

Hide and Seek

I Kings 17:1-7

Introduction

Arthur Guterman penned the following words,

*First dentistry was painless;
Then bicycles were chainless,
And carriages were horseless,
And many laws enforceless.
Next, cookery was fireless,
Telegraphy wireless,
Cigars were nicotineless,
And coffee, caffeineless.*

*Soon oranges were seedless,
The putting green was weedless,
The college boy hatless,
The proper diet, fatless.
Now motor roads are dustless,
The latest steel is rustless,
Our tennis courts are sodless,
Our new religions, godless.*

You might be interested to know that Guterman wrote those words in 1936. And, if I can learn anything from this poem, it is that time has changed the comforts of mankind, but time has not improved the hearts of mankind.

In fact, the Bible has made it very clear that, as humanity rushes toward its climactic encounter with the final judgment, mankind will only grow more sinful, more perverse, and more proud. The King

James Version says, according to II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 13,

... men ... shall wax worse and worse ...

The truth is, Satan is not really very original, but he is very clever. He will take the same old lies and repackage them for every new generation. Every generation has to deal with Satan's deceptions and destruction.

I subscribe to a magazine entitled, *Christian History*. The latest copy included a few letters that had been uncovered by archaeologists. These letters were written during the days of the apostle Paul and talk of things that were occurring during that time.

- The first is a letter detailing a mystical experience that a man had with the god Asclepius. The Greeks considered Asclepius to be the god of healing. It is interesting that, in the first century, a man had a mystical experience with a god who did not exist.

For there was a feeling as if taking hold of him and of clearly perceiving that he himself had come; of being midway between sleeping and waking; of wanting to look, of struggling against him departing; my hair stood on end; my tears flowed in joy; the burden of understanding seemed light. What man is able to put these things into words?

- Here is a letter from a man to his wife who is evidently, pregnant and soon due.

Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious. I beg and entreat to you, take care of the little one and as soon as

we receive our pay, I will send it up to you. If by chance you deliver the child, if it is a boy, let him live; if it is a girl, cast her out.

I find it incredibly fascinating that the apostle Paul wrote without peppering his letters with these latest atrocities. As wicked and diabolical as Paul's day was, you will not find one shred of evidence in the New Testament that the church was supposed to stop everything and panic, or at least to change the priority of their mission.

Frankly, a great majority of the church today seems preoccupied with the darkness; preoccupied with the latest onslaught of depravity. I am afraid that our preoccupation with the problem has become a part of the problem.

Yes, we are surrounded by ecologists and activists and feminists and egotists and astrologers and liberal strategists and on and on . . . While we are to pray, we are not to panic. We are to penetrate; to permeate the darkness with light.

Has it ever occurred to you that a lighthouse has never gotten rid of a storm? Its purpose is to simply stand and shine through the storm. The darker the storm, the brighter the light appears, and the more desperately it is needed.

Ladies and gentlemen, the light that our generation desperately needs today, is the light that Paul's generation needed and Elijah's generation needed. David wrote, in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 118,

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

When the power failed in our home some time ago, it would have done little good for me to sit in the living room, with my family and friends around me, and rant and rail against the power company. It would not have accomplished anything to talk about how undependable they are and to call others to join me for a small group study on the failure of modern day power companies. What I needed to do was light a candle!

It is not enough to curse the darkness, you must introduce the light. Our world today, needs a candle for the kingdom. Our world needs a word from God.

Review

If there was ever a day when Satan's kingdom seemed to have the upper hand, it was Elijah's day. In

I Kings, chapter 16, we learned, in a previous discussion, that this was a generation of idolaters, immoral deviants, and those who would sacrifice children. At the same time, there was absolute silence on the part of God's prophets.

While Jezebel was personally paying the salaries of four hundred fifty false prophets, Obadiah, the leading prophet of his generation, was fearfully compromising his stand and hiding a hundred prophets in caves. In other words, the score was: Baal - 450 to Yahweh - 0. You might have concluded that the game was already over and that you might as well leave the stadium or cheer for the other side.

Look at the situation at the time. The nation was experiencing regular rainfall and enjoying bumper crops. The birds were chirping and the lakes were flowing. Maybe Baal is "the rider of the clouds," and perhaps he is "the sustainer of life". Maybe we should bow before his mistress, Asherah, or mother earth.

Elijah in Public

No, it is time for a word from God to be spoken through a messenger from God. When the days of Israel were the darkest ever known, the book of I Kings, in chapter 17, tells us that a man, suddenly and without a royal invitation, walked up the palace steps, strode confidently past the palace guards, and into the inner court, where the twin serpents, Ahab and Jezebel, sat, coiled and hissing in all their wicked splendor.

