

THE BARREL OF MEAL (I Kings 17:14)

John Wesley travelled over a quarter of a million miles on horseback to preach over 40,000 sermons. He is reputed to have said unless you preach a sermon ten times, you have not preached it right. Each occasion the Holy Spirit takes us to a passage, He has something fresh for us. This is the sixth time we come to these verses, **I Kings 17:14** thus saith the LORD God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the LORD sendeth rain upon the earth. ¹⁵ And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. ¹⁶ And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah. We come again to consider what God has to say in our present circumstances.

Elijah lived in spiritually demoralising times when God's name was no longer precious, and His ways were abandoned by the most of society. As judgment, the nation had become divided and corrupted by a litany of kings intent on pleasing the people, rather than God. In the northern kingdom, one of the worst kings was Ahab. He was a thoroughly evil man, and he was married to a thoroughly evil woman, Jezebel, - one of the wickedest women in the Bible. During their reign Baal-worship thrived and infested the land. Israel and Judah were sinking in a murky pit of unrighteousness, far away from God.

However, God did not abandon the covenant He had made eight hundred years earlier with the father of their nation, Abram. Originally an idol-worshipper, God called him out of Mesopotamia, from his idolatry, and established him and his family. ... Joshua, in the closing message to his people, began, **Joshua 24:2** Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods. ³ And *I took* your father Abraham from the other side of the flood, and *III led* him throughout all the land of Canaan, and *III multiplied* his seed, and *III gave* him Isaac. ⁴ And *I gave* unto Isaac Jacob and Esau: and *I gave* unto Esau mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt. ⁵ *I sent* Moses also and Aaron ... and kept them separate from all other people as He had covenanted with Abraham, **Gen. 17:7** I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

Sadly, the children of Israel had wandered away from God on many occasions, but He consistently kept a remnant of faithful believers ... and in the reign of Ahab, God called Elijah to be His spokesman. Elijah was just an ordinary man God used in a very ordinary place. Because of the sins of the people, God sent a famine into their land, resulting in widespread poverty (I Kings 17:1). Even

so, the people did not repent and change their ways. Instead of God confronting them through Elijah, He instructed Elijah to leave them, go into the desert and *hide thyself* by the brook Cherith (v.3). ... Since the people would not listen at that time, God had nothing to say to them.

At God's command, Elijah confronted the king in his palace in Jezreel (v.1). At God's command, Elijah went into the desert (v.2,3). At God's command, Elijah drank from the brook which kept flowing (v.3). At God's command, Elijah was fed by the ravens (v.3). ... At God's command, Elijah obeyed even though the way before him was unclear (v.5). And despite there being no dew and no rain (v.1), while Elijah was at the brook Cherith, it never failed to flow, and the ravens never failed to feed (v.6) because ⁵ *he [Elijah] went and did according unto the word of the LORD*. ... Obedience, during a time of widespread *disobedience*.

In the will of the Lord, the brook dried up (v.7), - nothing remains the same, - and Elijah received another command from the Lord to move on, ⁹ *Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there*. ... Sidon belonged to the tribe of Asher (Joshua 19:28) which means it was within the kingdom of Israel. However, Israel never controlled it because they failed to abolish idolatry within its borders. And this was where Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel, came from ... and she was a 'dyed-in-the-wool' anti-God idolatress! ... Nonetheless, God commanded Elijah to go to Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

He travelled the distance by foot from the wilderness beyond Jordan, to the east, and he made his way north-westward to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. At Cherith God had the waters from the brook and the ravens meeting Elijah's needs ... and God gave him another promise He would also meet His needs in Zarephath, ⁹ *Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee*. ... God never sends us anywhere without making preparation.

Arriving at the gate of Zarephath, in obedience to God's command, he had not long to wait until the widow woman appeared. God's plan was in operation. It was obvious she was widowed for she was wearing a black dress and black head-covering ... and it was also obvious she was poor because she herself was picking the pieces of wood to bring home to make the fire to bake her last piece of bread. ... The Lord was using *her* in *her* situation for the next stage in *His* plan for the prophetic ministry of *His* servant Elijah.

