

ELIJAH'S FLIGHT TO HOREB: 1 KINGS 19:1-18

by R H JOHNSTON

This passage must be analysed carefully taking all the facts provided if we are to understand why Elijah runs away and abdicates his position as a prophet. We must accurately handle the scripture if we are to avoid hasty and superficial conclusions (2 Timothy 2:15).

Elijah had just had great success - he had thought Carmel was going to be the crowning achievement of his ministry. He had prayed that it might not rain (James 5:17-18). God had been faithful. He had followed the LORD's instructions at Carmel. The people had confessed that the LORD was God (1 Kings 18:39). The prophets of Baal he had personally killed with the sword. He had prayed and it was raining. He had known the hand of the LORD upon him as he ran more than 20 miles from Carmel to Jezreel ahead of Ahab's war chariot (which must have been capable of sustained speeds of at least 10 mph. What a triumph! The honour of God was vindicated at last - the people would now worship the true God having seen his mighty power. Everyone would see and believe. Or would they?

The story – verse by verse

v1 Firstly the work suffered because Ahab was a bad reporter - he did not say what God did, only what Elijah did, emphasising the fact that Elijah had personally killed Jezabel's prophets. Ahab was capable of repentance (1 Kings 21:27-28). Jezabel was not - she was the source of the evil in Ahab's time - she had not been at Carmel - she was left untouched.

v2 Jezabel was angry: she sent Elijah a promise of immediate death. Clearly Elijah's whereabouts were now known, unlike situation previously when he could not be found (1 Kings 18:10).

v3 When he *saw* is a preferable reading to he was afraid. Versions vary and there is uncertainty in the Hebrew. What had Elijah *seen*? He was unafraid of death - indeed he asks for it in v4. No, he is not afraid of her. No, he sees that his great triumph of yesterday has been a failure - that nothing has been changed by it. This makes him panic, and so he failed to heed Proverbs 3:25 - "do not fear sudden fear", and Isaiah 28:16 - "he who believes is not in haste" . He has a problem - all this was done under the instruction of God - he now believes he got it all wrong - God has failed him. He feels he must get back to the place of revelation (Horeb) as quickly as possible. He fled to Beersheba which is at the extreme southern edge of Judah (about 100 miles from Jezreel), where he left his

servant as far away from Israel as possible, before continuing his journey towards Horeb alone.

v4 He goes into wilderness where the children of Israel had wandered, where at the end of the day's journey he collapses from spiritual and physical exhaustion. He cannot go on. He asks for death - there is close parallel with Jonah 4:3. As I recall it only these two men in all scripture seek the Lord that they should die. Both were prophets with a successful ministry. Elijah and Jonah both felt a failure, and more especially that God had failed them. Their sentiment was "I did what you said and it did not work out as I expected". Both were prophets with an emphasis on judgement.

v5 He is exhausted - he had run over 20 miles before the chariot (18:46), having not eaten at Carmel (18:41-42), and has done a further 120 miles or so, at fleeing speed. Exhaustion has a strange effect on attitudes. An angel touches him - there is no one else in the desert.

v6 All temptations to allegorise scripture should be firmly resisted - the point being made and reason for the detail about the baking on hot stones is that it is real normal food and drink, not something supernatural.

v7 It appears he does not eat enough - he must eat more - the angel's message shows God is aware of Elijah's reasons for making the journey and that it is to end at Horeb. His weak and mind-twisted condition is the result of starvation. He will continue in the strength of that food for a further 40 days.

v8 Elijah goes to Horeb = Sinai, the mountain of God. He goes here because he knows there is something he needs to understand - he believes he got it all wrong from God. If you get in a hole, it is quite a good idea to go back and re-examine how you got into it.

v9 When God asks you questions you are in real trouble. The first example is Adam and Eve. Lots of questions in Malachi. Jesus asks Peter questions in John 22. Where are you? Why are you here? Has this ever happened to you?

v10 As always, the answer to such questions reveals the heart. Elijah feels let down by God in spite of his own faithfulness to him - his faith in God has collapsed. Elijah needs a new revelation about God.

v11-12 Elijah is told to go and see the Lord passing by. This event is intended to teach Elijah something - it has symbolic significance which we can legitimately examine by parallelism:

- 1) Strong Wind tears the mountains - breaks things up. "Break up you fallow ground (Jeremiah 4:3, Hosea 10:12). The hammer that breaks rocks in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29).
- 2) Earthquake - God shakes all that can be shaken (Hebrews 12:26-27)
- 3) Fire - fire destroys, or in right context, purifies.
- 4) still small voice - NASB suggests sound of gentle blowing. This is the only part the LORD is "in".

There is quite a bit in Psalms about God riding on the storm &c. (Psalm 18). Ezekiel had his strange vision which started (Ezekiel 1:4) in the form of a storm with parallels with Elijah's experience.

Storm and fire create fear (e.g. Psalm 83:13-16), but do not of themselves produce lasting faith. The first three things are preparatory but they are not the thing itself. But they are essential (Jeremiah 23:29 - word is a fire and a hammer). Elijah's ministry was preparatory only - he is good on the fire and destruction aspect - this is why John the Baptist is said to be in the spirit and power of Elijah - such people are needed to prepare the way for the Lord to come. Are we discomfited by uncomfortable, even destructive, ministry - yes, but such is needful to make our hearts ready for the Lord to come to us. Elijah had confronted Israel with Truth - the Baals were powerless, but God is a consuming Fire, and had better be feared. Unless people are first faced with that truth they will never get saved. Do we confront people with unpalatable truth? - it can be done gently, but we must do it. If people are to face up to God, we must confront them with the truth they are avoiding, whatever that may be - it is different for different people.

