

1 KINGS ELIJAH 13

Have available a map which covers the area from Carmel to Jezreel, and Sinai (Map009)

Read 1 Kings 18:41-46

41 And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." 42 So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

43 "Go and look towards the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

44 The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. 46 The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

We left Elijah praying on Mount Carmel. And naturally he was anxious for a sign that his prayer had been answered, so v43:

"Go and look towards the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said.

How often we pray and then eagerly search the horizon, and how often we have to admit 'there is nothing there'. Perhaps we see no sign of a change in the one we have been praying for. Perhaps there is no hint that our own problems are going to improve. There is nothing. And because there is nothing when we have just begun to pray, we stop praying. We leave the mountain top not realizing that God's answer is just over the horizon.

But Elijah persevered. *Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."*

Again and again the servant came back to his master with the same message, *"There is nothing there"*. Each time he was sent to look again. But there was nothing there. No wisp of cloud in the whole sky from the horizon to the east, out across the Mediterranean to the west. Not the slightest hint of rain.

What do you imagine Elijah was thinking as he sent the boy back for the second time?

The fourth time?

The seventh time?

The heavens were like brass. The sun had blazed down unrelentingly all day, and not just all day, but it had been the same every day for the last three and a half years! However, Elijah had been given faith to persist in prayer until he had received his answer, and this he was going to do.

Sometimes our father grants our request, and prepares the answer for us, but keeps it back for a while, so that we are led on to a deeper prayer life, which in turn is a blessing to our spirits. So we must never be discouraged by having to wait. Remember *Isaiah 65v24*:

"Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear."

The answer to our prayers may be nearer than we think. In this case the physical processes of evaporation and absorption and condensation were well advanced. The wind speed, temperature and air pressure were already established. At last from the very top of Carmel his servant could just make out a cloud on the horizon, a cloud that looked no bigger than a man's hand; and he came running to tell Elijah.

That tiny cloud was sufficient evidence for Elijah, but there was still a problem: Ahab. How could he reach the leader of his nation? How could he break through the barrier in Ahab's soul and show him that *"The LORD - he is God"*? Fire from heaven was not enough, perhaps the rain that was about to fall would dissolve that stony heart and cause Ahab to turn from his sins. So Elijah said v44 *"Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops YOU.'"*

Again a command, again he reminds Ahab of God's supremacy in sending the rain. Elijah desperately wanted him to show some glimmer of repentance, but still there was nothing. v45: *The sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.*

The king left in the driving rain, picking his way off the mountain in his royal chariot, but:

*Verse 46: The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel, some eighteen miles distant.*¹

This brings to a triumphant close this part of our study. God has acted in response to the prayers, faith and action of an ordinary man. The people of Israel had been halted in their uncontrolled slide into sin. Sacrifice had been offered on their behalf, the prophets of Baal had been slaughtered, and God's blessing was even now being demonstrated in the return of the rain.

So we can turn confidently to the next chapter in the story of the people of Israel.

1 Kings 19:1-4

1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say,

¹ The current records for fell running over a 21 miles (34 km) course, encountering heights of 9,000 ft (2750 m) at the Wasdale Fell Race is - male record 3:25:21 (Billy Bland, 1982), female record 4:12:17 (Janet McIver and Jackie Lee, 2008) (Wikipedia)
But don't forget *The power of the Lord came upon Elijah!*

"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

We don't know how long Ahab stopped to eat or Elijah waited for the cloud. As it was already past *'the time for the evening sacrifice'* some people may have returned home immediately while others took part in the slaughter of the priests of Baal, however it's most likely that Ahab's party were the first to bring news of what had happened to the palace in Jezreel.

The torrential rain was a fitting conclusion to that eventful day. The king and the prophet would have been soaked to the skin by the time they both reached Jezreel. While Ahab was received at the palace by Jezebel, Elijah probably stopped at the palace gate, waiting for others to return who could give him shelter and food.

All day long the queen had been wondering what had been happening on Mount Carmel. She had desperately hoped that Baal had triumphed; and when she saw the rain clouds racing across the sky, she was relieved that there was obviously a result. But still she waited fretfully. Finally, probably around midnight, she heard a commotion, the door opened and Ahab entered. *'Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the Prophets with the sword.'*

**Did Ahab make a good reporter? Was he biased?
What mention was there of what God had done?**

Jezebel was incensed. She was like a tigress robbed of her young. It seems that Ahab's temperament was totally materialistic; if the palace supplies were maintained, and the horses and mules were cared for, he was content. He couldn't understand people becoming so passionate about religion. In his judgement there was not much to choose between God and Baal. His philosophy was take life easy; eat, drink and be merry. Now the rain had come the problem was solved.

Not so with Jezebel. She was as fanatical as he was indifferent. Crafty, unscrupulous, scheming and thoroughly evil, she sought to mould Ahab to her mind.

To Jezebel this was a major crisis and she knew she had to act quickly. If this national reformation were permitted to spread, it would sweep away before it all that she had spent her life striving for. She must strike, and strike at once. So that very night, amid the violence of the storm, v2: *'she sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the Gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." '*

That message tells us something of Jezebel's nature.

