

LESSONS FOR A QUARANTINED CHURCH - Part six

Sunday, May 10th, 2020 - 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2030

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WHEN FAITH LACKS EVIDENCE

1 Kings 18:41-46 - "And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." [42] So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. [43] And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times. [44] And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'" [45] And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. [46] And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel."

There are texts where the sermon just jumps out at you. "Go look for rain!" "I did" "Go look again!" I did. There is nothing." "Then go look again!" Victory is for those who will not take no for an answer. The text says it all. **Faith standing firm in the face of delay. Faith standing firm in the face of doubt. Faith standing firm in the face of circumstance. Holding on to the promise of God. That's what this story is all about!**

Let's look back at the context of this great passage:

1 Kings 18:1-6 - "After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." [2] So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. [3] And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, [4] and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) [5] And Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." [6] So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself."

The land has been buried in dust for three years. Obadiah is trying desperately to find enough water to keep a few of the animals alive. Food supplies are drying up. The lakes and streams and ponds are nothing but dust. The sand and dust fill the eyes and lungs.

The land was filled with sceptics about the future. Doubt and pessimism filled the land. The mood was ugly. It was not the best time to go around predicting cloud-bursts. The attitude of Elijah's servant was typical - "There's nothing. There never will be anything! Let's not kid ourselves about future rain."

The passage is full of lessons for us:

1) **FAITH NEVER GROWS WHEN TIMES ARE EASY**

Go through your entire Bible and you'll find that when the whole land is full of negative reports, God will raise up a man of faith. He looks for people who are more influenced by the power of His Word than the spirit of the age.

Faith will always be bombarded by pessimistic reports. Faith will always be challenged by the downward pull of the crowd.

"There's nothing!" You'll face it every day of your life.

- a) ***There's a challenge here for people who have not yet reached middle age*** - you'll hear it every day in high school, college, and university - "The Bible is a collection of myths." "Religion is just a crutch." "There is no God except the one that exists in your own mind."

The whole system is designed to teach you that there is nothing out there to make your future except you. That you must trust solely in yourself. That you can make up your own rules as you go along. This world wants you to live life ignoring God.

Do you know how to stand up against that? Are you going to accept that as your final answer? Do you know who to stand against the tide? Do you know how to satisfy your own heart and "give a reason for the hope that is in you?"

The church is getting desperate for a rising generation who can carry their own weight for Jesus in this world. Keep your hope in the Lord and send the experts back to the blackboard with their empty theories.

- b) ***There are always going to be particular times of spiritual challenge and difficulty.*** Unless you are just a bleary eyed dreamer, or perhaps a brand new babe in Christ, you will know what I mean when I say ***there are times in life - just like the weather in our text - when the whole universe seems to shout that there is no hope for rain in the drought.***

You've been praying for a situation to get better and it's getting worse. You've been thirsty for a fresh cloud-burst of spiritual refreshing and you've been choking down nothing but dust.

In short, it just doesn't feel like high tide in our walk with God. You see other people with their glowing stories of faith and power and while you try to fake it on the outside, you feel more ***out of season*** than ***in season*** in your own soul.

Elijah could identify with all of that. This day had started out in a pretty dynamic way for him. He had just come off of the top of Mount Carmel. ***The fire had just fallen. The false prophets had been eliminated. His prayers had been answered instantly - no waiting, no lack of evidence!***

Everything had been so decisive, so obvious, so immediate.

But now it's all so different. Now Elijah stands all alone. If you're going to follow Jesus, there are times you have to stand all alone in this world. Nobody even seems to remember the victory on the mountain.

Nobody shares Elijah's conviction or his confidence. Everybody's thinking in the opposite direction. ***If Elijah is going to stand up for God he's going to have to do it all alone.***

And so he prays - ***just like he did on the mountain.*** Only nothing happens. So he prays again. Nothing happens. So he prays again, And nothing happens. So he prays yet again. And nothing happens. So he prays again. And nothing happens. So he prays again. And nothing happens. Every time he prays he gets the same response - ***"Nothing!"***

And what I want to leave you with all my heart today is it's what you do at that point that makes or breaks you spiritually! There's a great lesson in these verses. That leads into the second point:

2) **SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE BEFORE YOU SEE THE EVIDENCE**

Everyone would believe God after the rain fell. They'd all praise and trust him once the gullies were gushing with cool, clear water. They'd all trust God once He gave them exactly what they asked for. But the Bible says ***faith is the "evidence of things not seen."***

I know that many times, life can be difficult. I'm just like you. I have lots of days when I'd be perfectly happy to grow a beard, move to San Francisco and sell real estate.

