

ELIJAH: A PASSION FOR GOD

II. "The Only Real Security"

2-2-03

I Kings 17

INTRODUCTION

What do we look for security? There have been some interesting insurance policies written to protect and give security to that which people consider most important to them. Did you know that pop singer, Tina Turner, currently insures her legs for a sum that is "quite large," possibly surpassing "Entertainment Tonight" co-host Mary Hart, whose legs are insured for \$1 million each. I was kind of wondering what needs to happen to their legs to collect.... I presume a bit of fat in the calves wouldn't do it. Jimmy Durante insured his signature "schnozzola" for \$50,000. Bruce Springsteen has a \$6 million policy on his voice. And, the chief taster for Dreyer's ice cream insured his tasting ability for \$1 million. From that I'd assume there is a lot of money in being a taster for Dreyers. That would be a tough job, wouldn't it?

We live in a time when much of what has seemed secure has collapsed before our eyes. It was just about this time last year that the whole Enron house of cards came tumbling down. Here was the seventh largest corporation in America that many had invested retirement funds in, following the advice of trusted financial advisors, melting down before our eyes. Many found their financial security for retirement seriously eroded or disappear. And none of us will ever forget the image of those twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsing just a year and half ago. Now hardly a news broadcast goes by without some reminder of our vulnerability.

Ultimately, there is only one place of security for any of us: **in the center of God's will.** Was it Augustine who said, "*In His will is our peace?*" Peace is there, because we know we are under His divine, all-powerful protection. Scripture talks a lot about security, recognizing our human need to feel safe. But it always warns against trusting anything human or of this world. It always points us to God who cannot fail. This morning's story is one of the most powerful in the Bible in the lessons it teaches on security and releasing our faith to trust in God.

Last week, we began this series on Elijah. Elijah was a man who lived in a time in Israel's life, the 9th century B.C., when the tides of evil seemed overwhelming. The worship of Baal had taken over. Queen Jezebel had killed most of the prophets of God. She kept 450 priests of Baal on the royal payroll. Only 7000 in Israel had not bowed down in worship to Baal.

In Elijah last week, we heard the challenge that God always uses people to stem the tides of evil in our world. He models three keys for us in his confrontation with king Ahab:

1. His certainty is rooted in, "As the Lord lives..."
2. His allegiance is to God alone, "before whom I stand..."
3. In Elijah's name we see his source, for "Elijah" means: "The Lord is my strength."

Following that solid base, the next thing we need to know in confronting evil in our world is where our security lies so we can live by faith and not make choices based upon fear and panic. Let's turn now to I Kings 17:1-6 (page 345 in pew Bibles). Keep your Bibles open, for we'll read the rest of the chapter in a few minutes.

GOD'S CARE

This is a time of judgement on the nation of Israel for her idolatry. Baal was the god of fertility and of the thunder clouds. The drought was a direct confrontation from God upon the nation turned to Baal. Spiritual bareness is giving way to physical barrenness. It is reminder on a grand scale of the impotence of Baal. Yet, in the midst of judgement, God is able to care for His own. Elijah is hidden by God, protected, provided for in the Kerith ravine, a remote area on the east side of the Jordan. There, the Lord, the creator of all creatures, Lord of all, orders ravens to bring Elijah meat and bread every morning and every evening.

If you know much about ravens, they are not too fussy in their food-source. I used to enjoy going to the local garbage dump when we lived in Montana. There were always huge numbers of ravens there feasting on the goodies. I'm not sure a raven would be the one I'd choose to feed me! Yet, I'm sure God provided good stuff, not just garbage and half-rotted meat. Also, ravens are not a particularly pretty bird (unless you're into black), and have that raucous, irritating call. Here we see God giving a fairly obnoxious bird a new dignity! I can't look at a raven without thinking of Elijah.

A few years ago, I came across a parallel story in *Guidposts* magazine, told by Josephine M. Kuntz who now lives in Oakland, CA. She remembers the winter of 1940 when her husband, a house painter, was temporarily out of work due to the weather. She'd been laid-off from the textile plant where she worked. They reached the point where they literally had no money. To make matters worse, their 18-month old daughter, Rachel, was recovering poorly from pneumonia. The Dr. insisted they needed to feed her a boiled egg each day to help her regain her strength. But, even that was beyond their means.

