

an essay:

A LEADERSHIP STUDY OF THE PROPHET ELIJAH

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NOTE:

All Bible passages are quoted from The King James Version.

I. INTRODUCTION

What were the characteristics that The LORD instilled in His prophet Elijah, which allowed him to carry out the seemingly overwhelming tasks set before him? What marks of his life as a leader in ancient Israel may we discern from The Holy Scriptures? And how may these characteristics and marks as a leader of GOD's people in difficult times be as examples for faithful Church leaders in today's difficult times? Such will be the objective of this essay.

II. THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF ELIJAH'S LIFE

A Biblical background and account of the ministry of the prophet Elijah is given in I KINGS 16:28 to II KINGS 2:25, which spans the years of about 925 BC to 896 BC. The historical context of Elijah's life is imbedded in Israel, the only covenant nation with GOD in all of human history. By Elijah's day, however, the fruits of rebellion, sin and worldliness had done great damage to the nation. The ancient initial nation of Israel had split about 975 BC into the southern state of Judah with its capitol in Jerusalem and the northern state of Israel - made up of at least 10 of the 12 tribes - with its capitol eventually in Samaria. So Elijah's life is not far removed from this irreversible split of ancient Israel.

By the time Elijah begins his public ministry in about 925 BC, it has only been about 125 years since King David - a man after GOD's own heart according to Scripture - was King of all Israel. It has only been about 79 years since the wise King Solomon offered his righteous dedication prayer at the consecration of the First Temple of GOD in Jerusalem. It has only been about 50 years since the oppressive and foolish King Jeroboam presided over the division of ancient Israel into 2 separate nations northern and southern.

Both nations had as yet to undergo their full moral degeneration and rebellion against GOD, which would eventually end in the total destruction of Israel by the Assyrians and the overthrow of Judah by the Babylonians. But by the time of Elijah's ministry, all of GOD's prophets and ministers in Israel were on the run, most having been put to death. By this time, the worship of GOD had been displaced by false pagan religions such as Baalism.

The social context of Elijah's ministry takes place in the northern remnant of ancient Israel. This was a society that - by Elijah's time - had not only jettisoned even the external trappings of Old Testament righteousness, but had very much embraced pagan culture and religion outright. By the time of Elijah, The Bible records that most of the prophets and priests of GOD had in fact been put to death on the orders of King Ahab's pagan queen - Jezebel. GOD reveals to Elijah - when he complains that he alone is left in all of Israel faithful to Him - that there are only 7,000 men in the nation who have not bowed down before Baal. It is thus indeed an understatement to say that the social context in which Elijah lived and preached was violently hostile to any worship of GOD and to those who served Him.

The political context at the start of Elijah's ministry opens as the prophet speaks GOD's judgment of no rain or dew for 3 years in Israel. This meant crop failure,

drought, death of animals and severe suffering of the people. It can be assumed that this resulted in political turmoil in the nation. Scripture indicates King Ahab blamed Elijah personally for these troubles and that his wife Queen Jezebel harbored a seething hatred for the prophet. This likely set the domestic political mood of the nation as one of extreme anger at Elijah for the nation's ills.

This was also a time when both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were fearful of Syrian military power. This external threat pushed Israel and Judah into close military cooperation. King Ahab led 3 military expeditions against Syria, the first 2 of which were successful thanks to Divine wrath that was kindled against Syrian pride. By the time of a third and eventually disastrous expedition against Syria, a close personal working relationship between the King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah had developed.

III. CONDITIONS THAT GAVE RISE TO ELIJAH'S CALL AS A LEADER

Elijah began his public ministry at a time of great apostasy and paganism in Israel. I KINGS 16:30-33 reveals the depths of ungodliness that pervaded that society at the time. King Ahab "did evil in the sight of The LORD above all that were before him." Ahab took a pagan wife - Jezebel - "and went and served Baal, and worshipped him." And King Ahab went further in his rebellion to GOD, for he "reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria." And beyond this, Ahab also "made a grove," which was a common place of pagan worship. So in the very capitol of Israel the nation's king had publicly rejected GOD and embraced paganism, setting the lead for the entire nation. And so "Ahab did more to provoke The LORD GOD of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."

In I KINGS 17:1, Elijah's first action in his public ministry is to chastise the Israelites and get their attention directly on behalf of GOD. Thus Elijah proclaims, "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." The lack of rain and dew lasted 3 years! GOD Himself speaks - presumably audibly - to Elijah starting at this point, giving him encouragement, direction, strength and comfort. "And The Word of The LORD came unto him, saying..." GOD speaking directly to Elijah throughout his ministry is itself a condition that gives rise to Elijah being called as a leader.

