

Elijah : Prophet of Fire

A man in God's presence

1. The hidden years – learning to serve 1 Kings 16:29-17:24

Introduction

The huge variety of God's creation reveals the vastness of His design and creative power. This can be seen in:

- the inanimate world – the privilege of travel
- the living world – Red Sea Coral Reef a reflection of His glory
- each work of God's hands with His stamp of individuality
- this individuality is seen even more in man
 - ✓ the variety of personality
 - ✓ the variety of physical appearance
 - ✓ the variety in mental endowment
 - ✓ the variety in the capacity of the soul
 - ✓ the variety and age and how environment develops a person

God uses these almost infinite variations to show forth His glory and for the fulfilment of His purposes.

Why study Elijah?

- All discipleship is learning to serve. The world teaches men to lead. God teaches men to serve.

Elijah was one-of-a-kind – intrepid, resolute and vehement. The wildest colts make the best horses when tamed! We shall see the hand of God bringing this strong man under His control.

Elijah is a man of similar passions to us! (James 5:17) This is a comforting thought. Like all people who are used by God, Elijah had to learn to serve. He had to learn to tread the path of discipline and know the discipline of the Father. God's work isn't the work of a moment, but of a lifetime. It is often done quietly. There is no quick way to prepare for Christian ministry. There are no shortcuts to Christlikeness. The price never comes down. It has been said that bargain hunters only ever get remnants! It takes time and testing, training and discipline to make a man/woman that God can use.

It means resolutely rejecting the claims of self-indulgence and self-pity and always seeking the fullness of God and His control. This is a lifelong process. God has a person for every task and God's people are prepared in secret and revealed in crisis!

Examples are Joseph, Moses, David and John the Baptist. All spent years in obscurity learning obedience, learning patience and learning to serve. ***"When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him."*** (Is. 59:19 KJV)

Elijah's long years of preparation

The greater the load of spiritual responsibility, the greater the tempering of the instrument that is needed. So it was with Elijah – long years in obscurity, learning obedience, learning patience and learning to serve.

If you take an iron bar and hammer it into horseshoes you double the value of the bar.

If you take the same bar and by labour and care make it into needles its value increases x 100.

If you take the same bar and make it into fine balance springs for watches, its value increases x 1000.

The times in which Elijah lived demanded a man of strong will who was decisive, active and fearless. Self-discipline is part of the key to victorious living.

So throughout our lives we are learning to serve and training others to serve.

Before Ahab, Elijah was stern and fearless. On Carmel Elijah was bold and challenging. He was decisive himself and demanded decision of the people. He commanded retribution against the false prophets. So part of the time Elijah was resolute and masterful. He dominated the situation. He was a goal-conscious man.

Elijah is one of the great characters of the Old Testament. He arrives on the scene with no warning at all – a rough-hewn man – roughly clothed. Without any formality he confronts the wicked King Ahab with speech that is brief, stern and rather impolite.

We too are called to serve God in our generation. We are to keep our eyes on the outworking of God's purposes – a maze of events – changing worldviews, political, economic and social surges and declines etc. we are people "of like passions" to Elijah from Gilead.

As Elijah bursts on the scene so dramatically he demonstrates a great principle in the work of God.

This principle is expressed in two commands to Elijah:

17:3 ***"hide yourself"***

18:1 ***"show yourself"***

This is the divine order of things. First there must be a period of withdrawal and then a period of service. First there must be a period of seclusion and then a period of publicity.

Have we sometimes failed to accomplish much for God because we have never allowed ourselves to be "hidden" by God?

- **A word about Tishbe in Gilead**

Elijah was brought up in an obscure village called Tishbe in Gilead. He was no aristocrat. He wasn't part of the wise or the mighty in the land. He never went to the seats of learning. He never went down the corridors of power. He never experienced the luxury of kings' palaces or the soft clothing of materialism and wealth. He was brought up in the rugged hills of Gilead – in the solitude of the forest and the haunts of wild animals. He learned to serve as a shepherd boy inured to hardship and able to endure long periods of physical fatigue with little food. He may have been tall, muscular and sinewy for he could outrun horses! God provided Elijah with a ready-made school to toughen him up. Is there a correlation between toughness of body and toughness of character? What about the relationship of fitness of body and mind to spiritual fitness?