Note the parallel with Acts 2 - rushing mighty wind, flames of fire. But it was the message of preaching which brought the conviction. Remember Zechariah 4:6.

v13 Elijah could face the rough stuff - he was a tough guy, but had to hide his face from God (compare Moses Exodus 3:6). Elijah is now himself prepared for God to speak again. Same question.

v14 Elijah gives exactly the same answer as before. Elijah is proving a difficult case - the message about God's ways is not getting through. God's further answer is to show Elijah he ought not to despair, but sadly also essentially marks the end of his career.

v15-16 Elijah told to go and:

- 1) Anoint Hazael King of Syria
- 2) Anoint Jehu King of Israel
- 3) Anoint Elisha prophet in his place

v17 These three will finish off the destructive work Elijah has begun.

v18 7000 left who do not worship Baal - he is not alone - and these are the ones being preserved through his ministry. The righteous do take note and are encouraged. That everyone doesn't get saved should not discourage us. Broad is the way that leads to destruction: many are on that way; few find the way to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

Did Elijah carry out the instructions in verses 15-16? ***NO not at all.***

- 1) Hazael not anointed, but given a word which makes him king by Elisha in 2 Kings 8:8-15
- 2) Jehu anointed by Elisha in 2 Kings 9:1-10
- 3) Elisha was never anointed - just "mantled" in 1 Kings 19:19-21 and is positively discouraged both there and in the curious transfer of power in 2 Kings 2.

All this is very sad, but has much to teach us.

Does Elijah do anything else after this? - a little:

- 1) He confronts Ahab at 1 Kings 21:17-29.
- 2) He calls down fire on the captains and fifties etc. in 2 Kings 1.

What was Elijah's problem?

The issue is not that Elijah became fearful of Jezebel killing him. Elijah had no fear of death - after all he sought death for himself under the broom tree. The problem is much deeper. He could no longer trust God to work through him. He believed God had failed him, and that he was himself as much a failure in getting God's glory revealed as his forefathers had been. (1 Kings 19:4).

He misunderstood his own ministry and the way God brings about repentance. He thought by the famine and the work at Carmel, everything would be transformed - he thought all the wickedness would come to an end, as the direct and immediate result - he thought demonstration of the power of God and the destruction of the false prophets would be enough. Note his prayer in 1 Kings 18:36-37, how it ends "and that you have turned their hearts back again". When it did not happen and Jezebel, the source of the evil remained there, unchanged, he thought God had let him down. He did not realise his work was preparatory for a later destruction of the evil of Ahab's house, and this his work was intended to give the opportunity (only the opportunity) for men to hear the voice of God. Those in our day who think that we are here "to bring in the kingdom" often suffer the same disillusion. (Daniel, in Daniel 9, faced a similar need to see that

God does not work by making everything "successful": God tells him that Jerusalem will know trouble to the end of time.)

The tragedy of Elijah is that this misunderstanding effectively destroys his further ministry (hence the command to anoint Elisha in his place).

Lessons for us.

- **Watch your expectations.** Make sure you understand how God works, otherwise you may be destroyed by your wrong expectations, when your illusions are shattered. This only happens to those who have a strong zeal for God, and a real expectation that God is almighty. Elijah had a zeal for the Lord which was unsurpassed - but it lacked the knowledge of God's methods of working. Real systematic study of scripture is therefore essential preparation so we do not become disillusioned - allegorical and plum-picking approaches to the scriptures leave you wide open to disillusionment when God does not work the way you expect. Preparation of this sort can avoid future trouble. If you get into trouble do not panic, but carefully reassess what God said to you.
- **God asking you questions** If you get into the state where God is asking you questions, you must be careful to try and discern what God is trying to get through to you. Don't get stuck with repeating your first answer - you must make progress, and whatever happens do not give up on God. He has not changed - it is your attitude that is the problem. Having such a problem is not the end of your ministry ("I am no better than my fathers" (19.4)) provided you handle it the right way.
- **Am I an abdicating prophet?** Many people have done the same as Elijah - they prayed with great faith and confidence in God - but it did not happen according to their expectation - and they now will not risk anything for God. Are you one of them? Do you, like Elijah, effectively discourage your successors from using the spiritual gifts you once had but had decided it is too dodgy to use? Do your followers have to struggle against your unbelief, as Elisha had to do?
- **Don't let abdicated prophets put you off** Young people take note of all this. Do not let your seniors who failed like this discourage you, but learn better than they did how God works so that when it does turn out strangely it does not destroy you. Gods ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The LORD is faithful (2 Timothy 2:13): we must know how this is true when it does not look like it.

These notes were prepared for a sermon on 9 May 1996 (Versions: 9.5.1996, 4.7.1996, 2.9.2018). It is not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has

been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk)

© R H Johnston, 1996 This paper may **only** be copied **in its entirety** for private non-commercial use. All other usage requires the written permission of the author.