

Lessons from the life of Elijah

14. "A little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand" (1 Kgs. 18:41-46)

Stephen Whitehouse

The supremacy of Yahweh over the false gods having been dramatically demonstrated on Mount Carmel in response to Elijah's prayers, He now responds to more fervent prayer by the prophet and further demonstrates His supremacy by sending abundant rain to bring to an end the sufferings of the drought-stricken nation.

IMAGINE HOW AHAB felt after witnessing his prophets slaughtered in their numbers, deep in the Kishon valley! But, to his relief, the appointed hour for sealing his own personal fate had not yet arrived. On this day he would be mercifully spared.

"Get thee up, eat and drink"

When the last of Baal's prophets had been hewn asunder, Elijah turned to King Ahab and commanded: "Get thee up, eat and drink" (1 Kgs. 18:41). After all the bloody and heart-rending scenes of the day, Elijah could detect that the monarch would still find refreshment a welcoming thought.

The foolish king had observed the greatest of manifestations upon the hillside of Carmel, yet his thoughts were only for his stomach and its immediate gratification. He had beheld the great and marvellous flame, the righteous judgements of God, but none made any impression. Seemingly he had escaped punishment, he would have thought, his life mercifully granted, and to celebrate he would now indulge in eating.

How little had this man's attitude changed! Recall how previously his subjects had been suffering the punishments of God's judgements, the sore drought, yet he had cared only for fresh pasture to nourish his starving horses and mules (v. 5). Ahab was indeed spiritual deadness personified, devoid of all appreciation and recognition of the God of Israel.

"A sound of abundance of rain"

Though judgements had been poured out, no blessings had yet arrived. But this was about to

change, for the faithful prophet had glad tidings for the king: "there is a sound of abundance of rain" (v. 41). The Hebrew for "abundance" can be understood to mean a 'roar' or 'tumult', or a noise generated by a great number of people, and the phrase can be rendered: "a voice of a noise of rain" (mg.). Although there was as yet no visible sign of rain, the prophet heard it clearly. This was without doubt "the hearing of faith" (Gal. 3:2,5).

Similarly, we can bring to mind the faith of Moses, for he "endured, as seeing Him Who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). Surely the exhortation is that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (v. 1). And ponder on what is written concerning the faithful of ages past: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but . . . were persuaded of them, and embraced them" (v. 13). They "were persuaded . . . and embraced them", though they never "received" them. This wonderful gift still awaits them.

Yet is it not also revealing that the sound of precipitation did not register with any of the other spectators? Were they simply deaf to the sound of faith? Were they all spiritually incapable of discerning Divine matters, even after this marvellous event of power and glory had been witnessed?

"Elijah went up to the top of Carmel"

While the king was engaged in refreshing himself with food and drink, the faithful prophet, in stark contrast, thought only of spiritual matters: "Elijah went up to the top of Carmel" (1 Kgs. 18:42). Like the Lord Jesus, he had "meat to eat" (Jno. 4:32) which Ahab and the multitude were not aware of. Elijah did not pause for any applause or ovation, not even for a word of congratulation, after the fire had descended from heaven. He preferred to remove himself in order that he could be alone with his God in prayer.

As the prophet stood at the summit he would have surveyed the drought-stricken country. It would have been difficult to recognise the land

that had earlier been described as "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness" (Deut. 8:7-9). Now it lay as a scorched heath, parched under the punishment of God.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16)

Elijah, on this day of momentous things, had been highly favoured. He had been answered by fire from heaven, yet he still approached his God in strictest reverence. Indeed, he "cast himself down upon the earth" (1 Kgs. 18:42), or 'prostrated himself'. He stretched himself upon the ground, bowed his knees before the Most High, and positioned his head between his knees so that it touched the earth. He humbled himself in the dust under the heavy feeling of his own infirmity and deficiency.

Survey the contrast in the prophet's actions. When he stood before the people he was God's ambassador, His representative, and so spoke and acted in virtue of his high commission and calling. But now, as he stood alone before his God, he viewed himself as did the Apostle Paul, as merely a "wretched man" with a "body of . . . death" (Rom. 7:24). Has not this always been the attitude of the righteous, such as Abraham, when he declared, "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27)?

We have already witnessed three remarkable instances in Elijah's history of the truth of the statement that "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16). Firstly, he had prayed that it might not rain (1 Kgs. 17:1; cf. Jas. 5:17). Secondly, he had prayed that the life of the widow's son might be restored (1 Kgs. 17:21). Thirdly, he had prayed for the answer by fire (1 Kgs. 18:36,37). Now he prayed again, but not openly in public as before, for he earnestly prevailed in private prayer.