They had a live-in teenaged baby-sitter who was staying on without pay to help them. This teen said, "Why not pray for an egg?" Josephine said, that while they were a churchgoing family, this teen's practical faith was something new to them. All the same, Josephine said that she and that teen got down on their knees and prayed, telling the Lord that Rachel needed an egg every morning.

About 10 o'clock that morning, they heard some cackling coming from the hedge in front of the house. There in the bare branches was a fat red hen. They had no idea where she came from. But as they watched, she laid an egg and then proceeded down the road out of sight. They thanked God for his provision.

But that was only the beginning. Each morning after that, for a week, they would hear the hen cackling from the hedge and go out and retrieve the egg. Each morning, Rachel had her boiled egg. With that, Rachel seemed to daily gain strength. By the end of the week, the weather had changed and her husband was back at work. The next morning, Josephine says she waited by the window and watched to see if the eggs would continue. But, the little red hen did not come back. Ever. Their prayers had been answered—precisely.

Now, Elijah's faith is tested even further. The brook dries up. A single sentence, *Some time later, the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land* (1 Kings 17:7). Imagine sitting there day after day, watching the dwindling supply of water. This is still in the first year of a three year drought. Wouldn't you worry about what's next? Then, *after the brook dried up, the Word of the Lord came to him.*" I'm afraid this is rather characteristic of the Lord's guidance. He has a way of waiting until the last possible minute to provide. In the meantime, we fret, worry, and lose sleep over our dwindling resources. Yet, it is always a time of faith-development if we don't panic. Has God ever placed you in a position of watching your resources dry up? A time when you had to daily fight panic, wondering what and when God would provide?

In our visits in your homes, several of you have shared stories of God's marvelous provision when your resources reached an end.

A time that stands out in my mind is when we were in our first church, just out of seminary. We were living very close to the bone. My mother had a life-long dream to visit the area of Norway from where her parents and most of her brothers and sisters had immigrated. The Lord impressed strongly upon Polly's heart that I was to accompany my mother. When Polly suggested that to me, 9 months before the trip, I was incredulous. I raised all the impossibilities. There was NO WAY we could ever afford it. But, after days of resisting the idea, I agreed to maybe entertain the possibility. I had recently signed up to occasionally substitute teach in the high school, and to be a substitute bus driver. We decided that those extra jobs could be the means of God's providing the needed money. So, finally, in a leap of faith, I made the commitment to go.

I planned the trip to be super-economy. There was a cousin near Stavanger we could stay with while exploring the family roots. When we traveled, we stayed in the cheapest places we could find, and lunches were always picnics of bread and goat cheese. A few weeks before the trip, it looked like I would have enough money. But then, the exchange rate with the Norwegian kroner began to go the wrong way. I was getting anxious as I saw my travel money daily shrivel as I'd check the exchange rate in the newspaper. A week before I was to leave, things were at the point of being quite marginal financially. I was thinking, "If I just had about \$300 more, it would make me feel more comfortable. What happens if I run out of money?" I picked up my mail, and there was an envelope without a return address. When I opened it, I found six \$50 bills. I never knew who the human agent was, but I knew it was from God, for I had never told anyone about my concern that I have more money for the trip.

And, while it admittedly wasn't too tough an assignment from the Lord to go to Norway— we had a great time— it did become clear it was definitely what God had called me to do. The trip would have been a disaster for my mother if I hadn't been there. But those were circumstances we could not foresee.

Now, let's look at phase two: I Kings 17:7-24

INTO THE FIRE

After the brook dries up, God has another phase of His provision for Elijah that is even more incredible. Now he is commanded to travel 100 mi. across Israel. By this time, it is safe to assume his name topped Jezebel's most wanted list. So it is a dangerous journey to Zarephath, a little town of Sidon. Sidon was where Jezebel came from and her father still ruled there. Tyre and Sidon were a coastal area, making up a seafaring nation. This was Gentile country and the heart of Baal worship that led Israel astray. "Zarephath" means "smelting furnace." I expect Elijah felt he was going from the frying pan into the fire. Here he is being sent to the least likely place (enemy territory) to be provided for by the least likely person (a widow). For widows of that day were generally the poorest of the poor. Certainly this one was no exception. Everything was gone. There was just enough flour and oil to make a little bread for her and her son's final meal before they starved.