Spiritual diagnosis of the nation and the man Elijah

A little more than 50 years had passed since the glory of Solomon's reign. Some alive probably remembered the prosperity and prestige of that reign. It was followed by 50 years of rapid spiritual decline in the Northern Kingdom. The people and the king followed the policy of Jeroboam – a policy of idolatry. (1 Kings 16:26)

Jeroboam was followed by his son Omri and then Omri's son Ahab. In Ahab's time Jericho had been built in defiance of God's command. Now the People of God were divided, weak, corrupt, impoverished and unrepentant. Ahab did more to provoke God than any king before him.

At this point Elijah appeared out of the hills before King Ahab and said, ***"There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word!"*** (17:1)

Was this a weather forecast? It was much more than a weather forecast. It was a spiritual diagnosis of the nation. In Deut. 28:1 God says to His people, ***"If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all His commands ... then all these blessings will come upon you"***

It is clear that blessing is a consequence of obedience. Again in Deut. 28:15 God says, ***“If you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all His commands ... all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.”*** Again we can see the clear connection between disobedience and cursing!

This is a key Old Testament concept. In Deut. 27 a huge visual aid was set up by God. Mount Ebal was identified with curses and Mount Gerizim was identified with blessing. There was an inescapable choice to be made. Choose life or death. Choose blessing or cursing. How do we do this? It is by choosing obedience or disobedience. Yet on Mount Ebal an altar was to be built! Even where sin abounds grace abounds much more. (Rom. 5:20)

So curses come upon a disobedient people. Elijah wasn't a weather forecaster, but a prophet! He stated the spiritual diagnosis of Ahab and his people. The proof was that they would suffer a drought. ***“The Lord will strike you with scorching heat and drought The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron and the Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder.”***

The proof of disobedience would be the curse of drought. The partition of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms was disastrous. There was perpetual skirmishing, the constant threat of aggression and the introduction of idol worship. Under Jezebel, hordes of idolatrous priests had invaded the land to plant their pagan rites. The priests of God were killed and gross spiritual darkness covered the land. At such a time as this God's command came to Elijah. God matched His man to the conditions of the land.

How do we meet current conditions? Are we ordinary? Are we earnest? What kind of man was Elijah? The Evil One was making a human tool under the influence of the priests of Ba'al with their hideous and cruel rights to work even amongst God's People in order to wipe out the true worship of God.

God was making an instrument to withstand the forces of evil, to rebuke wickedness in high places and to carry out judgement. He was making a prophet of fire! ***“When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.”*** (Is. 59:19 KJV)

- **Elijah was a person just like us** (James 5:17)

Jezebel was a terrible woman with the savage fury of a tigress. The devil got hold of her and moulded her temperament to further his purposes and defend his interests. She was strong, domineering, self-willed. She ruled the king, the priests of Ba'al and everyone else. She had an influence for evil long after Ahab died. She was an outsider, tutored in and committed to idolatrous cults. She crushed all in her path – a despotic, ruthless tyrant. Her name became synonymous with rotten apostasy.

She was brought up in the luxury and wealth of the court of Tyre and Sidon. She was fanatically devoted to the rites of Ba'al worship – child sacrifice and the sexual promiscuity of the fertility cults. She had a mission when she came to Israel. Her opponent was Elijah who was just like us!

God matches His people to His tasks.

The times required an active, fearless, intrepid person with great force of character – someone as dedicated to God as Jezebel was to the Devil. The need was for God's man to confront the Devil's tool. Such a man must be filled with the Spirit and trained and tempered by that Spirit.

Notice how ordinary Elijah was. He didn't have a privileged upbringing, he learned to endure hardship. (2 Tim. 2:3)

- **He developed an intense earnestness for God** in the solitary hills of Gilead. He says, ***“I was very jealous for the Lord of hosts.”***

It was this intensity that gave him a cutting-edge in his speech. It stamped his character and was demonstrated in all his actions.

- **He had a profound understanding of the Scriptures**

He knew of the covenant relationship between God and His people. He had a sense of God's history, God actively controlling events. He had a jealous concern for God glory as he watched the spiritual and moral decline of his nation. He prayed! In the light of the Scriptures – i.e. Deut. 11:13-17

- **He prayed earnestly that it might not rain.**

He prayed earnestly that God would vindicate Himself in judgement and reveal Himself to be the true and living God. He prayed that God would be true to His promises. He prayed for calamity on his people – a blasting of national prosperity, personal well-being down the drain, five-year plans destroyed; so that people would turn from the worship of gods of their own hands and return to the true and living God – the Fountain of Life.

This was Elijah being stern and fearless before Ahab – bold and challenging – decisive himself and demanding decisiveness from others.

