

Elijah's Strange Prayer

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Last week we studied the story in Acts 12, recounting the angel awakening Peter, asleep in prison, preparing him for deliverance. What did the angel do to wake him up? He “smote” Peter to break him from his slumber, didn’t he. But this was an act of mercy, wasn’t it. We wonder: When you get to heaven, will you complain if God “smote” you to wake you up and get ready to be delivered? The study today has a lesson in common with that of last week. It concerns a very strange prayer offered by the prophet Elijah. The question we must ponder is, “Are we willing to pray the prayer of Elijah?”

The prophet Elijah was deeply troubled, and was led to pray a very strange prayer, one of the strangest in the Bible. Elijah lived about 8 centuries before Christ. Israel had occupied Canaan now for some six centuries, and it had been more than a century since the kingdom had split into two parts, Israel to the north and Judah to the south.

The nation to which Elijah ministered, the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital of Samaria, had fallen into great apostasy. None of her kings is identified in the Bible as being “good,” and almost all successions by rulers was accomplished by violence. When the kingdoms had separated one from the other, in order to keep the nation from being led back to Judah through the worship of Jehovah at His temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam had set up two golden calves; one in Dan (in the north) and the other in Beersheba (to the south). The roots of the northern kingdom were set in the soil of idolatry.

How this must have grieved the heart of Elijah, God’s messenger! He was well aware that the great head of their race, Abraham, had been called from Ur of the Chaldees to cross the Euphrates River and settle as the pilgrim of Palestine for the very purpose of leaving the false worship of idols and establishing the worship of the Creator God. Had not Joshua stated, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Your fathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac.’” Joshua 24:2, 3.

As the nation of Israel stood poised to enter Canaan, Joshua continued, “Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!” Joshua 24:14.

Joshua was referring to the fact that while in Egypt, Israel had been exposed to and corrupted by the evil influence of the Egyptian systems of worship. Hardly had they escaped from that land, through the mighty miracles of Jehovah, but they transgressed at the foot of Mt. Sinai, from whose lofty heights the Lord had spoken and written His sacred law, the first precept of which was, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Their journey from Egypt was marred by the transgression of worshiping the golden calf at Sinai, and by the tragic misstep into idolatry at Baal Peor just before they entered Canaan.

When they entered Canaan, they were instructed to diligently drive out the peoples whose cup of iniquity had been filled. They were told that if they became slack in this, the idolatrous practices of the native peoples would be a snare to them. Moses told them, “If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.” Numbers 33:55. Joshua said the surviving nations would “be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes.” Joshua 23:13.

Elijah knew all this, yet this is exactly what had happened! Not only did Israel copy the practices of idolatry modeled by the nations around her, but they exceeded them in the disgusting and revolting rituals involved in their worship of Baal and its counterparts. It broke the heart of Elijah to see “God’s people” trapped in false worship. The blessings that God had given them were credited to worthless idols that see and hear not. The rain that refreshed the farms and valleys, the sunlight that brought warmth and energy, the crops that grew and sustained life; all were esteemed to be the blessings of Baal and not from the hand of the Creator God Jehovah.

Elijah knew that if Israel continued to push God away and reject their Maker, the end would be disastrous. They were intrinsically no better than the Amorites who had lived here before. The very same rejection that visited upon the nations which had occupied this territory in times past would come upon Israel if she continued in this path of rebellion. The very thought of it brought tears to the face of Elijah. He joined a long list, a large fraternity of weeping prophets. Another time, we’ll take a look at that list. Something must be done! Now the history had reached the point that Israel had “done worse” than previous inhabitants. Elijah knew what that meant, and he didn’t want that to happen! Something had to be done!

Surely if clear instruction was given it would change the heart of the nation. Surely if clear warning could be given it would have the desired effect. Surely they would listen to God’s appeals! No, such was not to be the case. It was not as though God had left His people without messengers

who taught them the right way. Abraham, Moses and Joshua had given them clear instruction. Samuel's voice had been heard at the close of the time of the judges and the beginning of the kings. Nathan, Gad and others were ones used by God to teach and warn. Yet, the nation seemed steeled in opposition to God's ways.

Listen to the Bible's account of this sad history: "For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, Who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and they had feared other gods, and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. Also, the children of Israel secretly did against the LORD their God things that were not right, and they built for themselves high places in all their cities, from watchtower to fortified city.

"They set up for themselves sacred pillars and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree; and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations had done whom the LORD had carried away before them; and they did wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger, for they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, 'You shall not do this thing.'

