

**Sept. 27, 2009 1 Kings 17:1-7 “A Place Called *There*” by Richard Boatman**

<sup>1</sup> Now Elijah the Tishbite...said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." <sup>2</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: <sup>3</sup> "Leave here, turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, east of the Jordan. <sup>4</sup> You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." <sup>5</sup> So he did what the LORD had told him. He went and lived by the brook Cherith, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. <sup>6</sup> The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. <sup>7</sup> Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

A place called “there” is where God’s provision is promised. We get to this place by the path God has called us to follow. Many do not know our Lord’s peace and joy and strength and power because they are seeking the blessings of God without surrendering to the will of God. God did not promise to provide for Elijah in any place of *his* choosing. There was one place, and one place only where miraculous provision awaited the rough hewn prophet—Cherith.

The Brook of Cherith was no oasis in the desert, an ancient Palestinian version of a Holiday Inn. It was a polluted little stream that meant the “cutting place,” as over time it had worn away the stone to form a deep narrow ravine. Surrounding Cherith were treeless hills and jagged rock formations with a smattering of caves for occasional residents. This place, this “cutting place” would be Elijah’s home.

The “cutting place” was Elijah’s first stop on a path leading to the conquest at Carmel and ultimately to a new understanding of the God he served. Remember what Jesus said in John 15 that God does to fruitful branches? He prunes them—cuts them back. And what does the author of Hebrews tell us the Lord does to his beloved children? He disciplines them. He prepares them for battle. (Chapter 12)

If we embrace the notion that the Christian life is always filled with comfort and that we can do as we please and God’s love is somehow obligated to still bless us with abundance, we have embraced a false god. For it is only in the place called *there*—that place where God has directed us to go—that heaven’s provision is granted. And for all of us there is a “cutting place,” a place where God chisels our character. If we resist this place of chiseling, we are destined to live lives of spiritual mediocrity. The meat of God is reserved for those being hallowed by his name, for those willing to walk the path, following God to a place called *there*.

The years I spent traveling with a gospel singing group (and then later on my own) were rich with diversity and learning as we ministered in various denominations. Staying in people's homes was its own education. We had a covenant motto: *Where He leads me, I will follow; what they feed me, I will swallow.* This maxim would sustain me through cold fried eggs and reused ice in Missouri to sardines floating and staring at me in a Ukrainian borsch. Yummy.

But we followed...and we swallowed. God said to Elijah, "I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." We may have a romanticized notion that these big black birds came swooping down with a grilled sirloin, baked potato, dinner salad and fresh baked bread for our hero. But ravens are garbage birds—scavengers. For a Jew these birds were considered unclean and repulsive. Elijah obeys God and confronts the evil King Ahab and his wicked sidekick, Queen Jezebel. And he's rewarded with six months of road-kill cuisine. How about that for the good life?

In Arkansas our team worked for several days at the modest home of an elderly couple. Earl and Carol had few if any teeth and sort of captured the stereotypical look of Arkansas poverty. One day Earl came to me holding out a cookie in his bare hand. At this point I must confess to you that I have a few "minor" idiosyncrasies. One of them is eating food touched or being held by others. I might never eat chocolate again if I had to take it from the palm of someone's hand. I don't let my grandkids drink out of my glass. Before I met Larae, some friends tried to set me up with some lady. At the dinner table they poured me a glass of soda. It started to fizz over. This woman quickly stuck her finger right in my glass claiming it would keep it from overflowing. It worked. But it also snuffed out any possible romantic spark. So you get the picture—I've got a few issues. So here's Earl, toothless Earl holding a chocolate chip cookie out to me. I thought, "Oh, dear Jesus. What do I do?" I ate it. Earl was my "raven" and a little house in northwestern Arkansas, for that moment, was my Cherith, my "cutting place."

Are you getting it? This thing called discipleship isn't about comfort but about chiseling. It's about following God's path—a place called *there*—and swallowing the stuff on the menu laid out for us. You see God comes to us in assorted packages using a variety of vessels. But unless we accept the premise that it's all a part of the "cutting place" of spiritual growth, we'll miss it; we'll run from it out of anxiety or fear or revulsion, and in so doing, miss the blessing of God's provision.

Jesus was on his way to *his* "Cherith," the cross. But Peter protested for it defied all the apostle's images of Messiah. Jesus shouldn't have to do this. He shouldn't have to be tormented and tortured. But our Lord's response to the burley fisherman

puts it into perspective: “You stand right in my path, Peter, when you look at things from man’s point of view and not from God’s” (Matthew 16:23, Phillips). The cross was Jesus’ path. And Jesus said we must all take up our own cross, i.e. embrace our “Cherith” our “cutting place.”

