's history, had he no recollection of how Jehovah had delivered His people from Egypt all those years ago? Did he not recollect how all Israel had accepted Jehovah's law and failed to keep it, and was he unaware that all the time the people had been obedient to God He had kept His promise and blessed them? And now he dared to suggest that it was the prophet of God who had brought the drought and all Israel's troubles upon them.

Truly Elijah replied: "I have not troubled Israel; but thou and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and thou hast followed Baalim" (1 Ki. 18:18). The worship of Baal had prevailed in Israel for many years and never more so than during the reign of Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel. In those days it was the king who took the lead in almost all the matters of state and religion. He was certainly one of them. Ahab was therefore responsible for the spiritual condition of the nation, although no little liability could be laid at the doors of the priests who had forsaken Jehovah in favour of Baal.

The rejection of God today

I cannot help but feel that there is a similarity between Israel in Ahab's day and this country today, and indeed probably the whole of the Western world. Prevailing philosophies are largely based on the rejection of God, although those who propagate them would probably not admit it. The education of our children provides for the advancement of the godless system of evolution, the Christian faith is simply one of many, all of which ultimately lead to a common goal. The established Church is largely controlled by a government that has little regard for God, as is evidenced by the continual stream of legislation that is in direct contradiction to His word.

Who is responsible for all this? Firstly, man himself; he is a sinner and he is under the control of Satan. Secondly are the rulers of the nation who, generally speaking, give no example either personally or collectively. Thirdly I believe the media who all loathe to say anything that might forward the evangelical aspect of Christianity. Then lastly come those who bear an especially heavy responsibility, and I refer to the leaders, or at least to those who esteem themselves to be leaders and exponents of the Christian faith for their woeful adherence to the faith which they profess to believe. Few of them can say with the apostle Paul: "For Christ sent me to preach the gospel; not with the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:17,18).

Man's religion versus God's religion

Now follows what is probably the most important incident during Elijah's ministry and might be called a contest between the religion of God as opposed to the religion of man. In Elijah's day true belief was that which was based upon Jehovah and the revelation of Himself, and was known only to Israel. It had the Law for its guide together with the written word of God as it was then gradually being revealed. Today with the coming of Christ, the Christian faith is the only one that is true. The Law has given way to grace and eternal life, which is only received by believing on the Lord Jesus and His atoning death at Calvary. And just as Israel turned its back upon Jehovah and served a false god, so today men turn their backs upon Christ in favour of their own means of attaining heaven.

Looking upon this incident in this way, the first thing we notice is that the religion of man is apparently a popular one: four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal versus one man, Elijah. There is a saying that there is safety in numbers, but we are reminded of the Lord's words: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go in thereat; because narrow is the gate and hard is the way which leadeth unto life, and few their be that find it" (Matt. 7:13,14). Then we may take note of the fact that we may be very earnest in the practice of our religion. None could charge the prophets of Baal with insincerity; they cried all day to their god, they gashed themselves with knives till the blood flowed, in an endeavour to cause him to hear. But sincerity is not enough, the man who built his house upon the sand built in real earnestness, but his house collapsed when the floods came.

Then man's religion is a deceitful religion. Listen to the chidings of Elijah: "Cry aloud; for he is a god. Either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or perhaps he sleepeth, and must be awakened" (1 Ki. 18:27). In the end "there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded" (1 Ki. 18:29). When the need arises there is nothing man's religion has to offer, whether it be in life or in death.

Now let us notice something about Elijah's approach to this problem and its contrast with that of the prophets of Baal. If we take note of Elijah's position here and compare it with our own today it simply confirms that which we already know, that is that the followers of Christ are comparatively few and the way seemingly hard. Even in this country we are conscious of the fact that we Christians are in a minority and our work and testimony for the Lord seems to bring little result and we can so easily become discouraged. And if it is so here how much more so in some countries abroad where believers are subject to intense and hostile persecution.

But Elijah under the direction of Jehovah set about to prove that the religion of Jehovah was a tried and proved religion. The first thing he did was to repair the altar of the Lord which was broken down (1 Ki. 18:30). He did not attempt to build anything new, but went back to basics. From the very earliest days God had demonstrated to man that approach to Himself could only be by sacrifice. Abel had brought of the firstlings of his flock (Gen. 4:4), and the first action of Noah when leaving the ark was to build an altar and to offer up a burnt offering to the Lord (Gen. 8:20). Abraham wherever he pitched his tent built an altar (Gen. 12:7,8; 13:18), and this is what Elijah now revived.