Elijah had come! He did not come with a candle of revelation, but with a flame-thrower of God's ultimatum.

Elijah, James told us, in chapter 5, verse 17, was an ordinary man. He was also unlettered, uncultured, and unimportant. The distinction of Elijah was that he had a word from God.

Elijah was able to speak because he was convinced that God was alive. He announced this to Ahab, in verse 1a of chapter 17, as he said,

. . . "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand . . ."

In other words, it did not matter to him if the score was Baal - 1 million to Yahweh - 0, he was convinced that Yahweh was permanently victorious and that Baal was only temporarily in the lead.

Notice the rest of verse 1. This is the word from God.

“. . . there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

I can imagine that a gasp emanated from all the courtside scholars and politicians who were around the twin thrones. Words were probably said, such as, “How dare he?” and “What does he know?” and “Just who is he?”

Elijah is, in effect, declaring, “Baal doesn’t control the dew and the rain, the God of Israel controls the dew and the rain. Baal is not “the rider of the clouds,” God is “the Rider of the clouds”.

What a moment! What a brilliant light from the life and lips of an ordinary, but obedient man.

Elijah, in the public arena, was faithful, if not spectacular.

Elijah in Private

Now, we will observe Elijah in private.

A Silent Assignment

Pack your gear and come on Elijah’s “silent” assignment. This, my friends, is a far more difficult assignment.

Notice verses 2 and 3 of I Kings, chapter 17.

The word of the Lord came to him saying, “Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.”

The Hebrew word for “hide yourself” could be translated and amplified, “purposefully absent yourself from view”.

God basically, gives Elijah assignment number two.

“Elijah.”

“Yes, Lord?”

“I have another assignment for you.”

“I’m ready.”

“It will take great courage.”

“Check.”

“It will stretch and develop your faith.”

“All systems on go!”

“This assignment will be personally difficult.”

“I’ll push the pedal to the metal, Lord, just name it.”

“Go and hide yourself by the brook Cherith.”

“Lord, there seems to be some static in this frequency. I’d better check the antenna. There. Now, do what?”

“Go and hide yourself by the brook Cherith.”

“That’s what I thought you said. Lord, I just got here. I’ve just begun my public ministry. I’m the only one speaking and my first speech was so effective, the king and queen were left speechless. You saw it, Lord!”

“Go and hide yourself, Elijah.”

Now, I made that up because that is how I would respond. However, you do not find one word of complaint, correction, or argument from Elijah. Skip to verse 5a.

So he went and did according to the word of the Lord . . .

He just did it! Ladies and gentlemen, the mark of maturity is not obeying when we might understand, but obeying when we might not understand!

Elijah has done a tremendous service for God in the public sector! Do not overlook the fact that Elijah’s public statement will challenge the faith of Israel. This private seclusion will challenge and develop the faith of Elijah.

Easily forgotten truths

Let me give a couple of easily forgotten truths that we are reminded of by this assignment.

1. First, we tend to forget that God is as interested in doing something in us as He is in doing something through us.
2. Secondly, God is as interested in developing our faith as He is in demonstrating His power!

God could have cut off the rain without Elijah, but God is always pleased to allow ordinary people, who are convinced that He is alive, to co-labor with Him. Then, when it is all said and done, God’s work is accomplished not only in the world, but in the life of His willing servant.

After God gives Elijah his assignment, He then provides assurance. Look at verse 4.

It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.

This job is for the birds! Continue to verse 5.

So he went and did [!] according to the word of the Lord, for he went and lived [!] by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.

We all like Elijah's first assignment, "God, I want You to use me in the palace!"

That is spectacular! And, the results are immediate!

We do not like the second assignment, though. "Elijah, I want you to get to know Me in the wilderness. I want to pull you out of the limelight and the spotlight and tuck you away and out of everyone's view but Mine."

Why?!

A Sustaining Assurance

Let me suggest a few reasons why; a few tough truths about isolation.

Tough truths about isolation

1. First, a period of isolation usually precedes an entirely new ministry of involvement.

I think of Moses, who would leave the palace of Egypt in exchange for the wilderness, but God was preparing him for the greatest task yet.

Joseph spent a number of years forgotten and abandoned in an Egyptian prison before he ever enjoyed the publicity of being prime minister.