The Lesson for our Day

People today are turning for salvation from their problems to the gods of materialism, consumerism, hedonism or modernity. There is so much social injustice and economic disorder – so many tensions and so much antagonism between people as well as mistrust between nations and peoples. But the world was not built on this foundation! Modernity or “the market” will not solve these issues. Man is a spiritual being, **“Man does not live by bread alone”**.

Today more than ever we need Elijah's goal consciousness – **“this one thing I do!”** We need those who are resolute. It is important to alleviate malnutrition, to meet the needs of refugees, to deal with the problems of poverty, disease and illiteracy, but it is not enough. The root cause is idolatry!

People need food, improved agriculture and improved medical care. People need employment. The messenger of Christ must go with the cup of cold water in one hand and the Gospel in the other. But we need to realise that all the money and all the effort to help those in dire need is but to betray them if we give them the impression that materialism alone can satisfy. **“It is not by bread alone.”** (Mt. 4:4)

To serve with only the spirit of humanism is to betray them. We have the example of Jesus. He met human need and He made people whole! Man's true predicament includes his sin and his idolatry. Without reconciliation to God he will never have well-being in himself or between himself and others. Our hope is in God alone and to us is committed the Gospel of reconciliation.

Elijah's Spiritual Secret

The secret is in 17:1, **“As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand (serve).”** Elijah is saying, “The Lord is my God.” He was standing before King Ahab, but he stood in the presence of God and he knew it. God's presence was more real to him than that of the earthly man.

John Bunyan said, **“Fear God and you will then have nothing else to fear!”**

We are not told of Ahab's response to Elijah. It was a matter of indifference to him. God had spoken! Elijah was supremely conscious of the call and commission of God as he stood before Ahab and spoke God's word of judgement. It looked as if God had died and Ba'al had taken over! But Elijah knew the truth, **“As the Lord lives”** This was Elijah's secret! He believed the promises of God and his faith was nurtured by obedience and prayer.

See Deut. 31:6, **“Do not be afraid or terrified because of them for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.”**

The grace of God is never fully known until it is fully tested. If our spirit is willing, we will be kept by the power of God in the day of testing and trial. The Lord lives today. History is under His control and all things are moving towards His supreme purpose in our Lord Jesus Christ that at the climax of history all the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

Spiritual Apprenticeship

The Lord doesn't allow Elijah to stay with God's People to help them in their plight and to help others in their spiritual need. The Lord knows the condition of His People. He knows the cause of it and He knows the cure of it!

Why isn't Elijah sent to them straight away? He could explain about the necessity of repentance and help them recover – but no! God's principle requires a period of apprenticeship for His workers. The principle of withdrawal for training was imposed by God.

"Hide yourself." (v. 3) wasn't a question of Elijah's will or choice. God ordered him to hide. Why? Perhaps the Lord knew how tough it was going to be! Even after his period of training, he still suffered a huge failure. It is possible that the secret police of Ahab were searching everywhere for him. He needed a bolthole. The Lord is very gracious and protective.

The emphasis of Scripture is not that Elijah had to hide from danger but that there were lessons he needed to learn in trusting and in obeying.

There are three important stories in chapter 17.

- a) **Elijah fed by the ravens at the Brook Cherith** (v. 2-7)
- b) **Elijah fed by the widow of Zarephath** (v. 8-17)
- c) **Elijah raising to life the widow's son** (v. 17-24)

Many a man of great promise didn't accomplish much for God because he never allowed himself to be hidden by God. How the flesh rebels against this hiding – this death to self! But this hiding, distilling of the energies of the flesh in the presence of the Holy One, is essential for the person God uses and for all who would learn to serve.

Moses was in the desert of Sinai 40 years until all that was of the flesh and all confidence in self had withered. Then God spoke, **"Now come, I will send you ..."** (Ex. 3:10)

Paul spent 2 years in Arabia and further hidden years in Tarsus until his great abilities, his fine intellect, his strong will that was vehement and practical had learned to take the second place. He learned how to serve under gentle Barnabas. He had lost all confidence in the flesh.

Jesus had 30 years of 'silence' in Nazareth. These years of faithful lowly service caused the Father to give testimony, **"This is My beloved son"** – 30 years of preparation for 3½ years of ministry! We are always in such a hurry! There is no shortcut to holiness and fitness for service.

Elijah was a tempestuous man with an impatient spirit. It must have been a hard lesson! God's disciplines and 'schools' are always exactly suited to our needs. Elijah was fearless before King Ahab, but he was to sit by a small brook out of sight of man till his hastiness was tempered and his irritability tamed.

