

Into the Crucible!

I Kings 17:17-24

Introduction

Today we will go back to the biography of an ordinary believer. We will travel back in time to a city where furnaces belched black smoke into the air. These were furnaces for the smelting industry that created the images of Baal and Asherah. They burned in a city that was often clogged with false priests who had come to buy the latest images and idols from the shops that littered the streets. This city was a noisy place and a prosperous place as well. In fact, it was one of the last strongholds of Baalism that could still claim to have water and oil, even for a widow, while the entire country suffered from drought and famine.

In the very heart of this city, the country's most wanted criminal was hidden. He was a prophet of God who dared to pray for that drought, so that the glory of God would be revealed and the word of God would be fulfilled.

If you have been with me in this journey thus far, you know that it has been a difficult time for this prophet of God, named Elijah. He:

- first, was hidden at the brook Cherith, where refreshing water was provided for him, until it dried up and trickled away;
- then, dying of thirst and hunger, was sent to the industrial city of Zarephath, where, against all his inclinations and inhibitions, he was told to seek the help of a pagan widow living in the hometown of his arch enemy, Jezebel, where God provided the miracle of unending corn meal and olive oil, as well as personal safety.

From the brook Cherith to the smelting pot of Zarephath, Elijah has gone without question; without argument; without hesitation.

Now we are ready for the showdown on Mt. Carmel. That is what we remember best about Elijah. You may remember that the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal were silenced forever by the flashing fire from heaven. If Elijah needed to be prepared for Ahab, then, "Lord, he's ready!"

Right? The inspired record, however, says, "No!"

It is time instead, for Elijah to enter the crucible. There the heat will be turned up and the most possible pain inflicted.

Look at I Kings, chapter 17, verse 17.

Now it came about after these things . . .

Stop! Here is a chronological clue that demands the question, "After what things?"

The answer is in the preceding paragraph. After the miracle of God in providing for a starving widow and her only son; after God performing the unbelievable in providing meals of hot cornbread, which filled stomachs for the first time in months, if not in more than a year; after God making the promise that the jar of oil and corn meal will provide for the widow and her son until the famine is over; after these things . . .

. . . that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.

Now, the “bottom line,” “point blank,” the frank truth is, “Your son is dead!”

This widow’s link to life; her reason for getting up in the morning; her only hope for the future is suddenly, without warning, dead!

I have never felt what she felt; I have never had a child of mine to die; I have never felt this that some of you have felt in my few years of ministry. I have preached a number of funeral sermons. In fact, just this past week, I preached at the funeral of a saint of a woman. She was a great grandmother who ended her long journey and arrived at her heavenly home. There has not been anything more difficult however, than to preach at the funeral of a child. In the last eight months or so, I have spoken at two such funerals. I have observed incredible faith and trust and yet, the deepest sorrow imaginable during those times. And, although I wept with them, I could not feel the depth of their suffering.

A number of years ago, I was asked to preach at the funeral of the son of a couple who did not attend our church. The bereaved mother of this teenage son, who had attended our church twice, asked me to preach. This fifteen year old had sneaked out of the house early one morning, taken the family car out for a fast spin, run into the wall of a building, and was killed instantly. The mother asked me to preach the gospel, hoping that someone would believe and give sense to her son’s meaningless death.

The funeral home was packed with students, faculty, and family. They were standing around the walls, in the foyer, and spilling out onto the lawn. All of the doors were left open, so that everyone could hear. Rather than try to provide an answer, I proceeded to give direction; direction that is, for life beyond the grave. Eleven teenagers and adults received Christ that day. For that mother, however, was that enough?!

Relief is rarely felt in the crucible. That seems to be the one word that best categorizes the suffering of the children of God – “crucible”.

A crucible, in ancient times, was a vessel into which metals were placed for melting and refining. I find it incredibly ironic that Elijah and this widow are encountering the deepest challenge to their faith in a city whose very name meant, “smelting; refining”.

For many days the prophet and the widow and her son had enjoyed all the cornbread they could eat. An amazing miracle had occurred. Can you imagine their

relief and joy?! The entire country is scrapping for a meal and they have been given a promise; they have plenty to eat! Frankly, they are having a celebration!

In September of 1985, a party was held at one of the largest city pools in New Orleans. The reason for the festive occasion? The summer of 1985 was the first summer in years that a drowning had not occurred at a New Orleans city pool. The summer was now officially over and two hundred guests were at the celebration, including over one hundred certified lifeguards.