Paul, after his conversion, was obscured by God in Arabia for three years while God prepared him to become the greatest missionary to ever live. We know almost nothing of his three years in private obscurity.

There seems to be a pattern. It seems that the wilderness may be the best place in the world to get to know God.

2. Secondly, while we would never volunteer for lonely obscurity, it is in the secret place where God's choicest work is accomplished; where we learn God's character best.
3. Finally, faith is forged under private pressure!

These three truths say the same basic thing. Isolation is preparation!

Now God never gives his children a difficult assignment without providing an assurance. In verse 4b, God said,

. . . I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.

Then, in verse 6, we are told,

The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook.

Why did God use birds?!

Now we have to ask ourselves, why did God use birds?!

1. First, to reveal to Elijah that God was in control of creation.

Now, liberal theologians do not like the miraculous element in these verses, that ravens brought Elijah his breakfast and supper. So, they have suggested that the Hebrew word for "ravens," which is "oreb," could be changed a little to stand for "Arab".

That may be a slick way to tinker with the text, but it "won't fly." Pardon the pun. Although it would be a miracle for an Arab to feed an Israelite, that is not the miracle in these verses!

Frankly, if God is powerful enough to create the universe, He is powerful enough to command the universe. Not only does He reorder the natural water cycle so that dew and rain cease, He also reorders the natural inclination of these common birds.

Birds do not cater meals to mankind; they do not bring food to humans. I know because I have one, and that little glutton is good for nothing!

My friend, if you can believe the first chapter of Genesis, you can believe the seventeenth chapter of I Kings. For that matter, you can believe every other chapter in the Bible then, too.

Every morning and every evening Elijah received his food from the beaks of birds.

Now, you may remember from our last discussion, James told us that Elijah was a man just like us. That may mean that between breakfast and supper, he might begin to doubt God's care. It may mean that during the darkness of the night, he might begin to question God's plan. But then, the birds would come.

Every time the birds came, Elijah was reminded that God was bigger than Baal. Baal, at this moment, is unable to make one stalk of wheat grow; one drop of rain fall. God, however, can provide a full course dinner of meat and bread.

Now pay careful attention to *what* the birds brought to Elijah. They brought meat and bread. Did you notice that the birds did not bring any vegetables to Elijah? I think God is trying to say something. We need to apply this.

Some of you may be thinking, “Well, the ravens didn’t deliver any glazed doughnuts either.”

That is a misapplication! Leave the preaching to me! Alright, alright.

There is another reason that God may have chosen to use ravens to deliver this model meal.

2. Secondly, God was reassuring Elijah that anyone, or anything, He chose could serve as His messengers.

Did you know that according to the Old Testament book of Leviticus, chapter 11, the raven was considered an unclean animal! God chose to use something unclean!

Gene Getz suggested that, should Elijah be tempted to doubt his worthiness to ever be used by God, the ravens would remind him two times a day that unworthy things who obey God’s commands, serve as His finest messengers.

Whenever you and I are living by our brook of obscurity or isolation; when God pulls us into the secret place of His counsel, we, like Elijah, can be overwhelmed by thoughts of unworthiness. It was there, by that brook, that Elijah learned that God works through weak and obscure instruments to do His work for Him.

A Severe Answer

Now, notice verse 7. I will refer to this as a severe answer.

It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Now, wait a second! There was hardly any food in the land either, but God miraculously caused the ravens to deliver it. Why not cause this brook to continue flowing?!

Elijah, for more than a year, has stayed by this brook. I imagine he has probably built a hut for himself and perhaps, made some crude furniture. He is used to the outdoors. God had already prepared his body for this, but now, He wants to prepare His soul.

So, Elijah notices the trees and the shrubs slowly dying. The land becomes barren, as the hot days blend into each other. The wind whips up the dry land, swirling the dust, as the land groans for a drink of water.

Elijah’s brook begins to slow. He notices the bank of the brook becoming more and more exposed as the brook narrows to a trickle. Finally, it trickles down to nothing and the ground, where the brook used to flow, now bakes under the sun and turns hard, like everything else.

The wilderness to Elijah had been a place of isolation and preparation. Now it becomes a place of desolation. You need to understand that Elijah was experiencing the answer to his own prayer! And, it was a severe answer.

Suffering would become a part of God’s process in preparing Elijah for the task.

Desolation’s, or Adversity’s, deep truths

You may wonder, and I heard people ask, “How in the world can you be in the center of God’s will and experience a drying brook?!”

Let me give you some deep truths that desolation, or adversity, leads us to.