For without the “cutting place,” there is no brokenness; and without brokenness there is no power. Recently I attended a prayer meeting in Iowa Falls that focused on spiritual hunger and thirst for Hardin County. In such an atmosphere, the Lord often gives us words of encouragement and/or direction. The line that came to me was: “Movement from the sweetness of God’s presence to the empowerment of the Spirit is through the bridge of brokenness.”

Many in our denomination (and our church) have left the “Egypt” of their lives and enjoy the sweetness of God’s presence. But many have balked upon coming to the Promised Land, in effect refusing to trust God in going across the Jordan River. It is crossing the Jordan that symbolizes brokenness, trust and surrender. Consequently, we constantly want to enjoy the sweetness of God’s presence on the wrong side of the Jordan. We want to sing *about* God’s power without crossing the bridge of brokenness that actually *brings* us God’s power.

Regarding this dynamic, one of our church’s veteran lay speakers wrote me: “I think we are all too busy and too wrapped up in the day-to-day. Life seems to come at us with such breathtaking speed that our spiritual life, even as faithful Sunday worshipers is an after thought rather than at the center of our lives. God has blessed most of us with such an abundance of good things that we take it all for granted. Even when the hard times come, we have insurance, a government bail out, an abortion, no-fault divorce, a public relations firm that can spin the truth, or some other escape hatch to keep us from breaking, surrendering and trusting.” Such awareness is the beginning of change.

A call to faith is not a call to fun but a call to formation. The first lesson in Elijah’s formation was the chiseling away of things hidden deeply within—attitudes, fears, prejudices, pride, ego, etc. We all have those hidden feelings, as Dallas Willard intones, that are “normally clothed in layer upon layer of habitual self-deception and rationalization.” So how do we get to those hidden issues? How do we expose our “self-deception and rationalization” getting real and honest about our faith? On our own, we can’t. But like Elijah, we make a commitment to follow God’s path. We will never be genuine if we do not make such a deliberate decision to follow and obey our Lord’s call. If we do so, the Holy Spirit will do an incredible work.

Phillip Keller writes: “In spite of the dreadful diet...in spite of the desert drought Elijah stuck it out at Cherith. It was the place of God’s appointment of him at that point in time. It was the arrangement made for his survival. It was the fierce furnace of affliction that would refine his faith in God. He did not try to duck out of it...This was God’s best will for his life.”

Maybe you’ve been emotionally beaten. Separation or financial calamity or sickness has left you feeling as though you’ve taken giant strides backwards in life. You feel like when others look at you they see a large “Loser” stamped on your forehead. But remember, God does not look at the same things we do; God does not measure with our yard stick. Those who seem so far ahead may be miles away from brokenness. From human eyes, Elijah had gone from the penthouse of Ahab’s court to the outhouse of Cherith’s brook. And yet now he was where God needed him to be. Are you at that place called “there”? Don’t duck out of it. You need it.

When God looked at Elijah at the brook of Cherith, he saw the great defeat of the false prophets at Mount Carmel. For as Jesus could have no crown without first bearing a cross, Elijah could have no conquest at Carmel without first dying to self at Cherith. And as Dallas Willard says, “The self-denial Jesus speaks of is always the surrender of a lesser, dying self for a greater, eternal one—the person God intended when he created you.”

Like tools used for building a *physical* structure, God has given us tools called spiritual disciplines to aid us in our *spiritual* structure. Prayer, solitude, fasting, study, meditation, worship, service—disciplines such as these help expose and bring to the surface for healing things deeply “buried in our will and character.”

Not long ago, we had two *Klondike Bars* left—heath flavored. I ate one after lunch. The remaining one was rightfully Larae’s, but she forgot about it. That evening while she was putting Caleb to bed, I took the last one. Half way through, she came downstairs. I hid it holding my hand between the couch and wall. She went into the kitchen and I surreptitiously finished it. I couldn’t take the empty wrapper into the kitchen, so I wadded it up and dropped in on the floor, out of sight. Scripture says, “Be sure, your sin will find you out.” I forgot about the wrapper and the next day Larae found it. I was tripped up by a Klondike...lust of the flesh.

The spiritual disciplines help combat the lust of the flesh. Fasting exposes our addiction to food; solitude exposes our addiction to people. Worshiping God and serving others delivers us from selfish pursuits and self-promotion. They help us to legitimately follow Christ to the “cutting place,” trusting him to “Take My Life.”