It was a great party! Everyone was thrilled at the accomplishment of the summer. It was not until the party was nearly over that they noticed a figure at the bottom of the pool near the drain. It was a grown man, fully-clothed. They attempted to revive him, but it was too late. The man had drowned, surrounded by lifeguards, who were celebrating their success.

In the process of celebrating the miracle of God’s provision, suddenly, unexpectedly this widow’s only reason for living, is dead.

A New Testament Instruction

Please turn to a passage that tells us, with no punches pulled, that the crucible is a place that every Christian experiences. This is not just for an Old Testament prophet and an unknown widow. Turn to I Peter, chapter 4, and look at verse 12.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you

Now, I am glad for someone like Peter. He has evidently, developed some compassion over the years. However, he still talks straight to the point. He says, in other words, “Stop being surprised by suffering. C’mon, why are you so shocked when testing comes your way . . . as if it were something you were immune to?”

From this verse, at least two observations can be made about a crucible experience; a crisis experience. Let me give them to you.

Although crisis comes unexpectedly, it should not surprise us

1. Although crisis comes unexpectedly, it should not surprise us.

The surprise that Peter refers to is that of unbelief. We think, “I can’t believe this would ever happen to a child of God!” or “I can’t believe a Christian would ever experience something like this.” That is Peter’s point.

Since crisis develops mature faith, we should not resist it

2. Since crisis develops mature faith, we should not resist it.

Notice that Peter uses the same language for the believer that the ancient world used of precious metal being refined in the fire. Look back at I Peter, chapter 1, verses 6 through 7.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though [your faith is] tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ

Peter refers to “fire” two times in these verses and in the verse that we read in chapter 4, where he referred to the “fiery ordeal”. The word Peter selects, under inspiration, for “fiery ordeal” is taken from the context of smelting; of refining metal. In other words, just as the crucible refines the precious ore and burns away the slag and the impurities, so God designs our crucible to purify us – our faith, our perspective.

By the way, do not ever forget who Peter is addressing. In chapter 4, verse 12, he refers to his readers as, “Beloved”. The form of this word, in the original Greek, means, “To ones dearly loved”.

Why is the stress on “ones dearly loved”? Because, in the crucible, you tend to forget that God loves you; you tend to believe the lie that He has no future for you.

The truth is, however, He does love you. In fact, the crucible is proof, Peter writes, that He loves you in the present tense.

Dr. Philip Yancey wrote an intriguing, humorous perspective on pain in his book, *Where is God when It Hurts*.

Each of our crucibles – our trials – can be seen as a birth. Imagine what it would be like if you had had full consciousness as a pre-born baby and could even now remember

your delivery. Your world is dark, safe, secure. You are bathed in warm liquid, cushioned from shock. You do nothing for yourself; you are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that someone larger than you fills all your needs. You life is a fine existence.

One day you feel a tug, then another. The walls are falling in on you. Those soft cushions are now pulsing and beating against you, crushing you downwards. Your body is bent double, your limbs cramped and wrenched. You’re falling, upside down. For the first time in your life, you feel pain. You’re in a sea of roiling matter. There is more pressure, almost too intense to bear. Your head is being squeezed flat and you are pushed harder, harder downward. Oh, the pain . . . the noise . . . the pressure. You hurt all over. You can hear groaning and an awful sudden fear rushes in on you. It is happening – your world is collapsing. You’re sure it’s the end. Then, suddenly, you see a piercing, blinding light. Cold hands roughly pull at you. There’s a painful slap – “Waaaaaahhhhh!”

Congratulations . . . you have just been born.

Physical birth growth begins with pain – spiritual growth requires pain as well.

An Old Testament Ordeal

Let us go back to I Kings, chapter 17. I want to make two observations about this widow’s reaction.

The widow places the blame on the prophet of God

1. This widow places the blame on the prophet of God.

Look at verse 18a.

So she said to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? . . .

The first thing she does is explode with anger – there has to be someone to blame. She, in effect, puts the blame for her son’s death on the shoulders of Elijah. She swings at the person closest to her; the one whom God had already used to bring the miracle of food to her household. Her words could be translated and paraphrased, “Why did I ever invite

you to my home?! Why did I have the misfortune of ever meeting you, Elijah?"