"Yet the LORD testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, namely every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets.' Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God. And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made which their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them that they should not do like them." II Kings 17:7-15.

What could Elijah do? His beloved people had not listened to the voice of mercy and had turned the blessings into a curse, attributing God's wonderful gifts to the false deities. He was led to pray one of the strangest prayers you'll ever read.

Elijah was a man of prayer. We read about him praying over the dead form of the lad whose mother, the widow of Zaraphath, had fed him in his time of need. We read about Elijah praying for the fire on the top of Mt. Carmel and then for the rain. We read about Elijah praying when fleeing from the face of Jezebel. These prayers make perfect sense. We can understand them. But this other prayer; how strange! Yet there it is, recorded in the Bible. It was the only thing Elijah could think of doing to try to rescue his people Israel from doom and disaster.

We read about this strange prayer not in the Old Testament, but in the New. James tells us about it. When Elijah is introduced in the first book of Kings, he is pictured as striding boldly into the palace of Ahab with his announcement that there will be neither dew nor rain until he says so. Those are the first words we read about Elijah in I Kings 17. But from what James tells us, this was not the beginning of Elijah's ministry. He had been at work before his mission to Ahab; he had been busy praying a very strange prayer.

James is writing about the importance of prayer, especially for the sick, and then he illustrates his point by referring to the experience of Elijah and tells us something the Old Testament doesn't mention. James says, "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months." James 5:16, 17. Here's a prayer of Elijah that we don't read about in the Old Testament. "He prayed earnestly that it would not rain." He prayed that God would shut the heavens up and withhold the life-giving rain? Yes, that's what it says! Now, that's a strange prayer! Without rain--what? Drought, poverty, famine and death. Is that something you'd pray for, earnestly?

If one did not know the background and have appreciation for the history and the ways of our generous, merciful and just God, this prayer would seem out of place, inappropriate, incomprehensible. Why would you pray that it wouldn't rain anymore? Was it because Elijah hated the people, or "wished ill" upon them? No. He loved them, just as God loved them. If all you ever heard about Elijah was this prayer, it would be hard to understand. But then again, as we mentioned last week, if all you saw on a certain news clip was Lieutenant John Lambert slamming into a young man, sending him catapulting over the guard railing, his action would seem very strange and out of place too. If the story in Acts 12 that we studied last week, spoke only of an angel smiting Peter, without any additional information, it would be hard to grasp.

But we can know what was in Elijah's mind. Israel had been given the voice of mercy, but had not listened. The more the Lord blessed His people, the further they turned from Him and gave the credit to lifeless idols. The only thing Elijah could think of that might bring Israel back to the Lord since they no longer heard the voice of mercy, would be that they might listen if the Lord spoke to them by voice of judgment. And so, he prayed a very strange prayer: he prayed that it would no longer rain, in fact, that there would be neither dew nor rain. Perhaps if the blessings were removed, perhaps if the nation were smitten by this judgment, it might awaken her to a consciousness of the futility of depending on false supports like Baal and the danger of forsaking the worship of the Creator God. And so, Elijah was led to pray this very strange prayer.

It was a radical prayer, designed to break through the fog of deception dispelled by the arch deceiver, Satan. It was he who had led them to first forget and then despise the Lord as the Creator. We might wonder, How could they be so blind as to not recognize God's hand? How

could they deny the One Who had created and given all? It was He Who gave the rain and the sunlight, the crops and life. But they had rejected this truth and believed something false.

When you get right down to it, there is but one “truth,” and that is the existence and character of God. That is the essential truth of the universe. He not only speaks the truth, He is “the truth.” Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” John 14:6. Conversely, there is essentially only one lie, and that is the rejection of the existence, character and ways of God. It’s very interesting that according to the Bible, Satan, the father of falsehood, doesn’t lead people astray by means of “lies,” but by “the lie.” (Singular)

Notice what Paul wrote, speaking of those (including apostate Israel) who had chosen the worship of idols in place of the Creator God. “Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, (singular) and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever.” Romans 1:24, 25. That’s exactly what Elijah saw when he looked at his people Israel. According to Paul, there is only one “truth,” only one “lie.” All other systems of falsehood are branches, ramifications or subdivisions from the one main trunk. The Truth is God; the lie is the rejection and denial of Him.

Again Paul wrote concerning the coming of the “lawless one,” made in the image of Satan, “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason, God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” II Thessalonians 2:8-12.

