

# Lessons from the life of Elijah

## 16. Fed by an angel's hand (1 Kgs. 19:4-8)

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*Fleeing into the wilderness from the wrath of Jezebel, Elijah is rescued from the depths of despair by an angel, who provides him food and water and sends him on his way to Horeb, where the Law was given to Moses.*

**I**MAGINE ELIJAH alone in the desert, with the sun beating hard upon his back and his feet blistered by the scorching sands. Gradually, with sheer exhaustion finally taking hold of him, he seeks for rest.

### Under the juniper tree

With no strength left in him, Elijah "came and sat under a juniper tree" (1 Kgs. 19:4). The juniper tree, mentioned also in Job 30:4 and Psalm 120:4, is in fact the desert broom, which grows abundantly in Israel, particularly in the desert area of Sinai. And it was on seeing this shrub that he threw himself down under the shade of its leaves, and sank into the melancholy of his own thoughts.



The desert broom

Though the juniper tree would have lent him its refreshing shade, this would never have provided complete refuge for the prophet. So he "requested for himself that he might die" (1 Kgs. 19:4). Here we survey a great contradiction; the prophet had fled into the wilderness "for his life" (v. 3), from the treacherous Jezebel, but now he desired that his life might depart from him!

Why did Elijah desire his life to end here? Surely now he believed that all his labour and efforts had been in vain, that everything accomplished through God's strength had fallen short of what was required to turn the people to true repentance. And now he was persuaded that his physical departure would be to his own benefit, completely away from Jezebel, her husband and the foolish children of Israel. With his departure he would be released from all this tribulation and sorrow.

What a difference Jezebel had made to Elijah's mental stability! Before, Elijah had been noble and selfless, as was witnessed at the brook, in the company of the widow, with Obadiah, on meeting Ahab, and finally on the mount. But now he had become apparently self-pitying, totally absorbed with himself and his own sorry state and predicament.

### Dark days for faithful believers

Before we condemn the prophet, however, think of other extraordinary characters of faith, and how at times they were brought low with dejection. There was Moses, the great leader of the Exodus, who once uttered the words, "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me", and then continued, "And if Thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray Thee, out of hand" (Num. 11:14,15). Think also of Jonah, who became so downhearted that he requested, "Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3).

The Scriptures are awash with other notables of faith who at times allowed their natural feelings to take advantage of their better judgement. What about King David, who found himself in utter despair, and said, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest" (Ps. 55:6)? And also Jeremiah, who, in a moment of depression, declared, "Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed" (Jer. 20:14); and Job, who said, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived" (3:3).

We also often find ourselves, during days of despair and failure, in terrible lows. It is during such occasions that our daily burden seems too heavy, our yoke impossible to carry. This feeling is often compounded if we are alone and destitute. It is then, when we feel there is nothing else we can do, that we cry as Elijah did, "It is enough!" (1 Kgs. 19:4). Even the Apostle Paul was well aware of the joys of being released from the daily toils and strife, "having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better" (Phil. 1:23).

Note that Elijah cried, "It is enough", when he was physically and emotionally spent. Sometimes these dark and gloomy feelings that take hold of us are nothing more than us losing perspective, thinking too deeply about ourselves; and often they occur when we are simply drained from our efforts.

God was now going to pity His servant and provide refreshment. It was when Elijah "lay" under the juniper tree that he finally found peaceful rest and "slept" (v. 5). Does not the psalmist say that our God "giveth His beloved sleep" (Ps. 127:2)? And why is this so? It is because "He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust" (103:14). Our heavenly Father is ever mindful of our weaknesses and infirmities, and in this knowledge He sympathetically handles us.

Yet Elijah's load was not removed; rather, God bestowed strength on him in order that he could resume his journey. This is just as the Apostle Paul declared: "God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

**"Like as a father pitieth his children" (Ps. 103:13)**

God was not going to allow His prophet to die, so Elijah's appeal remained unanswered. Our God is "longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). But the Almighty was going to answer him, and when Elijah "lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat" (1 Kgs. 19:5).

Observe the extent to which God cared for His servant: He sent His angel to touch him. Did not the writer to the Hebrews say, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (1:14)? Note also the attention of the Father; He waited for Elijah finally to fall asleep under the tree before He

touched him. Remember the words of Jesus to Nathanael while he also sat under a tree: "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee" (Jno. 1:48).