IV. EXPERIENCES & QUALITIES THAT PREPARED ELIJAH FOR LEADERSHIP

Of all the experiences that prepared Elijah for leadership, without doubt the most incredible are the numerous times that GOD Himself talked - presumably audibly - directly to Elijah. After Elijah called upon the power of GOD to shut up all rain and dew in the land of Israel, we find GOD Himself telling Elijah to go to the brook Cherith, where He Himself would provide water and food for the prophet. We next encounter the instance where GOD tells Elijah to go to Zarephath to live with the widow woman and her son, where all 3 are provided food and water for the duration of the lack of rain.

Next, although we are not told if GOD speaks to Elijah verbally in reply to his prayers for the life of the widow's dead son to be restored, I KINGS 17:22 records, "The

LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived." In these examples we see GOD speaking directly to Elijah and GOD performing miracles through and on behalf of Elijah. These experiences prepared Elijah for further works designed to call the nation and its leaders to repent and return to the worship of GOD alone.

For what reasons GOD chose Elijah at this time and place in history to work his will, we are not told directly. But what is revealed is a portrait of a man in whom the qualities necessary to his call of leadership in Israel are molded. There is Elijah's willingness to submit to GOD and do whatever GOD instructs him to do. Elijah develops an unquestioning trust in GOD, which allows him to give GOD absolute obedience. Elijah becomes so confident in GOD that he learns to speak things to come to pass in GOD's Holy Name before GOD grants that they come to pass! Note also that, whatever the very voice of GOD instructs Elijah to do, there is no questioning, disputing or arguing on the part of Elijah; there is only absolute obedience built upon absolute trust in GOD.

This confidence and trust in GOD reaches its pinnacle in Elijah in the confrontation with the false pagan priests of Baal before King Ahab and the people in I KINGS 18. In the contest to call down fire to consume the offerings, Elijah is so confident and trusting in GOD and His Divine Power that he has his offering saturated with water 3 times, as well as having the surrounding trench filled with water. Without any apparent doubt, the prophet then calls down fire from Heaven to consume the water-drenched offering, so that "that the people may know that Thou art The LORD GOD, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." [I KING 18:37].

V. ELIJAH'S VALUES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Elijah's values are clearly GOD-centered. He has an absolute respect for GOD. He cherishes being faithful to GOD, even in spite of persecution, threat of death and isolation. Elijah is faithful to GOD even when he complains, "for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left: and they seek my life, to take it away." [I KINGS 19:10]. Yes, Elijah - as a frail mere human - does become discouraged, fearful and depressed, but is always faithful to GOD! We see Elijah is steadfast and true in his pious trust in GOD, even as he flees from Queen Jezebel in fear for his life.

Elijah's guiding principles then are to trust GOD for all his needs; to trust GOD for protection and deliverance; to trust GOD for miracles. Elijah's core principle is to simply trust and obey GOD. Under girding these principles is the vision to see his nation and his king repent and return to the true worship of GOD and GOD alone.

VI. CHALLENGES FACED BY ELIJAH AND HOW HE MET THEM

Elijah's all consuming challenge was to call the people and king of Israel to repent and return to the worship of the One True GOD. Relying on the simple and powerful formula of "trust and obey," Elijah found himself time and again being used by GOD to bring forth a call of repentance in Israel. We see this in Elijah's calling upon GOD to withhold rain and dew in the nation for 3 years. If King Ahab's animosity towards him

was any indication, many in Israel cursed him and hated him as a result. Yet he would not turn from trusting and obeying GOD. We see this in Elijah's later confrontation with King Ahab over the king's appropriation of Naboth's vineyard, whom his wife the wicked Queen Jezebel had murdered in his name. Yet because of Ahab's repentance, GOD showed mercy upon him by delaying Divine wrath and judgment until after Ahab's death.

The most striking event in Elijah's ministry is that of his confrontation with the false prophets of Baal before the people and King Ahab. Outnumbered at least 450 to 1, Elijah showed his absolute conviction and trust in GOD in the face of the multitude of false Baal prophets. His sureness and bravery - coupled with the miraculous nature of GOD's consuming fire coming down to consume the water-drenched offering - must have been a powerful call of repentance to the King and the people. Note Elijah was so sure and trusting of GOD that he gave thanks in front of the people and king to GOD for sending a consuming fire upon his sacrifice before GOD actually sent the fire!

This miracle in fact is so powerful a call to repentance that two things happened. First, "And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, The LORD, He is the GOD; The LORD, He is the GOD." [I KINGS 18:39]. Second, Elijah responded with the bold command to the people to "Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And Elijah and the people of Israel took these false Baal prophets "and slew them." {I KINGS 18:40}.