And how wonderful it is that this formed a central part of the teachings of our Master: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father Which is in secret; and thy Father Which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Mt. 6:6). The lesson is that the follower must humble himself in God's presence so as to allow the Father to raise him to new spiritual heights in the Kingdom of

God: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (5:5).

"A little cloud out of the sea . . ."

Elijah was a diligent watcher, ever watchful for "a sign from heaven" (Mt. 16:1). The prophet commanded his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea" (1 Kgs. 18:43). While Elijah continued faithfully in prayer, he sent his servant to survey the heavens for any signs of the coming blessing, of any prospect of clouds arising over the Mediterranean Sea. Elijah's perseverance in supplication is most remarkable, for observe that even the great prophet was not answered immediately.

Elijah did not simply cease from prayer because there had been no visible answer, but rather he continued the more earnestly. He shared the same persistence as that of Jacob, who solemnly declared, after wrestling with the angel during the long and wearisome night, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (Gen. 32:26).

With the prophet this happened six times, and each time the servant returned to report that there was no sign of any rain, yet Elijah continued in prayer. He never became dispirited, though at each time of asking he received the heavy words from his servant, "There is nothing" (1 Kgs. 18:43).

Surely, then, the lesson of "The effectual fervent prayer" (Jas. 5:16) is "to pray, and not to faint" (Lk. 18:1; cf. Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2). We too should patiently persist in prayer and "give Him no rest" (Isa. 62:7). And note, before any heavenly blessings can be received, we too need fervently to "believe that [God] is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Observe also that the prophet said, "Go again seven times" (1 Kgs. 18:43). Seven, a prime number, is a significant number in the Scriptures, and refers to spiritual perfection, God's seal or covenant (cf. Josh. 6:15; 2 Kgs. 5:14; Ps. 119:164). And notably it was upon the seventh time of praying, in sacrificial obedience, that waters poured upon the earth; the prophet persisted in prayer until the God of the covenant answered his petition (cf. Lev. 4:6,17; 8:11; 14:16).

In symbol, this is prophetic of the seventh time or "the fulness of times" (Eph. 1:10). In this we see the commencement of the seventh millennial day when the hand of God shall act in the sea, or among all nations (Isa. 57:20), and raise that "plentiful rain" and "confirm [His] inheritance" (Ps. 68:9). It will be the time when all "shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with

power and great glory" (Mt. 24:30), with "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1). It will be then when righteous judgements shall be dispensed from heaven, for "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth" (Ps. 72:6).

" . . . like a man's hand"

What was the form of this cloud? It was "like a man's hand" (1 Kgs. 18:44). Hardly the most significant of proportions! Yet did not the psalmist attest: "Thou openest Thine hand, they are filled with good" (104:28; cf. 145:16)? And the Lord Jesus declared: "When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straightway ye say, There cometh a shower; and so it is" (Lk. 12:54). Though it began with such small dimensions, it was the commencement of a most glorious event.

Is this not seen in the Lord's parable of the grain of mustard seed? For this small seed grew and waxed strong to be "the greatest among herbs, and [became] a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof" (Mt. 13:32). Let us therefore take heed and never "[despise] the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10).

In response, Elijah turned to his servant and commanded him to inform Ahab, "Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not" (1 Kgs. 18:44), though not a drop had yet fallen to the earth. Elijah fully recognised that the "little cloud . . . like a man's hand" was his answer, and God alone was its source. The prophet had previously experienced how "an handful of meal" (17:12) had sustained a faithful home for many months, and so a heavenly 'handful' of raindrops would be more than enough to replenish and rejuvenate the land.

A miraculous storm blew up, as if prompted by the call of Elijah, and the heavens became "black with clouds and wind" (18:45). What a delight this development would have been to the prophet! He had earnestly longed that the brazen skies should dissolve in abundance of rain, and the season of famine and distress terminate. Here his request was about to be answered by the One "Who covereth the heaven with clouds, Who prepareth rain for the earth" (Ps. 147:8) and Who declared: "I will give you rain in due season" (Lev. 26:4).

The prophet honours the king

Ahab promptly complied with Elijah's request and "rode, and went to Jezreel" (1 Kgs. 18:45). The king was eager to recount all the dreadful events of the day to his wicked wife without any

delay. His curiosity had now been well satisfied. He knew that the One Who had answered by fire would respond again, but with great rain.

As Ahab drove off, the "hand of the LORD" rested upon Elijah (v. 46). This phrase denotes the great strength with which God endowed His prophet (cf. Ezra 7:28; Ezek. 1:3; 3:14,22; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1), for he was soon to run some twenty miles to Jezreel.

