

The people and places in the life of Elijah

Written by Chris Perver

Tuesday, 01 June 2010 08:40

I was meant to give a talk on the life of Elijah at a meeting not so long ago, but the meeting ended up being cancelled, so I thought maybe it might be a good idea to write my thoughts on here and maybe some of us can benefit from them. Elijah was quite a character. He was a unique individual that was used by God to bring His people back to Himself during an especially dark period in Israel's history. We are told in Scripture that Elijah was a man of like passions as us (James 5:17), and so as Christians there is a lot that we can learn from his life, and from the difficult circumstances that he often found himself in. A number of months ago I was feeling very discouraged and depressed. There are very few people in my assembly now. My grandfather recently went to be with the Lord, and I am the only young person left in the meeting. And I started to feel down, and to imagine how Elijah must have felt when he complained to God that he was the only one left. And so I started to think about Elijah and the places he visited, to understand more about the man, his faith in God, his struggles, his discouragements and his ultimate restoration.

I started with Elijah's name. In Hebrew it is pronounced Eli-yah-hu, and literally means, 'My God is the Lord'. 'Eli' means 'My God', and 'Yah' is a shortened version of the name of the Lord. I was thinking that the meaning of Elijah's name, as is the case of so many other names in the Bible, is extremely significant. For instance, the name 'Adam'. It is interchangeable with the Hebrew word for 'Man', and comes from the same root word that means ground, 'Adamah'. The name 'Eve' or 'Chavah' in Hebrew, is translated as 'life-giver', and being the first woman that God created, this is extremely significant. There are many other examples of people with significant names in the Scriptures, for example, 'Abram' means 'exalted father', and his name was later changed to 'Abraham' (Genesis 17:5), which means 'father of a multitude', a prophecy of a future day when God would multiply Abraham's seed. 'Isaac' or 'Yitzchak' in Hebrew means laughter (Genesis 21:6), and God's promise that He would give Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age would cause them to rejoice with laughter. 'Jacob' or 'Yakov' in Hebrew means 'supplanter' (Genesis 21:36), and he tricked his brother out of his birthright and blessing. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), the heart of a shepherd (John 10:11), and it is therefore significant that his name should mean 'beloved'. The name 'Jonah' or 'Yonah ben Amittai' in Hebrew means 'dove' and 'the son of truth'. The prophet was sent to Nineveh to bring them a message of God's peace, if they would repent of their sins. This reminds us of that Scripture, "Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other", Psalm 85:10. You can't obtain mercy from God without first acknowledging God's truth that you are a sinner. And God has provided a way whereby He can show the sinner mercy, yet still be righteous, through giving His own Son Jesus Christ to bear the punishment of our sins in our stead (John 1:29). And of course the name 'Jesus' or 'Yeshua' in Hebrew is no less significant, as it means the salvation of the Lord (Matthew 1:21). It is only through Yeshua that we can obtain God's salvation. So as you can see, the names of people in the Bible are of the utmost importance, and can teach us a lot about the character of a person and the role God has for them to perform in His will.

As we have said, the name 'Elijah' means 'My God is the Lord', and that statement seems to come to the fore throughout his life and the different circumstances he finds himself in. Ahab was ruling over the northern kingdom of Israel at that time. He was one of Israel's most wicked

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kings. His name in Hebrew, 'Achab', means 'a friend to his father'. It was said of his father, Omri, that he did more evil than all the kings who had come before him (1st Kings 16:25). And in that, it seems, Ahab truly was a friend to his father, for it is also said of Ahab that he did more to provoke the Lord to anger than all the kings who came before him (1st Kings 16:33). It was through Ahab and his wife Jezebel that many of the true prophets of God were slain, and he raised up an altar to the false god Baal in Samaria. It was to this king that God sent Elijah to deliver a message of impending judgement. We are told in the book of James that Elijah prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and for the space of three and a half years there was a massive drought in Israel. Only when the heart of the people was turned back again to Himself, the Lord would show mercy in sending the rain. This truth of God set Elijah in direct opposition to everything that Ahab stood for, and as a result Ahab sought to have Elijah killed. It should be the same for us today. The message of the Bible sets us apart from the world. Christ is a divider of men, for as He said, "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law", Matthew 10:35.