Have we ever considered the significance that it was not on Mount Carmel that Elijah was "touched" by God, but alone in the wilderness? Neither was Elijah in earnest prayer, or standing astride a scene of victory, nor even in open appeal to the people of Israel, but rather in a state of despair. It was when Elijah requested his own life to be taken that he received Divine relief to preserve it. Elijah had the benefit of a Divine watch, keeping guard while he slumbered, just as the psalmist affirmed: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (91:11,12). And have any of us ever quietly pondered about the pleasure God's holy angels must derive from serving and ministering to God's precious elect?

What a beautiful scene: a member of the glorious angelic host appearing before the prophet to provide a gentle touch, a caring voice and a most necessary gift! Though it would have been entirely justified for the angel to have rebuked Elijah, instead the awakened prophet found refreshment. Even though "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), His mercy and compassion remain constant towards us: "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10).

**"A cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head"**

The wondrous miracle had been Divinely provided for the prophet's sustenance and wellbeing: "And he [Elijah] looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head" (1 Kgs. 19:6).

But by no means is this an exclusive account of God providing "angels' food" (Ps. 78:25) in the wilderness. Remember how Israel, after they had been delivered from Egypt, impatiently asked, "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" (v. 19). They had sobbed, "it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness" (Ex. 14:12). Yet were they not provided with quails, manna and water? And now Elijah, also experiencing the brutal elements of the same wilderness, discovered the Divine hand providing, as it were, "water out of the rock" (Num. 20:8; cf. Ex. 17:6) and "bread from heaven" (Ex. 16:4; cf. Jno. 6:31).

What an extraordinary sight: one of God's almighty Elohim, a creature of His presence, humbly employed in the baking of bread for a friend of God! To us it may seem like a tedious task, altogether lowly, a duty of no honour, yet to this celestial being nothing could have been more joyous in its undertaking. Thus in the barren wilderness Elijah actually fed better than "the prophets of the groves four hundred, which [ate] at Jezebel's table" (1 Kgs. 18:19). We should therefore never view any service in the Lord, however wearisome and menial, as beneath us (Mt. 20:26-28).

Do we remember the despair of Hagar when she fled from Sarah, and how "the angel of the LORD found her . . . in the wilderness" (Gen. 16:7)? She received joyous news from the angel that she was to "bear a son" and that she was to "call his name Ishmael". Why was she to select this name? The angel declared: "because the LORD hath heard thy affliction" (v. 11). God had 'heard her affliction' in the wilderness and she was blessed. Similarly with Elijah, though he tried to lose his life, God had heard his cries.

Observe that this was the third time that God had bodily refreshed His servant. He had previously provided Elijah at Cherith with bread from the ravens (1 Kgs. 17:6); then at Zarephath, through the faith of the widow woman (v. 15); but now, the third time, it was by a member of God's heavenly host. Though the prophet had drunk deeply from the brook (v. 6), he could never have imagined that an angel would be extending a cruse of water to his lips.

After such a display of God's grace and love, how could one respond in any way other than in absolute appreciation, with a trace of humility and modesty? Surely there would have been an overwhelming feeling of Divine providence and favour. So how did Elijah react? "And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again" (19:6). The prophet was not astonished by such a Divine revelation, neither was he bewildered by the food that had been prepared for him.

But did God forsake him because he had not appreciated His mercy and grace? No. Instead, "the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat" (v. 7). The angel most probably "touched" Elijah again in the morning, when the day was dawning. Does this not remind us of prophet's time at Cherith, when "the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening" (17:6)? Just as before, prior to sleep,

food was provided, and as he awoke to a new day, food was brought.

Can we possibly imagine an angel of God having to come a second time for us fully to appreciate His loving kindness? The writer to the Hebrews said, "when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again" (5:12). And what about Peter? When the cock initially crew he disregarded it, but when "the second time the cock crew" he "called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him . . . And when he thought thereon, he wept" (Mk. 14:72). Even after this incident, on a later occasion Peter had to hear a "voice [speak] unto him again the second time". What specifically was he told on this occasion? "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (Acts 10:15).

#### **"The journey is too great for thee"**

But why did the prophet need feeding again? The angel clarified the matter by informing Elijah: "because the journey is too great for thee" (1 Kgs. 19:7). The prophet had not been directed to take any route—he was journeying of his own will—yet the angel knew exactly what course he was about to take.