1. Desolation, or adversity, enables us to understand the hurting world we are trying to reach.

May I suggest to you that isolation identified Elijah with God’s power; desolation allowed Elijah to identify with the nation’s pain. The season of silence and refreshment preparation beside the brook would cause Elijah to identify with God’s sufficiency; the season of desolation that now personally impacted Elijah, would help him to identify with the nation’s suffering.

Paul wrote in II Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 4b,

... we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

There is nothing more out of tune in the orchestra of God’s church than a believer who runs to hurting people, slaps them on the back, and says, “C’mon, get over it. What kind of testimony are you in tears!”

There is nothing worse than an insincere Christian exhorting another person, who has just lost a job, or a

child, or a mate, that, “Hey, listen, all things work together for good.”

Don’t you just want to slug ‘em!

God is as interested in your sorrows as He is in your triumphs! He takes equal note of your tears and your smiles.

I will never forget what I recently learned about J. Oswald Sanders, a distinguished Bible teacher and author. He had just delivered, what he considered to be, a compelling message. He was leaving the building where he had spoken, when he overheard a conversation between two elderly women.

One asked, “What did you think of Mr. Sander’s message?”

“Oh, he’s alright,” the other replied, “but he’ll be better after he’s suffered awhile.”

A. W. Tozer has written, “God cannot use us deeply until we have suffered greatly.”

Ladies and gentlemen, suffering was an indispensable part of the process in preparing Elijah to serve. It is for us as well.

2. Desolation, or adversity, is part of the curriculum for learning disciples.

In fact, it is during the confusing, challenging episodes that God accomplishes His finest remodeling in our souls. Adversity takes us to a place where we are hidden away. God meets us there and turns it into a place where we seek Him and find Him.

Perhaps you are hearing this today, and this passage has your name all over it. You are at a point in your life when it seems that God has put you in a room, closed the door, and pulled the shades; you are sitting by a brook that is drying up. You can look at Elijah and say, “That’s me. I’m in the wilderness and it’s desolate.”

Let me read what David Roper wrote about the brook Cherith (which some translations spell “Kerith”), as he applied it to the life of every believer:

Kerith is synonymous with being disregarded, misunderstood, criticized and accused. It is losing out as others take our place. Kerith is the death of our dreams. It’s waiting in lonely isolation with hope deferred, without promised togetherness and with no end of waiting in sight. Kerith is obscurity. It is dreary duty that no one sees or applauds. It is humdrum, tedious tasks, some boring, some distasteful; it is being unknown,

uncelebrated, unnoticed and unimportant. Kerith delivers us from the need for “men’s empty praise” and makes us satisfied with God’s “well done” alone. Kerith is learning to do without - without love, beauty, money, marriage, or health. It is being stripped of friends, father, mother, brother, money, reputation. It is being weaned away from all other passions but a passion for God. Kerith is going without feelings - it is learning persistence - not mere resignation, but a hardy obedience to a course we know to be right regardless of how we feel. Kerith makes us thirsty for God. Slowly, steadily, God strips us of all our longings, leaving us with nothing but desire for Him alone. Until we say with Israel’s poet: “Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.”

Dear Christian may I suggest that you and I become willing to play God’s version of hide and seek. He plays for keeps. If we, like Elijah, will obey the command to go to Cherith and leave the answers to Him, then that place of hiding will become a place of holiness; that desolate place will become a place of worship, instruction, and intimacy with the only One who understands. Remember, He is the One who experienced Gethsemane where, in agony, his sweat became like drops of blood. If anybody understands drying brooks, He does. As Hebrews, chapter 5, verse 8, says,

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Our Lord has a way, with Elijah and with you, to turn desolation into restoration; loneliness into learning; isolation into preparation, for something new that is just ahead!

One ordinary believer put his drying brook experience into an anonymous poem. To this day, no one knows who he, or she, was. Perhaps it is best that way, so that you can put your signature at the end. The words to the poem are:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;

I was made weak, that I might learn to humbly obey.

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;

I was given sickness, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy;

I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

I was given life, that I might enjoy good things.

I got nothing that I asked for,

But everything I needed.

I am, most richly blessed.

The hymn writer put it into music in a wonderful way, when he wrote:

Have Thine own way Lord, have Thine own way;

Thou art the potter, I am the clay,

Mold me and make me, after Thy will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still.

There by our brooks, Lord, we wait, yielded and still. We thank You for what You are accomplishing; we thank You for what You are preparing; and, even now, we thank You for what You are doing in us. We look for the day when You will again do something through us.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/24/1995 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1995 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.