Elijah’s strange prayer was designed to bring his people back into alignment with the truth of God and His ways and away from the lie of denying the Creator God. It was a prayer that said, “God, do what you have to do to wake us up. Do whatever it takes. If it means the removal of our treasured blessings so that we can come to our senses, do it.” It’s a challenging prayer, isn’t it. Usually we pray for His blessings to be poured out on us, don’t we? Are you ready to pray the prayer of Elijah? Are you ready to pray, “God don’t bless me, if that’s what it takes to save me”?

A father’s heart was broken when his son asked for his portion of the inheritance and then went into a far country. I’m sure that that father prayed for his wayward son. I can’t tell you that he prayed the prayer of Elijah, but it is true that when poverty struck and the son had run out of the money and was forced to feed pigs to survive (the very pit of circumstance for a Jewish boy), it

was then that he “came to himself” and the journey on the road home began. It was the spirit of Elijah’s prayer that saved him.

King Nebuchadnezzar fell into the trap of idolatry by ascribing the glory of his kingdom to himself. This, by the way, is the very essence of idolatry. The physical idols of wood and stone they had back then were only the visible symbols of self-deification. All idols are the works of “our hands.” They are something we’ve invented and made. With an idolatrous boast the king said, “Is not this great Babylon that I have built.” That was when God smote King Nebuchadnezzar in mercy and the king experienced a seven year hiatus from his throne, living like an animal. At this time Elijah was already translated, and not on this earth anymore, but the sentiment of his “strange prayer” was the basis of Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion! The Lord had to “smite” Nebuchadnezzar in a strange way to save him. And remember that last week we saw that the angel “smote” Peter to awaken him from his sleep and prepare him for deliverance.

What about us? Can the strange prayer of Elijah have application in our personal lives? It would take courage to pray, “Lord, do whatever You have to do to make me ready for heaven. Send me affliction, if that’s what it takes, that I may learn dependence on You.” Have you ever prayed that His blessings would be cut off, as Elijah prayed, that your spiritual life might prosper? This prayer has relevance to us corporately, to our church. “Lord, do whatever it takes to wake us up from our lethargy so we can be the people You want us to be.”

Certainly this prayer has relevance to our country, a country which, like Israel, was founded on principles of godliness and piety, a country acknowledged at the beginning to have been divinely led, yet today seems to be doing all she can to deny the existence and character of God. That is the essence of idolatry. We’ve come to the point where all our accomplishments we feel are our own doing. God is given no credit for the blessings He sends. The Voice of mercy has been speaking, but we haven’t been listening. We’ve ascribed “all this” to our own wisdom and have brazenly taken God out of the equation. Militant atheism such as was practiced by Egypt and France in the time of the Revolution has now found a home here in America.

You don’t need me to provide you with evidence of this. It is splashed across all forms of media. The mockery of religion and godly principles is the basis for much of the humor in today’s world. The denial of godly precepts is taken for granted by all forms of society. The idolatry of attributing His gifts to our efforts is common place. The rejection of God’s holy law is almost universally adopted. It may not be “Baal” today in the literal sense, but from heaven’s view we’re no different today than Israel of the past.

Are we courageous enough to pray the prayer of Elijah for our country? No country on earth has received the blessings of God as has this country. The Voice of mercy has been calling, but with little response. And now it seems that even the Voice of judgment has been denied. When our

country was smitten by Hurricane Katrina, and some dared to suggest that through this, within this, there might be the call of a rejected God, they were bashed by the press and ridiculed.

Last week one of our members shared a graph in which the frequency of earthquakes between the magnitudes of 6 and 8 are listed per year. It's an amazing study, gleaned from information from the United States Geological Society and can be found at the website:

<http://www.thehorizonproject.com/earthquakes.cfm>. The bottom line is that the frequency of earthquakes between the magnitudes of 6 and 8, deemed "deadly earthquakes" worldwide, tracked year by year from 1900 till now reveals a graph with a startling result. It is virtually an even line between the years 1900 and 2000, with a very few of those years experiencing more than 5 such deadly quakes. Beginning in the year 2000, the graph shoots up, with the number of such quakes being 20, 25 and even more than 35 in the year 2004.

Is God responding to an "Elijah prayer" in allowing these disasters to come, that we might turn to Him? What would it take for this country, for this world, to give God the glory due His name? What would it take for our church fall on the Rock and be converted and prepared for His coming? What would it take for us individually to yield completely to Him and surrender everything to God, which is the essence of true worship. Do you hear the prayer of Elijah today?