So Elijah was forced to flee for his life. But the Lord was taking care of Elijah. The Lord instructs him to flee, and turn eastward, and hide by the brook Cherith. There he would drink of the brook, and there the Lord had commanded the ravens to feed him (1st Kings 17:3-6). I had the privilege of being able to see this brook during my last trip to the holy land. There is a photograph of the brook on the right. It was especially nice for me being there, as I had done this study on the life of Elijah prior to coming here, so it had a special significance for me. The brook is not too far outside the city of Jerusalem, but it is still in a desert place. The word 'Cherith' in Hebrew means a 'cutting' or 'separation'. It could be that the brook got its name for

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the way it cuts through the land. But for Elijah, this was a place of separation. He was physically separated from the nation of Israel, and he was spiritually separated unto his God. That is what the word sanctification means. It means to be set apart unto God for a special purpose (Exodus 13:2. John 17:17,19). It was here, during this time of testing, that Elijah learned what it meant to depend on God. And it was here the Lord showed Elijah that He was Sovereign, even over the creatures that He had made. As the Lord said in the Gospels, not one sparrow falls to the ground without the Father knowing, and yet He cares for us much more than He does for the animals (Matthew 10:19-31). So God cared for Elijah. Sometimes we go through circumstances in our lives where we are separated from the world, either through sickness or difficult circumstances. But it is during those times that we are able to experience God's care for us in a way we never did before. Thinking about the 'cutting' aspect of Cherith, sometimes in the Middle East you will see groves of Olive trees, and they may appear to be hacked down to the ground until only a stump in the ground remains. You might think to yourself, how could that tree ever grow again? But it does. And the cutting is necessary to produce a greater yield of fruit in the coming harvest. When the Olive tree is cut down, it sends forth new shoots out of its roots. That reminds us of two Scriptures. The first in Job 14:7, that there is hope for a tree, when it is cut down, that it will grow again. This was true in the life of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who was cut down by God because of his pride, but grew again after he humbled himself (Daniel 4). It also reminds us of the prophecy concerning David and the coming of the Messiah, that the Lord Jesus Christ would be a Branch that would spring forth out of Jesse's roots (Isaiah 11:1). Sometimes in our lives we depend on people and things rather than depending on the Lord for our needs. And sometimes the Lord will cut away these things from our lives, so that we will learn to depend on Him instead. As the Lord said, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit", John 15:2. If you are going through a time of purging, be glad, because the Lord intends it for your good.

The Scriptures tell us that the drought caused the brook to dry up, and so Elijah is forced to move on once again (1st Kings 17:7). But this is a divine drought. He is only passing through what the Lord has already decreed should happen, so the Lord must be able to meet his need, even in this wilderness. And so the Lord sends him to a place called Zarephath, a city that belonged to Tyre and Sidon, north of Israel. And again the Lord displays His sovereignty over His creation, when He declares that He has commanded a widow to sustain him there. But how could a widow, who has no form of income nor means of support, possibly sustain herself never mind anybody else? The Lord did not explain to Elijah at this time how He was going to sustain him. But Elijah had faith that the God who had brought him thus far would not fail him now. The word 'Zarephath' in Hebrew means 'refinement'. And it was here that the faith of the widow was refined in the furnace of affliction. The drought had hit Sidon too, and when he met the widow, she was gathering two sticks with which to cook the last meal for her and her son. It is interesting to note the widow's increasing revelation of the God of Elijah. The first time she addresses Elijah in reference to the meal, she says, "As the Lord *thy* God liveth", 1st Kings 17:12. Either she was not personally a believer in the God of Elijah, or she no longer believed in Him. Perhaps due to the circumstances of her husband's death, or perhaps due to

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the famine and their own impending deaths, she had lost faith in God. But Elijah declares that the God of Israel says her barrel of meal will not run out, nor will her cruse of oil fail, until the day He sends rain on the earth (1st Kings 17:4). While this was nothing less than a miracle, we are not told that it affected the faith of the widow and her son to a great extent. It would take something that comes much closer to the heart to cause her to turn to the God of Elijah. It would take the death of her son. Her second address to Elijah was as a 'man of God'. She now recognized the God of Israel to be the true God, for she asks whether Elijah has come to call her sin to remembrance through the death of her son. We are not told what her sin was, but clearly it bothered her and it was this that prevented her from trusting in the God of Elijah and separated her from a relationship with God. The Scriptures do tell us that God will call to remembrance the sin of those who have not had their sins forgiven through believing on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation (John 8:24). And God requires that which is past (Ecclesiastes 3:15). Of course Elijah intercedes to God on behalf of the widow. And for the second time in the chapter, he asks her to give him something first. The first occasion was when he asked her to make him a meal first, and then make for her and her son. That was to test the widow woman's faith, whether she trusted the word of the Lord fully or not. For all that she had would only suffice to make a meal for her and her son. The second time Elijah asks her to give him what is closest to her heart. "

Give me thy son

", he says. Once again her faith was being refined. Elijah prayed, and the soul of the child came into him again. And the widow said, "

Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth

", 1st Kings 17:24. The question is, did she not know it before? What about the barrel of meal? That didn't touch her heart, but this did. And look at what she says, the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. It was no longer the 'God of Elijah'. It was no longer the 'God of Israel'. She calls Him Lord, which shows that she has trusted Him herself. What can we learn from Zarephath? The Lord also demands first place in our lives. As the Lord said in Matthew 6:33, "

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you

". May the Lord help us to not depend upon the fickle things of this world, but to depend solely upon Him, and to put Him first in our lives.

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