She evidently believes that Elijah's relationship to God as a "man of God" has somehow brought down judgment on her. So, Elijah is the one to blame. She is in the process of hurting the only person who can help! She is trying to isolate herself from the one person who can intercede.

Is that not just like us? Our natural tendency is to shut out those who care!

The widow places blame on herself

2. The second thing she does, as she gushes out in her anguish and pain, is place the blame on herself.

Notice carefully, the innuendo in the last part of verse 18.

. . . You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!

Somewhere, in the background of this woman's life, there was a dark deed which dwarfed all other memories, F. B. Meyer wrote. What it was, we do not know.

Some have suggested that it was related to her son; that perhaps he had been conceived from promiscuity. Some have suggested that her former lifestyle of idolatry was what she had in mind, and that she believed the true God was going to punish her now.

She is falsely assuming that God sent Elijah to bring judgement upon her. She is believing that one sin was so great God decided to lift her up with a wonderful miracle in her home before slamming her, shoving her into the graveyard. Now, her son, her only son, her only hope for the future lay lifeless in her arms.

How do I know she was holding him? Look at verse 19.

He said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed.

By the way, the grace of Elijah in this situation is a model for us. He is falsely blamed; unjustly accused; treated unfairly, when all he has done, to this point, is care for the widow and her son.

I would expect Elijah to say, "Now just hold on! I didn't do anything to your son! Why are blaming me for his death?! I liked my life just fine before I met you."

There was none of that from Elijah. He just said, "Give me your son."

Then Elijah went up to his room and began to pray.

In his book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, Swindoll related the following incident that he experienced in 1968. He was on an airliner, bound for New York. It was a routine flight and normally, a boring trip. It was typically the kind of flight I like – uneventful. But, this one proved to be otherwise.

Descending to the destination, the pilot realized the landing gear had refused to engage. He worked the controls back and forth, trying again and again to make the gear lock down into place. No success. He then asked the control tower for instructions, as he circled the landing field.

Responding to the crisis, airport personnel sprayed the runway with foam, as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles moved into position. Disaster was only minutes away. The passengers, meanwhile, were told of each maneuver in that calm, cheery voice pilots manage to use at times like this. Flight attendants glided about the cabin with an air of cool reserve. Passengers were told to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. It was one of those I-can't-believe-this-is-happening-to-me experiences. There were tears and a few screams of despair. The landing was now seconds away.

Suddenly the pilot announced over the intercom, "We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with international Aviation Codes established at Geneva, I want to inform you that if you believe in God you should commence prayer."

The landing was successful, no one was injured . . . a relative of one of the passengers called the airline the very next day and asked about the prayer rule the pilot had quoted. No one volunteered any information on the subject.

Crisis had uncovered an all but forgotten rule, “When in crisis, commence prayer.”

This is like America during the Gulf War, or any war, or like the moment before surgery or burial – crisis forces us to our knees. *Commence praying!*

That is what Elijah did. Look at verses 20 through 22.

He called to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, I pray You, let this child’s life return to him.” The Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived.

Was Elijah praying out of line? Was he providing an example that we should follow today? Should we think that if we pray hard enough and fall on the deceased three times, they will revive?

No! Elijah is again, praying that God would fulfill His word through Elijah. This was the final test before Elijah stands before the prophets of Baal and declares the word of the Lord.

And what was God’s word through Elijah? Look back at verse 13. Elijah promised the widow that she and her son would not go hungry as long as he remained with them; that their corn meal and oil would continue to last until the famine lifted.

What kind of promise is that if the boy dies? Implied in his promise of food was that of life!

What a test this is for Elijah! It is one thing to pray that God will fulfill His word in stopping rain from falling; it is another thing to pray that God will bring life to a dead boy!

Now, notice verse 23.

Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.”

That is as if to say to her, “See, my God keeps His word.”

She got the message too! Continue to verse 24.

Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

Elijah is ready for Ahab! He is ready to face Jezebel – that hissing serpent who was named in honor of Baal.

What was the final test that prepared this man of God? You would think that God would have sent him to face down the King of Phoenicia, who was Jezebel’s father, EthBaal. You would think that God would prepare him for the big test by some grand public display of power. Why not face down EthBaal in his own palace?

However, like Elijah, an ordinary man, God most often prepares us for public service and for displays of His grace and power through some private crucible; some private pain.

Application

There are some lessons to be learned about that crucible. Let me give you several.

