

The Ministry of Elijah

He was a terror to some; to others he was a blessing. In each case he was a God-send What's the connection?

by *Darren M. Cary*

Elijah was a true man of God in every respect. God talked with him, walked with him, and told him he was His own. Yet many today would disapprove of his ministry. He might be considered a bit "rough" on the people.

Why? What were the first words we read of from the lips of Elijah? "As the LORD God Of Israel liveth, before whom I stand there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (I Kings 17:1, KJV throughout unless otherwise noted).

This was a severe decree given to King Ahab, seventh king of Israel. The drought punished the land for three and one-half years (cf. James 5:17), and when water becomes scarce for an extended period of time, things die: crops, livestock, and people.

"That's no way to get people to repent," modern thought says. "Punishment and brutality only drives people away; it never leads them to Christ."

But what many fail to realize is that the ministry of Elijah did not serve to destroy, but to give life. His procedure and style, however, adjusted to those he dealt with accordingly.

Elijah, believe it or not, practiced balance. He understood the principle of "seasons," that there is "a time to kill, and a time to heal" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). With God's approval and empowerment, that is exactly what he did.

I think Elijah was a brash man by nature. He seems to have enjoyed the "steel" part of his "man of velvet, man of steel" character as much as anybody. This was made evident when he faced the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

When Elijah returned to the wicked King Ahab after the three and one-half years of drought-he challenged the prophets of Baal. it was an absolute stand-off: "'How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people answered him not a word" (I Kings 18:21).

The agreement was this: Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal were to offer a bullock on their respective altars, while "kindling no fire beneath them." Then Elijah proposed "'And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God.' And all the people answered and said, 'It is well spoken'" (v. 24).

Elijah, fully confident that the prophets would fail utterly, gave them quite a

difficult time. Skipping and leaping, dancing and prancing, they cried out to their god but to no avail. By noontime, Elijah took the opportunity to jeer and ridicule--and he was considerably good at it.

"'You'll have to shout louder than that,' he scoffed, 'to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!'" (v. 27, Living Bible).

In response to Elijah's chiding, the false prophets screamed, hooted, and hollered with even more volume and gusto. They even reached the point where they thought it was necessary to bleed for their cause, slicing themselves with knives and lancets. But apparently, Baal was still "indisposed."

When nearly an entire day had passed it was finally Elijah's turn. How did God react to his "unChristian" taunting? Well, after Elijah doused his offering three times with water, completely saturating it, he prayed a short prayer. Responding favorably, God sent a fire so hot that it consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even the water in the trenches!

But notice in his prayer what Elijah's intent was: "Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again" (v. 37). It was not merely to gratify his ego, but to arouse repentance.

Elijah afterward charged that the men of Baal be put to death. One could call this a drastic move to get a point across.

But on the other hand, notice the gentler, "godlier" side of Elijah during the drought's reign. He was sent to a widow in Zarephath to be sustained with food and water (1 Kings 17:9). It was apparent to the woman that there was not enough meal to feed the both of them and her son. And while the woman already knew he was a man sent from God (v. 9), she was still tested when Elijah asked to be fed first (v.13).

However, because of her faith as a believer (a gentile, at that), God spared the widow by miraculously keeping her meal container from running out. He also saved her oil from depletion. 'The three of them "did eat many days" from this "limited" supply of food

But soon afterward, the widow's son became ill and died. "And she said unto Elijah, 'What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?'" (v. 18). Smarting off to a prophet of God and accusing him of murder would seem to be a serious offense; but Elijah understood her grief and frustration, so, carrying the boy up to bed, he prayed over him in sore distress. He, too--this rough and tough "bad boy" of God--had a broken, tender heart.

The Lord heard his cries and did revive the lad from death. Elijah then brought the child to his mother, showing her God's grace, healing power, and mercy. Through this great miracle of restored life, the widow's belief was confirmed and strengthened: "And

the woman said to Elijah, 'Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth'" (v. 24).

Elijah was a hard man and a soft man. But his objective of turning hearts to God never changed. For some, mercy and encouragement were all that was needed; for others, "knees had to be broken" to conform-whichever it took.

Do you remember Ahab, the most evil of all the kings of Israel (I Kings 21:25)? God, through Elijah, threatened him with a violent and bloody death: "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went softly" (v. 27).

When God saw this, he came to Elijah and said, "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (v. 29). Well, what do you know? It worked! If he can repent, anyone can repent.

Indeed the ministry of Elijah was one of giving, sustaining, and restoration of life.

Ours should be, too.

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