He made a trench around the altar, he laid the wood in order upon it and the pieces of the slain bullock were placed on the wood. Twelve barrels of water were then poured over the altar and the trenches were filled. And then at the time of the evening sacrifice Elijah drew near and made his prayer to Jehovah: "Hear me, O Lord, hear me that this people may know that thou art the Lord God and that thou hast turned their heart back again" (1 Ki. 18:37). Immediately fire from God came down from heaven and burned up the sacrifice and the altar and consumed the burnt offering and dried up the water in the trench. Elijah's challenge had been: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God follow Him, but if Baal then follow him" (1 Ki. 18:21). Elijah had demonstrated that his message to Israel was true and the people now cried out: "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God" (1 Ki. 18:39). What the people wanted of course was rain, but it was not rain that came down from heaven but fire. It is interesting to note that when Abraham, in Genesis 22, went up to offer his sacrifice he took the fire but no sacrifice; Elijah provided the sacrifice but no fire.

A picture of the Lord Jesus Christ

We must not pass over this incident without drawing attention to the clear lessons that it brings before us. We would seek to be faithful to that responsibility to which we have already referred. Here we have a people gone astray on their own way which leads to destruction. God sent His messenger to show them the right way. He heard and immediately answered the prayer of faith. Today we can discern in that bullock of

sacrifice and the fire that consumed it a type or picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself exhausting the judgment of God. In Hebrews 10:12,14 we read: "For this man (Christ) after He had offered one sacrifice for sins...has perfected for ever them that are sanctified". If you have not availed yourself of the great blessing available through the death of Christ, may I urge you to do so now?

James at the end of his epistle summarises Elijah's dependence as the man of God: "Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit" (Jas. 5:17,18).

Elijah's successor

And so it was, but sadly this great triumph was followed by the most depressing moments of Elijah's life. When Jezebel was told by Ahab all that Elijah had done, she immediately vowed that she would murder him by the following day. When Elijah heard this he fled into the wilderness, and sitting down under a juniper tree he cried to the Lord that he might die and said: "It is enough! Now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers" (1 Ki. 19:4). But in such circumstances God did not forsake His servant. He visited him, provided for him and comforted him, and then told him the procedure for anointing his successor.

At the end of First Kings 19 we have the call of Elisha and then in Second Kings 2 we have Elijah's final triumphant journey. Under the guidance of Jehovah Elijah told Elisha that the Lord had sent him to Gilgal and asked him to remain behind. But they both went together, and at Gilgal there were sons of the prophets who warned Elisha that his master would be taken away from him that day. Elisha's response was: "Yea, I know it, hold ye your peace" (2 Ki. 2:3).

Gilgal, of course, was the first place where Israel trod after crossing the Jordan subsequent to their forty years wandering in the wilderness (Josh. 4:19). There the ritual of circumcision was revived and the reproach of Egypt was rolled away (Josh. 5:7-9). This was their first experience of the Promised Land; the manna ceased and they ate of the old corn of the land.

From Gilgal they went to Bethel where they were given a similar reception. Bethel was well known as the place where Jacob stayed overnight on his journey to Paddan-aram when fleeing from his father's house. There he dreamed of the ladder set up on earth and reaching up to heaven, and there God promised to bless him and cause his seed to be as the dust of the earth. There he took the stones that he had used for a pillow and from them built a pillar, poured oil upon it and called the name of the place Bethel, which means 'House of God' (Gen. 28).

Then on to Jericho where again Elisha was warned, but again he refused to be separated from his master (2 Ki. 2:5). Jericho would always be remembered by the children of Israel as the place where God had demonstrated His power causing the walls to fall at the sound of the trumpets and delivering the city into the hands of Joshua (Josh. 6). Finally they came to the Jordan where we have Elisha praying for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah (2 Ki. 2:9). I believe that these four places were deliberately chosen by Jehovah to comfort and encourage Elisha as he was now about to set out on his service for God. He would be reminded of all that Jehovah had accomplished in the past and that now all that power would be available to him for his forthcoming mission.

A glorious exit

The waters of the river were miraculously parted and the two went over together. Jordan is a figure of death and Elijah had passed through it, but Elisha would have to return to carry on the work of God in the midst of His people. As they talked together a chariot of fire with horses of fire appeared, caught up Elijah and by a whirlwind he was taken up into heaven (2 Ki. 2:11). What a glorious exit for such a faithful man of God.