And when she was bent down picking up the wood for her fire, Elijah requested from her, *Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink* (v.10). He

didn't have a vessel of his own, and that's why he asked her, and she set down the sticks she had gathered, and was going towards the well to lower the vessel down into it to get him a drink of water (v.10) ... and while she was doing that, he called out to her again, this time to bring him a morsel of bread in thine hand (v.11). Now, the water she could just about supply, but she really was stretching her resources to give him a piece of her bread, for ever crumb was needed by her and her son, and she had to reply courteously, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die (v.12). ... That's how it is, she told the stranger.

Ordinarily, it would not have been a problem, but the present conditions brought on by the famine were stretching her to breaking point. As she saw it, she genuinely was unable to provide Elijah's request. ... The water, yes, but more than that would have proved too much. ... Only a piece of bread ... not a whole loaf ... *only a piece of bread*.

Elijah saw the worry in her eyes, and he heard the concern in her voice ... she really was at the end of her 'tether'. Nevertheless, the Lord had taken him from the wilderness in the Jordan to the well in Zarephath. ... He had taken him thus far and was not now going to renege on His promises. The Lord had brought him to Zarephath, and the Lord was going to keep him in Zarephath for He had promised Elijah he would 'dwell' there (v.9), and the word 'dwell' indicates he would be staying for a while with this widow and her son. ... God was not bringing Elijah to this home for nothing for He would fulfil His plan, ¹³ And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake *first*, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. ¹⁴ For thus saith *the LORD God of Israel*, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that *the LORD* sendeth rain upon the earth. ¹⁵ And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

Elijah was learning the *LORD God* sustains His people, regardless of circumstances. Whether it is to a wilderness or a 'Zarephath', He goes *before* them and *with* them. He has His plans already in operation.

It was good, not only for Elijah, but also for the woman for when her son took ill (v. 17ff), Elijah was there to bring God's healing. If she had sent Elijah away when they met at the gate ... and if she had not given him a drink, and food to eat, and a place to dwell, Elijah would have been somewhere else, and her son would have died. By saying 'yes' to God's servant, God honoured her, and He

also honoured her home. ... God honours those who honour Him! He blesses those who bless Him ... and God's provision became her testimony (v.24).

Elijah is also in a constant state of learning for after leaving the woman, the Lord told him to go back to King Ahab in his palace in Jezreel and tell him the drought would soon end (18:1,2). In the meantime, King Ahab instructed Obadiah, one of his leading officials, to go into the countryside and find water to bring back for the horses and the mules (v.5). ... ("Ahab, what about bringing back water for your *people*?!" ... Sin confuses priorities!)

During all this time, Obadiah *secretly* believed in and feared God (v.3), but he also feared Ahab (v.9), and the king did not know Obadiah worshipped God. Besides Obadiah, there were one hundred prophets of God hiding in two caves! ... And when Obadiah 'happened' to meet with Elijah, he admitted how he feared in case Ahab heard of his faith and he would be put to death (v.9).

In fact, when Elijah told him to return to the palace, and challenge the king and 850 of his prophets of idolatry, and all the people to meet on Mount Carmel, Obadiah was petrified (v.12-13). Nonetheless, he told Ahab and Ahab *did* meet Elijah, who he branded the 'troubler of Israel' (v.17)! On the mountain, Elijah challenged the idolatrous priests to call on their gods to bring fire down upon their offering. Despite their sycophantic efforts they failed miserably, - they could not even get a spark, never mind a fire! ... Elijah didn't fail though for when it was his turn, he told them to cut up his animal in small pieces and soak it with water ... not just once, twice, but three times ... and the water ran down into a ditch which was dug ... and when the preparations had been completed, he *prayed* with such God-given power, fire came down from Heaven, and the water-drenched offering burst into flames (v.38)! When the people saw it, they fell on their knees and repeated, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God (v.39). ... And on Elijah's instructions, the false prophets were slain (v.40f).