The crucible deepens our understanding of God’s sovereignty

1. The crucible deepens our understanding of God’s sovereignty.

It is in the crucible that we discover what God is really like.

The Psalmist wrote, in chapter 119, verse 71,

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.

There is something in all of our lives that is difficult, if not impossible, to understand and properly respond to; there is the unexpected. For this widow, it was the unexpected death of her only son.

For you, the crucible may change shape. It may be:

- the sudden, unexpected accident you had;
- the job you lost that you thought you owned, or the job that turned out differently, with the pressures you were not expecting;
- the courtship that seemed to be smooth, compatible sailing that turned into a marriage filled with unexpected storms brought on by hidden emotions and deep scars;
- the child you unexpectedly lost, or the child you had;
- your parents unexpected divorce;
- the health you lost.

The unexpected! I would like to define that intimidating word in this way,

Anything that invades your life, uninvited, and conflicts with your plans, desires or expectations.

For some of you, your crucible is in the shape of something unexpected. For all of us, we have spent some time in the widow's house. It comes in a variety of sizes, shapes, and colors. It may be a major crisis, or the difficulty of the daily grind.

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is the quiet confidence in knowing that God is with us in the crucible, even when He chooses not to explain Himself.

That is the uncluttered perspective of Daniel, as he records these words concerning a sovereign God, in chapter 4, verse 35,

. . . He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can . . . say to Him, "What have You done?"

Christianity means frequently living without explanations.

The crucible intensifies our commitment to God's plan

2. The crucible intensifies our commitment to God's plan.

Faith is forged under fire. Just as steel is made stronger by the intensity of heat applied to it, so the character of a believer is strengthened, not weakened, by trial. *But*, in order to grow and mature, we have to be willing, on the eve of our private crucible, to say, "Lord, Thy will be done!"

Robertson McQuilken, the well loved president of Columbia Bible College, entered the crucible by means of his wife's illness. Her name was Muriel, and she was suffering from the advanced ravages of Alzheimer's disease. In March of 1990, Dr. McQuilkin announced his resignation in a letter that was read around the world.

My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about eight years. So far I have been able to carry both her ever-growing needs and my leadership responsibilities at Columbia. But recently it has become apparent that Muriel is contented most of the time when she is with me and

almost none of the time when I am away from her. It is not just "discontent." She is filled with fear – even terror – that she has lost me and so, she always goes in search of me when I leave home. So it is clear to me that she needs me now, full-time.

The decision was made, in a way, forty two years ago when I promised to care for Muriel in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part. So, as I told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next forty years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; I love Muriel. She is a delight to me – her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I do not have to care for, I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.

Kent Hughes mentioned then that he and his wife visited the McQuilkins soon after this resignation. He wrote of Dr. McQuilkins's gentle manner with his wife, who understood little of what was even going on.

The crucible solidifies our dependency on God's power

3. The crucible solidifies our dependency on God's power.

Paul wrote, in II Corinthian, chapter 12, concerning his thorn in the flesh, that he begged God three times to take it away. God responded by saying, paraphrased, "No, but I am with you and that is all you need."

We need to understand that, when we are suffering in the crucible, God is not a doctor who prescribes some bottle of medicine with instructions to take a spoonful in the morning and a spoonful at night. There is no quick antidote for those that He wants to refine in the fire and pressure. God does not prescribe something for us to take, *but* He does prescribe Himself!

Paul wrote, "Each time He said, "No, Paul! But I am with you and that is all you need."

Paul would later write in Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 14a,

For He Himself is our peace . . .

The most important words that Elijah prayed, that day in his little room in the widow's house, are found in the words in verse 20a,

He called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God . . ."

Then, he used the same words again in verse 21b, . . . and called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God . . ."

My friend, I have nothing encouraging or hopeful for you, unless you can call the God of Elijah, the God of Israel, "your" God.

If you call Him "yours," however, then we have learned that He creates crucibles to create Christ-like believers out of ordinary people, like Elijah. And, in your crucible, He stands by, not waiting to take it away, but to be invited in.

As Jesus Christ said, not to the unbeliever, but to the church at Laodicea, which had slowly shut Him out, as recorded in Revelation, chapter 3, verse 20,

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door [of sweet fellowship], I will come in to him, and dine with him, and he with Me.

Whether you are on the mountain peak of joy or in the crucible of pain, do not shut Him out, invite Him in. He knows what your crucible is all about. Invite Him in.

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