But there's something growing inside me that just loves the fibre of this man Elijah - ***"You go look at the sky for rain!" "But there is no rain." "Then go look again because God said He'd send rain and by george, it's going to rain!"***

No, this is not just some kind of wishful thinking or positive confession. Faith isn't make believe or pretending. There's far too much pretending in the church already. That isn't what faith is all about. The important point in this account we're studying is that ***God told Elijah He'd send rain!*** Elijah isn't dreaming. He's not running around screaming "It's raining! It's raining" when he knows it isn't. The power isn't in Elijah's ***words*** but in God's ***promise!***

I love this man. He just keeps relying on God's word. He just stays steady when everyone else gives up. He just keeps praying and trusting and looking for that promised rain! I love it!

That is never easy to do. There is many times - and they come to all of us - when it's easier to doubt God than to keep believing. It's easier to complain and grumble than to keep believing. The person who has to have the answer ***before*** he rejoices in the Lord is big trouble. Drought can be long and drought can be hard. And drought can be stubborn.

If you just live your life by feelings and emotions and blessings you'll quit and go home. Continue to look to God and keep your life anchored in His sure promise. There's no magic. ***Just stay there until the rains come!*** Refuse afterthoughts. And refuse to budge.

3) THIS IS THE PATTERN IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

- a) **Acts 27:17-27** - "After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. [18] Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. [19] And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. [20] When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned." [21] "Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. [22] Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. [23] For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, [24] and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' [25] So take heart, men, *for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.*"

Everyone is filled with panic. Every wave says all is lost. There is nothing bright to hold on to in this situation. ***Except*** - except that Paul has a promise from the Lord that they will be saved.

This is a day when such people are sorely needed in the body of Christ. ***We need people who have a good word of hope in the Lord.*** We need people who don't lose their head when everyone else is.

- b) **Psalms 112:6-7** - "For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. [7] He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD."

Evil days do come. This psalmist lives in a real world. But he still chooses to believe in the goodness of the Lord - ***even when bad times come!*** This gives strength and steadfastness to his life. It still works that way today.

3) HOW THE NEW TESTAMENT TREATS OUR TEXT TODAY

Evidently, the New Testament writers felt our account of Elijah and his prayer for rain was so important and so relevant, it is brought right before the whole church as an important reminder about prayer and faith:

James 5:16-17 - "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. [17] Elijah was a man with a

nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.”

The Bible tells us several things about Elijah and his prayer for rain:

- a) **He was more jealous for God’s glory than anything else.** That’s why he prayed that it **wouldn’t** rain for three and a half years. The people were worshipping idols! Elijah couldn’t stand it. God’s glory mattered to Elijah more than all the lost sheep, cattle, crops and revenue - all of the heartache and agony of drought.

No wonder God’s answered his prayer. He was a **righteous man** in the truest sense! **What is the gut level, dominating desire and concern of your life?** You can’t fake faith. You can’t muster it up as the last minute when you face some huge trial. Faith lives and thrives in the soul that anchors all of life in a deep love for the glory of God! You can’t pray any higher than you live.

- b) **Elijah was a man who prayed with passion.** That’s James point in **5:16-17**. It’s the effectual **fervent** prayer of a righteous man that gets results. Elijah prayed **seven times - with his head between his knees**. I think he was literally doubled over with the weight of his prayer!

How do you measure passion in prayer? Volume? Probably not. I think there are **two key ingredients**: First, the **willingness to put other things aside to pray**. And second, **the refusal to be deterred from prayer**.

- c) **Elijah was a man just like you and I.** James anticipates my objection - **“Sure, Elijah got answers to his prayer. He also raised the dead back to life a couple of times. He was fed by ravens. He toppled kingdoms. He called fire down from heaven twice. BUT I’M NOT ELIJAH!”**

Don’t miss James’ point! Elijah was a man of like passions just like you! Notice that phrase **“a man of like passions.”** You don’t have to be a special person to do what I’m talking about. You don’t have to be a perfect person to expect God to work when you pray, though the Devil will tell you otherwise every time you bend your knee. But you do have to **stick with it!** No wonder the Bible says, **“Don’t throw away your confidence, for in keeping it there is great reward!”**

Underline just those three little words - **“...in keeping it...”** You have to **keep** your confidence in the Lord. Sometimes you have to believe **before** you see. Stay with it.