Elijah may well have already decided to head towards Horeb—to the former terrors of Sinai—where the Law had been given to Moses, and, what is more, where "the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking" (Ex. 20:18) had terrified the children of Israel. Whether Elijah had determined this or not, God had foreseen his journey and knew what this path would demand of him, so He instructed the prophet to eat again.

So Elijah responded and "arose, and did eat and drink" (1 Kgs. 19:8). Though he complied with the angel, there is still no evidence that the Tishbite was thankful for what had been provided. In fact there is no record that a further word was exchanged between the prophet and the angel. Elijah picked himself up and set out on a journey that would lead him to "Horeb the mount of God", and miraculously he "went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights" (v. 8).

The obvious question is, How could a single meal, though prepared by an angel's hand, sustain the prophet to travel for such a lengthy duration? Simply, it was because God had blessed the natural provision. Indeed, He Who had increased the meal and oil (17:16) and would multiply the loaves and fishes (Mt. 14:20; 15:37) could certainly add strength and vitality to this bread.

It is significant that the prophet journeyed “forty days and forty nights”. The number forty in Scripture often relates to a period of probation and trial (Deut. 8:2-5; Ps. 95:10; Jonah 3:4; Acts 13:18). And as Elijah journeyed he would have recalled how the children of Israel had wandered “in the wilderness forty years” (Num. 14:33). Here we observe the ‘day for a year’ principle (cf. Ezek. 4:6); for every day Elijah journeyed in the wilderness the children of Israel had suffered a year.

Elijah also took on, as it were, the situation of Moses. Recall how Moses was “with the LORD forty days and forty nights” in Horeb when “he did neither eat bread, nor drink water” (Ex. 34:28). And at the end of this period, as Moses himself informs us, “the LORD gave me the two tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant” (Deut.

9:11). Did Elijah believe that God was going to reveal Himself again in a similar way?

Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ himself would be “led up of the Spirit into the wilderness” (Mt. 4:1). Like Elijah, he too would not eat for “forty days and forty nights” and would be “an hungry” (v. 2).

How fitting, then, that Moses, Elijah and the Lord Jesus Christ were all in the wilderness for “forty days and forty nights”, and both Moses, who represented the Law, and Elijah, who represented the prophets, were also at Christ’s transfiguration (Lk. 9:28-31)! It was here that they spoke of “his decease”, better rendered “his exodus” (v. 31). And Elijah, during this forty days’ wandering, would be educated about the Exodus under Moses to prepare him for the great exodus that he will one day lead (Mal. 4:6).

(To be continued)

## Your Letters



### The plague of Zechariah 14:12

Most students of history and prophecy are familiar with the fact that French crop failures in the 1780s contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, an event very significant in the fulfilment of prophecy. Many are also aware that these crop failures were brought about by miserable weather, apparently due to the prolonged eruption of Iceland’s Laki volcano from June 1783 to February 1784.

A recent publication has added some details about the effects of this eruption, details which may be pertinent regarding a future prophecy against those who will attack Jerusalem. Overall, few were trapped by the slow-moving lava flows from a seventeen-mile (twenty-seven-kilometre) fissure system, flows which were comparable in volume to the flow

of Brazil’s Amazon River. However, seventy-five per cent of the sheep and horses, fifty per cent of the cattle and twenty per cent of the human population of Iceland died in the next few years. In all, three cubic miles of lava were expelled, covering almost 200 square miles of territory. The following quotation explains the reason for the deaths:

“Lava and ash were not the only products of the Laki outburst. Huge quantities of noxious gases were also expelled, including sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide, chlorine and fluorine. A blue, foul-smelling haze covered the land, beneath which crops and pastures yellowed and died. Soon livestock began to sicken as they chewed on withered grass contaminated with fluorine. This element took a terrible toll on the island’s animals.

Flesh fell from their bodies and manes and tails came off in the hand when pulled. Iceland’s human population fared little better, with fluorosis causing their gums to swell, their hair to fall out, and boils and bony deformities to develop all over their bodies”.<sup>1</sup>

These effects of fluorine poisoning appear to be very similar to the effects described in Zechariah 14:12: “And this shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth”. Zechariah’s prophecy

1. Bill McGuire, *Raging Planet*, p. 47, Barrons Educational Series, New York, ISBN 0-7641-1969-9.