Just as a smelting furnace is used to cleanse impurities from metal, I expect in the geography of this story, God is suggesting Zarephath is for Elijah a place of purifying his heart— removing independence, the pride of self-reliance and the fire of adversity to further develop his faith. I know men today who have a hard time letting their wives support them if they're out of work. I'm sure it was much harder on Elijah. For Jewish men it was common to daily thank God they were not born a Gentile or a woman. I don't know if Elijah ever prayed that way... but you get the sentiment of the culture. Here, he has to *ask* a woman and a Gentile to take care of him. Then, asking for their last meal! That takes some nerve.

Listen again to vs. 13-14, the incredible promise to attend her obedience:

*Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. **For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'**"*

Here is an important faith lesson. Most of us would say, "Let me see the provision first, then I'll give." For her, at least as a mother, to take care of her son first is only natural, who wouldn't? But God says, give to me first, then I'll see that your needs are met. And, indeed for her, the pipeline of God's supply is opened. The flour and oil never run out. And, she receives the first recorded miracle in the Bible of someone being raised from the dead when Elijah brings her son back to life.

This principle is repeated often in Scripture. The tithe, 10% of our income, is to be the first fruits. That is, we are asked to give that off the top, trusting God to supply our needs with the 90% left. And, frankly, that's about the only way tithing works. If we wait and see if we have enough at the end of the month, so often people don't. Whereas if we give at the beginning as an expression of faith, somehow God provides for the rest of the month. There is no question it is a statement of faith to do that. It is a choice to not fear, as Elijah encourages the widow. Mal. 3:10 contains a wonderful promise:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse (church)... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of blessing that you will not have enough room for it.

Also, we have the promise of Mtt. 6:33--

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

The "all these things" Jesus is talking about in this context are food, clothing, and shelter. In other words, so you can't miss it, if you want God's blessing, provision, and the security of His care, make Him the #1 priority of your life. Give first to Him, even if you don't know where any more is coming from and, then He will provide. We need to put God first rather than giving Him the left-overs of our lives.

THE WORD OF GOD

There is a deliberate emphasis through this section on the role of the Word of God. The Word of the Lord comes and Elijah goes to Kerith. Through God's Word the ravens feed him. The Word comes and he goes to Zarephath, *"I have commanded a widow to feed you."* Elijah promises her, *"The Lord the God of Israel says..."* She is provided for. The resurrection of the dead boy is seen as confirmation of God's Word as she says, *Now I know that you are a man of God and that the Word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.*

God's Word is powerful and creative. *"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made..."* God spoke all creation into being. If we align our lives with His Word and obey, we unleash the creative power of the Spirit to accomplish His ends. Let His Word speak into our lives. Nothing is too hard for Him. Obeying His Word places us in the center of His will which is always a place of assured provision and security.

CONCLUSION

Certainly all of us can identify with some point in this story. If we're anxious about life, we need to be reminded the only real security is being in the center of God's will. The principles taught here apply to all areas of our lives, not just to the outer, material needs we think of first. But, our needs for friendships, relationships and the security they provide are included. Our health needs, our emotional needs, and the fulfillment of our personalities are all part of God's desired provision.

Sometimes, in following the Lord, we find ourselves beside brooks of dwindling resources:

- We've given, and loved until we're emotionally exhausted and can't give any more;
- Maybe forgiveness is called for, but there is nothing left in you to forgive any more, or trust again;
- Or you feel panic threatening to break out, "How can I keep on?"

Don't be afraid, the Word will come when its time to move, if you listen, but not before its time. God is never without a plan. Maybe you're at Zarephath, that refining furnace. God is burning up your pride, and self-reliance—teaching you to receive from the hand the Lord provides. Or, you may be the widow, being asked of the Lord to give to Him first, and it may feel like its all you have. The giving may be time, talents or letting go of your first love. Or perhaps beginning to honor God with our first fruits of income, the tithe. Remember, the hoarding of your resources will only corrupt you and lead to death. Don't be afraid, windows of provision will be opened to you. Discover the freedom of living on God's supply.