Moses' irritability and impatience cost him his entry into the Land of Promise. The discipline of waiting is needed by us all, but especially by those of a hasty, active, energetic disposition. Those with a great zeal for God, who are always attempting great things for God, need to be quieted in spirit as they come under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Apprenticeship in the Word of God

In the first two stories we find the first major lesson Elijah had to learn:

God's would-be servants must learn that the Word of God is to be wholly relied on.

We learn this lesson through obedience. We discover it works and the result is a growing confidence.

- a) **Elijah fed by the ravens at the Brook Cherith** (v. 2-7)

"Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Brook Cherith." (v. 3)

Elijah did exactly that (v. 5). It wasn't very sensible as there was much less rain east of Jordan. Ravens are scavenging birds. Their whole energy is spent on feeding themselves. It is amazing that they should care for Elijah! The water supply was unfailing until it began to fail.

The mark of a servant of God is patience, long-suffering and endurance holding him/her steady in a work for God and forbearing with others.

"As servants of God we commend ourselves through great endurance and in much patience."
(2 Cor. 6:4)

"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience." (2 Cor. 12:12)

"The testing of your faith produces patience, steadfastness" (James 1:3)

Jesus is the finest example of this:

He demonstrated intense zeal for His Father's glory.

He was decisive, active, always in control of every situation.

He was energetic in action – cleansing the Temple.

He was stern in judgement – ***"Woe to you in Bethsaida ..."*** (Lk. 10:13)

Yet He was tender and compassionate. ***"Jerusalem, Jerusalem how often would I ... but you would not!"*** (Lk. 13:34)

Jesus was long-suffering with His disciples, ***"Have I been such a long time with you and yet you don't know Me?"*** (Jn. 14:19)

Some even thought Jesus was Elijah come back again!

He was tremendously active and sometimes had no time to rest or eat.

Yet He was always Master:

- + ready to meet every need
- + always patient with individuals
- + methodical and patient with crowds
- + never deterred by danger
- + tenacious in purpose – to the Cross
- + calm in the face of storms
- + poised and majestic in the midst of a mob in Gethsemane
- + quiet, dignified and regal before Herod and Pilate

He was tested in all points as we are, but without sin. (Heb. 4:15) He accepted the discipline of trials from the loving hand of His Father and learned obedience from the things He suffered. (Heb. 5:8)

As Christian workers, do we need discipline – especially the discipline of patience? Patience is one of the marks of an apostle (a sent-one). If we shun discipline at the hand of God, we won't proceed far in learning to serve. Discipline is God's way of pruning for fruit – more fruit, much fruit, fruit that abides!

Self-discipline is especially needed in the middle years (30-60) when the imposed discipline of others is relaxed. We should welcome discipline if we mean business with God.

Our personality and temperament is a gift from God. Do we yield to His Spirit and invest it for His glory? Although it is God-given, it must be disciplined to have the weak points strengthened. We need to cultivate virtue and add it to ourselves – 2 Pet. 1:5-7.

Key thought: the person who is to occupy a high place before men must take a low place before God!

We should thank God if He suddenly moves us from a ministry where we are at the centre of activity, where we begin to think we are essential and puts us in some quiet spot. It is our 'Cherith' – the place where we wait on God, learn to be still, learn that the work is His and the government is upon His shoulders and man is nothing. The man who would stand on Carmel and wield the Sword of the Spirit must first wait on God in some hidden Cherith – in the secret place of the Most High.

Did Elijah feel let down? Did he panic that what had touched others might be beginning to touch him? Often God's people are left to sit by a drying brook in the place of God's appointment – perhaps they are experiencing ebbing strength for the work, perhaps failing health or loss of supplies and helpers. Does such a circumstance mean we are forsaken or have missed God's leading? No! He means to teach us that His Word is to be more precious to us than His gifts or even our work for Him. We need to learn to be abased as well as to abound. We need to turn from failing supplies to a never failing Saviour. He must be more to us than anything He gives.

God hasn't promised to supply or care for us in our particular way. If we are to learn to serve, we must not trust in some method or some special person. Our trust must be in God Himself. If we are to become wholly dependent on God, we must become independent of men, of methods and of means. Cherith is the place where we learn to wait on God, to be still and know that He is God, that the work is His and the government is upon His shoulders. This is the lesson taught to all who would serve Him.

The Word of God proved reliable! Elijah was ready to move when God directed – abandoning a spot of blessing.

b) Elijah fed by the widow of Zarephath (v. 8-17)

Zarephath was near Sidon. The name means 'place of smelting furnaces'.