Elijah then told King Ahab rain was coming (v.41). With no sign of rain, the prophet went to the summit of the mountain and looked out over the Mediterranean Sea ... and for seven whole days, there was not a cloud in the sky. Nevertheless, Elijah was learning to believe God's promise, I will send rain upon the earth (v.1). At that, his servant told Ahab to get into his chariot and speed down to Jezreel before the rain became too heavy, ⁴⁵ And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel. ... Even though Elijah did not have a horse and chariot, he arrived in Jezreel first, because the hand of the LORD was on *him*!, and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel (v.46).

Then when Ahab returned to his palace, he rushed to tell Queen Jezebel all that had happened on Mount Carmel, and how Elijah had slain all the prophets (19:1). ... Jezebel was livid, and she sent a message to Elijah saying she would catch up with and kill him within twenty-four hours (v.2). ... When Elijah heard it, he was off as quickly as his legs would carry him from the north of the country to the south, to Beersheba on the edge of the wilderness, where he dismissed his servant (v.3). He travelled a further day's journey into the desert, sat down under a juniper tree, and pleaded with the Lord to end his life, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life (v.4).

He had had enough! That's it, Lord, I don't want to do anymore. ... But Elijah, remember how the Lord was with you at Cherith when He provided everything you needed, and at Zarephath, and on Mount Carmel, - you *proved* Him for He did not leave you wanting. He fed you with the ravens at Cherith, and by the woman and her son and household in Zarephath, and you proved Him again on Mount Carmel when you faced the king, his 850 false prophets and the crowds.

While under the juniper tree, a day's journey into the wilderness, an angel came to him *twice* with food and water, and the second time with the command to go a further forty days and forty nights deeper into the desert, unto Horeb the mount of God (v.8). There, *lodging* in a cave, with no plans to go anywhere (v.9), the Lord asked him, What doest thou here, Elijah? ... He replied again in a downhearted and defeated manner, ¹⁰ he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. ... That is what he had said in v.4. ... He had really convinced himself it was true for he had gone deep into the desert not expecting to come out of it again!

In the Lord's work, you don't finish until He says its finished ... and it wasn't finished for Elijah because the Lord told him to go and stand before Him on the mountain (v.11). He did, and a wind blew so fiercely some of the rocks hurtled down the slopes, but the Lord was not in the wind ... and then there was an earthquake which shook the ground underneath Elijah ... but the Lord was not in the earthquake either, or in the fire which came out of the earthquake. ... Following the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire, Elijah heard a still small voice (v.12).

And he wrapped his shawl round his face, and went out (v.13) for he was deep inside the dark cave ... and he stood at its entrance, And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, *I for the second time, v.9!* What doest thou here, Elijah? (v.13)

... Elijah, this is not where you ought to be ... Once again, Elijah rattled off his previous defence, ¹⁴ And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away *cf. v.10!* ... And the Lord responded, Get yourself back to where you came from ... back into the work! ... ¹⁵ Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria ... Return to what I called you to! And besides, ¹⁸ I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him. God told him about the view from Heaven, ¹⁹ So *[Elijah]* departed thence. ... He left the desert and returned to where he should not have left.

He had further issues with King Ahab, including what the king did to Naboth, the vineyard owner (I Kings 21) ... and he actually prophesied the downfall of Ahab and Jezebel and all their family (I Kings 22; II Kings 9 and 10). In due time, - in *God's* time, - Elijah was taken up into Glory, without having to travel through the valley of death, *II Kings 2:11* And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

In the New Testament, he appeared with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration when the face of Jesus did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. ³ And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him (Mt. 17:2).

Twice Elijah had begged the Lord to take his life because his burden had become so heavy ... but the Lord kept him from giving up and Elijah became one of the mightiest men for God, - if not the mightiest, - in the whole of the Bible. He learned not to trust in himself for he knew he could not keep up with what was required of him, and it was only by the Lord's help he would continue.

It is only with the Lord's help *we* shall continue, as Charles Wesley wrote ... "Strong in the strength which God supplies, through His eternal Son; strong in the Lord of hosts, and in His mighty power; who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror ... that, having all things done, and all your conflicts past, you may o'ercome through Christ alone, and stand entire at last".

May God give us the grace to follow Him as we must, to His eternal Glory!