However, here we also have Elijah's greatest failing in his ministry. After this great miracle of GOD before the people and the king, after he personally directed the people to slay all the false prophets of Baal in Israel, after the people and king spoke and showed their willingness to repent and return to worship GOD alone - after all this - Elijah responded by caving in to the death threats of the wicked Queen Jezebel. Elijah fled in terror from the Queen and went into hiding.

Elijah was so overwhelmed with fear that he fell into deep depression, petitioning GOD that he might die! Elijah "went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life." [I KINGS 19:4]. Although it was yet years before GOD sent a fiery chariot with angels to translate Elijah up to Heaven, it was clear to GOD - as it must have been to the nation and king - that Elijah's strength to continue to minister so boldly had waned.

In spite of GOD's personal and gentle ministering to Elijah, it seems the prophet only partially recovered his boldness a few years later when confronting Ahab about Naboth's murder and plans to war against Syria. GOD Himself acknowledged Elijah as a spent force, as we see GOD directing Elijah thus, "Elisha... shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room." [I KINGS 18:16].

VII. THE CLARITY OF ELIJAH'S LEADERSHIP VISION

Elijah's God-given vision was to see a day when Israel and its king would again Worship GOD and GOD alone. As a leader he was called by GOD to carry out this

mission. His vision began with a call for a repentance on the part of the people and king from their paganism. Elijah offered a vision of an Israel where people and king would trust and obey GOD as he himself did. This vision called for all to acknowledge GOD alone as sovereign and the giver of all good things - rain; food; drink; national security; continued existence of the nation and people; life itself.

The pinnacle of Elijah's success as a leader was immediately after the successful confrontation with the false priests of Baal. Here we see Elijah's vision in its greatest clarity. Sadly, the clarity of this vision grew dim when Elijah then lost the will to live and prayed to GOD for death. Although this vision again came into focus in later years of his ministry, it was never as strong and clear as it was at its peak.

VIII. ELIJAH'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FAILURES

Elijah's accomplishments in his ministry include stunning miracles and true prophecies fulfilled. GOD granted his request to shut up the rain and dew in Israel for 3 years. GOD granted Elijah to be a blessing to the widow and her son whom he lived with, food and water being provided for the household by daily Divine miracle. GOD granted Elijah's petition to raise up from the dead the widows son. Elijah successfully faced down the hundreds of false prophets of Baal before King Ahab and the people by GOD's power, which led to the people confessing GOD to be GOD alone and the killing of all the false prophets of Baal in the nation.

Elijah's confrontation of King Ahab for the murder of Naboth led the king to earnestly repent before GOD, and so both the king and the nation were blessed by GOD's mercy. And Elijah correctly prophesied that King Ahab would die in battle against the Syrians in his third military campaign against that nation, validating his prophetic mission.

Elijah failed in a number of ways in his ministry. Most striking is Elijah's collapse of strength and faith to continue his mission to Israel after the remarkable show of GOD's power in the Divine fire from Heaven that consumed his water-drenched sacrifice before King Ahab and the people. Falling into deep depression and overt prayers for death to GOD after fleeing from the death threats of Queen Jezebel, Elijah lost the greatest opportunity to sustain a revival of worship of GOD and GOD alone in the nation. The people were seemingly ready to embrace under Elijah's leadership this vision of national repentance.

Sadly, at this most critical moment, Elijah retreated in spiritual weariness and emotional turmoil into the wilderness. Although further examples of his godliness in later years of his ministry must have caught the attention of some, Elijah had lost the momentum and leadership of the king and the people for a sustained national revival of faith in GOD. In this key vision for his people, Elijah thus failed where he could have succeeded.

IX. IN CONCLUSION - LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED FROM ELIJAH

The Biblical account of Elijah reveals the following leadership lessons: First, we

must learn to trust and obey GOD without question in the small things of life, so that GOD can use us for His purposes in the big things of life. Second, The greater the challenge, the greater the potential miracles that GOD may be pleased to deliver. Third, GOD's willingness to deliver such miracles for His purposes on our behalf depends entirely on our total submission to Him. Fourth, even in the face of great evil and overwhelming odds, we must learn not to despair, but to have faith in GOD all the more.

Fifth, GOD will not allow us to be tried beyond what we can do with His help, nor what we can endure with His strength, but will leave a way of escape so that we can bear our burdens with His grace. Sixth, if we receive a leadership vision that is truly from GOD, we must remain steadfast in the resulting mission, lest we loose opportunities appointed by GOD to make that vision a reality. In The Name of GOD The Father, and The Son and The Holy Ghost. AMEN.