"Go at once to Zarephath ..." (v. 9)

"So he went to Zarephath ..." (v. 10)

God has said that a widow would take care of him. Widows were notoriously poor. This one was severely malnourished with nothing left to eat. She was an unbelieving foreigner! She was someone who could not share because she had nothing to give and who probably wouldn't give it to a foreigner of a different religion!

Tyre and Sidon were the very heart of the Ba'al worship being promoted in Israel. This was Jezebel's territory. This made no sense at all! Elijah had to cross over 100 miles of hostile territory where everyone was blaming him for the drought and all their troubles – he was "the troubler of Israel".

But the Word of God proved reliable. Elijah went from the cool and quiet of Cherith into the furnace of smelting – to be fitted for service – to be tempered in the furnace! May God place us in the fire now! – 1 Cor. 3.

Elijah's response? *"He arose and went."* (v. 10) To do what God says, is to verify the word God speaks. Elijah would never have chosen Zarephath – the HQ of Jezebel. But he was learning that God can use weak people and weak things – often despised by men whose orthodoxy and spirituality are in doubt. God uses the weak to confront the mighty!

So let us not presume to anticipate what God must do. Let us not argue with God about His methods and ways let us say, "Even so, Father, for it seems good in Your sight."

The path of a servant is the path of obedience. Learning to serve is learning to obey. It is not service for Jesus but submissive service to Jesus – yielding to His yoke and learning of Him.

So Zarephath was for Elijah:

- + the discipline of a further trial
- + the discipline of a refiner's fire
- + the discipline of a most unpromising situation

Apprenticeship in Prayer

c) Elijah raising to life the widow's son (v. 17-24)

This third story brings a lesson about how to handle a crisis. It was a crisis because there was no previous word from God to prepare Elijah.

The son of the widow died. (v. 17) What was Elijah to do about a dead child! There was no warning from God, no previous precedent, no one else had ever been raised from the dead! This was something new!

Earlier Elijah had been told that the ravens would feed him – a miracle.

He had been told that the widow would feed him – a miracle.

But now there is nothing to prepare him. What is he to do?

We often face unheralded crises! Usually we have some preparatory exercises of grace in God's dealings with us. These test and strengthen us and we grow until we are ready for the big one – a crisis!

The initial tests demonstrated that God was trustworthy. Elijah had learned to trust God. Now he learns to turn that trust into prayer.

+ The woman's reaction (v. 18)

She doesn't treat the death of her son as accidental, but as part of her relationship with God. ***"What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my son and kill my son?"*** She thought her son had died because of his mother's sin!

+ Elijah's reaction (v. 19)

Elijah perceives that somehow God is involved and his prayer confirms the intuitive reaction of the sorrowing widow, ***"Oh Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?"*** (v. 20)

He doesn't contradict her intuitive theology, but rather confirms it! God is in this tragedy. But Elijah believes that the God who does all things, can do all things, so that in a crisis you can bring that crisis to Almighty God.

Most people have an intuitive theology like the widow. In a crisis – such as the death of someone close – their reaction is, "Oh God, why did you do this to me?" We blame God or we think He is punishing us. We need to encourage people that God is in the situation and to ask questions. If we can't blame God or ask questions, then neither can we trust Him. If He isn't with us in our tragedies, when is He with us?

The Bible has a name for an absentee God who is never around when you need him. He is called Ba'al – see 1 Kings 18. Note Elijah mocking (18:27). The God of the Bible is never an absentee God. Never try to make excuses for our Great God in the face of tragedy. Show how trustworthy He is!

Elijah's God is the God of the impossible. He is the God who is ultimately in control of all things. He is the Sovereign Lord! We show our trust in Him by means of prayer. We read in verse 22, ***"The Lord heard Elijah's cry!"*** What an amazing turn around this is! Elijah had been listening to the voice of God and he had been obeying and now God listens to Elijah and God does what he asks!

Apprenticeship as to the Cost of Power

Elijah's trust in God rested on a rising demonstration and realisation of the power of God. But with this rising expectation of power, there was a rising realisation of the personal cost of using God's power. We can't experience the power of God without paying the price!

Look at the first test. (v. 3) *“Hide at the brook east of Jordan”*. But this was home. This was in Gilead! So this first test is easy. Elijah may well have thought, “Well, I don’t understand about the ravens, but I will be near home and can get by if the worst comes to the worst!”