But observe that the prophet chose to run before the king. This is particularly significant since it was the ancient custom that sovereigns and other high dignitaries had their own personal runners who ran before their chariots as a statement that the one in the chariot was of greater standing than themselves (cf. 1 Sam. 8:11; 2 Sam. 15:1; 1 Kgs. 1:5). Elijah was therefore giving due reverence to the Lord's anointed. He showed himself to be Ahab's faithful subject and servant, and hoped that this would touch the monarch's heart.

It is also worthy of note that if the king had paid due respect to the esteemed prophet of God then surely he would have invited him into his chariot, as did the Ethiopian eunuch with Philip (Acts 8:31). Yet, in humility, with his loins girt, Elijah ran to "the entrance of Jezreel" (1 Kgs. 18:46).

Though the prophet ran, he chose not to enter into the city but rather to remain outside. He knew that this was not a suitable place for a humble prophet of the wilderness, a man who was modestly "girt with a girdle of leather about his loins" (2 Kgs. 1:8). For this was the place of Ahab's splendid palace (1 Kgs. 21:1), a residence for kings and high dignitary, of materialistic honour and worldly renown.

A victory but not the fatal blow

Picture this scene well: the great prophet, with a huge sense of anticipation, joyfully descending the mount, his heart lifted high by the events of the day. He was now convinced that Ahab had been converted through the revelation of miracles and wonders.

As the great torrents of water splashed hard against his face, the prophet's mind was constantly on the redemption of his people, the salvation of Israel. Now, he would have thought, at long last a fatal blow had been delivered to idolatrous worship.

Yet, after all that had occurred, this most devout of prophets would soon learn that, though the contest on Carmel had come and gone, evil still remained. The monarch's heart was not

changed; no true faith had taken possession of it. Elijah's victory was not what he had originally hoped. It was not the fatal blow, but merely a graze, and the prophet would have to wait patiently.

Indeed, the ultimate blow against King Sin would only be delivered when the greater than Elijah, even the Lord Jesus Christ, through death would "destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

([To be continued](#))

Paul: the final period

2. The end of his course*

Tom Barling

In the concluding part of this study we trace Paul's final movements, his arrest and his subsequent imprisonment at Rome, where he met his end, fully confident that he would be raised and given the reward of eternal life.

IN OUR [PREVIOUS STUDY](#) much weight was given to the significance of the Lord's revelation to Paul in Jerusalem: "Be of good cheer: for as thou hast testified concerning me at Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (Acts 23:11). Unquestionably, whatever purpose he may subsequently have had in mind, his cherished hope was to witness to his Lord in Rome. In this connection we note what he purposed while still in Ephesus: "After I have been there [Jerusalem], I must also see Rome" (19:21). This was undoubtedly his desire and ambition; we note that at this stage there is no mention of Spain, referred to in Romans 15:24. His letter to the Romans, written in Achaia at the end of the Third Missionary Journey, bears ample witness to his great desire to visit Rome, especially 1:9-11. The conclusion was that there is no indication that he ever had the opportunity to visit Spain.

Last movements

We now endeavour to trace Paul's last movements before his arrest and final imprisonment. As in the first article, we recognise that we must engage in a certain amount of conjecture, although we shall see that the final chapter of 2 Timothy provides some valuable clues. We remind ourselves that the letter to Titus, composed while Paul was still in the Aegean (Greece and Asia Minor), shows he intended to winter in Nicopolis (3:12), on the west coast of Greece and near to Actium, where Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, had won his decisive battle against Antony in B.C. 31.

Clearly, therefore, in leaving the Aegean area the apostle would need to travel westwards. There is abundant evidence in Acts that on his travels he would establish contact wherever possible with fellow believers, especially with the ecclesias which he had personally founded. Now when we consult 2 Timothy, written from prison in Rome, we find mention of localities which could have been on his route westwards from the Aegean area ([see map](#)). He left a cloak at Troas in the keeping of Carpus, together with books, and also parchments which were especially important to him (4:13).¹ We are now beginning to pick up valuable clues. In view of the apostle's intention to pass the winter in Nicopolis, we can understand how a warm garment could prove useful.

A question now suggests itself. If these items meant so much to the apostle, why had he left them behind in Troas? This untypical conduct would seem to suggest that he had left under duress, having been summarily arrested, and constrained to depart for Rome under armed escort.

There is other evidence of his presence on the east coast of Asia Minor, for he had left Trophimus sick at Miletus (v. 20). A glance at the [map](#) shows that Troas is north of Miletus; for one coming from the east, this would appear

* Scripture quotations are from the RV.

1. The precise nature of the garment (Gk. *phailonēs*) appears to be difficult to identify, but it was clearly a warm garment, which would prove a comfort to the apostle. The identity of the various items in 2 Timothy 4:13 is discussed at length by G. W. Wright III in *The Pastoral Epistles*, Paternoster Press, 1992, pp. 466-7. See also Alfred Nicholls, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The Christadelphian, 1991, p. 340.