Did she really want him dead?

What would the death of Elijah actually achieve?

He would become a Martyr and the people would turn against Jezebel and Ahab.

If she had really wanted him dead the messenger would have been told to kill him there and then. And killing people who got in her way was not a problem for Jezebel (remember Naboth's vineyard? – study 16). Instead she controlled her fury and contented herself with threats, in the middle of the night, when Elijah was already exhausted, which were designed to cause him to run in fear. This would in turn discredit him in the eyes of his new converts, and she would be free to repair the havoc he had caused. Sadly, in this she was only too successful.

Is this a method often used by the devil in his attacks on Christians?

Do worries and fears planted in our hearts and minds actually do us more harm than the things we are afraid of?

How often does the thing we worry about ever actually cause us trouble?

How often is the outcome as bad as we feared?

It is a fact that in times of war, those people living on the outskirts of the war zone, who may hear but never experience any fighting, can suffer from severe psychological disorders caused by constant worry. Those who are in the thick of it, while perhaps suffering physically, are much better able to withstand the mental strain. Our minds will inevitably imagine things to be worse than they are. The devil knows this, and is not slow to take advantage of any fear we may have.

Elijah's presence in the nation of Israel had never been needed so much as now. The eradication of evil had commenced, and the people were in a mood to carry it through to the end. The people probably had by now associated the terrible effects of the three-year drought with their own apostasy and were in no mood for any more of that. The tide had turned, and God's Spirit had convicted people of the error of their past ways. Now they were in the mood to follow Elijah in a new work of reformation and reconstruction.

From what we have seen of Elijah, we should have expected that he would receive Jezebel's message with the contempt it deserved, or at the very most perhaps lay it before God. He might have taken comfort from Psalm 31v20 and been encouraged that *'In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men, in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues.'* But instead of this, we are told (and imagine how the writer must have felt as he recorded this in verse 3: *'Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.'*)

He ran for his life! Taking his servant, and under cover of darkness, he hurried out into the driving storm. His journey took him 100 miles across the hills of Samaria, over the border into Judea, passing Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and so to Beersheba in the extreme south of Judea, where the populated land fades into the Negev desert. ([Show on map](#))

He was safe there, beyond the influence of Jezebel, but even there he felt unsettled. It seems he had become so utterly demoralised and panic stricken that he could not even bear the company of his servant; so, leaving him in Beersheba, he went on alone down the rough track that led through the desert southwards to Sinai. (Map)

I doubt that he was running now. More likely the plod of a demoralised lonely man. Now there were no ravens, no Cherith, no Zarephath; no human to offer sympathy; perhaps he also felt that the very presence of God had left him. Finally fatigue and anguish overpowered the last of his strength,

1 Kings 19:3-5

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

What might have happened if Elijah had held his ground?

- The seven thousand disciples would probably have come out of hiding and encouraged the rest of the people in turning back to God.
- A Godly king might have followed Ahab.
- Perhaps there might even have been a reuniting of North and South in the worship of the one true God.
- And Elijah's record in scripture would have been saved from the stain of disappointment.

He missed a chance, which never came again. Though God in his mercy treated him lovingly and told him to return, He never again reinstated his servant in quite the position that he had so sadly abandoned.

Do we need to consider this as a warning to ourselves? How easy is it to just turn our back on God for one moment and go our own way, doing or saying something that we immediately regret but which by then has already spoilt our witness or broken relationships that have been built over many months?

Or it may be that we remain silent when we know we should have spoken, and it has damaged our influence for good and put us into a very different position to that which might have been ours, if only we had remained true. Thankfully as children we are always forgiven, but sadly as servants we may never be reinstated or trusted quite as we once were.

What other examples does the Bible have of great men who have failed just where we would have expected them to be strongest?

How about:

- Abraham, who was the father of those who believe; but his faith failed him when he went down to Egypt, and he lied to Pharaoh about his wife. Genesis 12v18,19

- Moses, whose trust in God we would never question, but was prevented by God from entering the Promised Land *"because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites"*. Numbers 20v12
- John was the apostle of love, yet in a moment of intolerance he wanted to call down fire from heaven. Luke 9v54

So Elijah who we might have assumed to have been above human weakness, shows himself to be a man just like us. James 5v17

But it does encourage us to believe the Bible is true! If it had simply been written by human authors without the leading of the Holy Spirit, I'm sure they wouldn't have spelt out the failures of their greatest heroes in such detail. No artist would deliberately spoil something that had taken many hours to complete.

This is one of the great things about the Bible. It doesn't try to hide human weakness and because of that we can be encouraged. If God is able to mould his best vessels out of such ordinary clay, He can actually do the same with us. We shouldn't feel superior as we read about Elijah's fall – rather we can take comfort from it as we realise we might easily have done just what he did.

What might have been the cause of Elijah's failure? Next time we will look at a possibility.