So the testing started gently. He obeyed and came face-to-face with the power of God. The ravens brought him fresh bread and meat every morning and evening. (v. 6) So Elijah learned God’s power over circumstances, over things and over nature. He learned that the natural creation is in the hands of God and subject to His power.

Look at the second test. (v. 8-17) This was tougher – into the furnace! Elijah had to leave his land and go to a foreign land. Even worse! He had to go into the heart of the enemy stronghold. He had to go to Zarephath in Sidon. Jezebel, Ahab’s domineering wife, was a Princess of Sidon. Her father, EthBa’al was king of the Sidonians. Zarephath is about 6 miles south of Sidon. It is still there today.

The cost deepens! Go into the heart of the enemy’s stronghold and learn more of the power of God! When Elijah obeys, he learns of that power – power over all things – even over the hearts and minds of people.

When Elijah came to Zarephath and approached the widow, she didn’t say, “Oh good, there you are, I have been expecting you. God told me you were coming!” No! She must have been shocked! Yet she was amazingly kind getting him water in a time of drought and feeding him in a time of famine.

It is an awesome thing to see the power of God bending the hearts and minds of people who, all unknowingly, do His perfect will! So Elijah remained there in the heart of enemy country. God’s power extends to counter all the workings of the enemy. By his obedience Elijah took a greater risk and paid a higher price, but in so doing he learned of a greater power. He learned of the power of God in respect of resources (oil and flour), in respect of people – agents (the woman looked after him) and in respect of opposition and hostility. Jezebel never found him!

Many people don’t like moving from place to place. Their response is, “Don’t ask me to move from my ‘Cherith’. I feel secure here and God has blessed me here. If I have to move, please not to Zarephath! That’s the furnace! If I go there I will have a nervous breakdown! I prefer the ravens’ miraculous supply to a widow’s pittance. One is so spiritual and the other so mundane. It won’t impress my church back home!”

But Elijah was a man under authority, so he went into the refiner’s fire. Why was this necessary? Probably to deal with some of Elijah’s hidden prejudices such as depending on a Gentile woman, going into the heart of idolatry and the fear of the secret police.

God is Sovereign in His plans and in His power to execute His purposes. In our immaturity we often react like Naaman did! (2 Kings 5:11)

We should never try and anticipate what God will do! Notice the progression:

- + from the pastoral peace of Jordan to confronting Ahab
- + from the excitement of challenging Ahab to the Brook at Cherith
- + from the quiet of Cherith to the Crucible of Zarephath

God uses all of these to mould Elijah into the servant He can use.

Look at the third test – the toughest of all! Elijah had to learn that God’s power extends into the spiritual realm – the realm of death and life. The widow’s son dies. Elijah takes that poor, cold, dead body up into his own room and lays him down on his own bed. (v. 19-21)

“Then he stretched himself on the boy three times.” (NIV) This is a poor translation. It might be true if Elijah was very small or the boy was very tall. A better translation of the Hebrew is

“measured himself”. It is a reflexive form. “He accepted for himself the measurements of the child” – i.e. it was a costly identification with the need he had to meet.

It was a bit macabre to lie on a dead body! Old Testament law was very specific. There was great contamination with any sort of contact with the dead.

But Elijah identified himself with the place of need – with the place of death – with the place of spiritual contamination!

There was a great price in identifying with the needy. But Elijah learned a new lesson. He learned about the power of God! ***“The boy’s life returned to him.”*** This was resurrection power – spiritual power bringing life not just to the boy, but new life to the widow’s heart!

This speaks much of the Cross and our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.

What is God trying to do in all this? He wants us to become people He can use. Even more importantly – He is conforming us to the image of His Son so that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in His kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:7)

Alexander Whyte wrote, ***“We cease to wonder so much at the care God takes of us and the care He lays out on us when we consider that it is the only work of His hands that will last for ever! All else we possess or pursue will fade and perish. Our moral character alone will survive!”***

God is seeking to bring many sons to glory – those who have been conformed to the image of Christ and who will show forth His glory in the ages to come. (Heb. 2:10)

In conclusion:

- The would-be servant of God is always called to live in the secret place so that he or she may be equipped for the public place.
- How we live for God tomorrow in terms of spiritual power and anointing depends on how we obey God today.
- God’s power is always totally sufficient but the way to that power is a costly way.
- These stories in chapter 17 emphasise trust and obedience. Elijah only did one thing – he prayed.
- Effective prayer sprang out of trust and the trust grew out of obedience.
- This is the key to spiritual power.