

## **1-17-10 1 Kings 19:9-18 “Despair, Discernment & Direction” (Part 2) by Richard Boatman**

When he got to Horeb, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep. Then the word of GOD came to him...: "Go, stand attentively on the mountain...GOD will pass by." A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.<sup>13-14</sup> When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?" Elijah said it again, "I've been working my heart out for the LORD GOD, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."<sup>15-18</sup> GOD said, "Go back the way you came through the desert to Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazeal; make him king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi; make him king over Israel. Finally, anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet...Meanwhile, I'm preserving for myself seven thousand souls: the knees that haven't bowed to the god Baal, the mouths that haven't kissed his image."

Last week we considered how a person so mightily used of God could find himself feeling so distanced from God and living in complete despair. In today's lesson we will see Elijah move from despair to discernment and see discernment manifested in divine direction. But this process, what we really call spiritual growth, is not without pain.

John 15:2 says, "Every branch that bears fruit, [God] prunes it, that it may bear more fruit." Hebrews 12:6 echoes this: "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines..." Verse 11 continues, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God."

These verses (and there are many more), help us define love as something more than a feeling. "God loves me" does not mean God always makes me feel snug and cozy. Even from a human standpoint, we can understand that there is a "feeling" of love that may actually be quite selfish. A mother may over-protect a child to meet her own needs. She feels love, but actually may keep the child from developing. A man can be drinking at the bar and with tears in his eyes tell the barkeep how much he loves his family, while even at that moment be neglecting them. I like the way psychiatrist Scott Peck defines love: "[Love is] the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." We may actually extend the act of love to someone for whom we feel very little. The person may smell or have habits that repulse, but you give of your time and energy and resources to help him/her grow as a person. This is love. So too, God's love is an act of commitment to restoring us—spirit, soul and body—to the people we are meant to be.

Often for this spiritual growth to happen, we must be **postured for discernment**. In other words, God must bring us to a place where we are more receptive to understand the shifts in thinking or changes in behavior necessary. To get Elijah out of the place of despair and to a place postured for discernment and change, God sent him on a six week trek some 300 miles through torturous temperatures, through the same wilderness where his ancestors had wandered for forty years, back to the roots of his faith, to the very place where God had spoken to Moses atop Mount Horeb. It was here that Elijah had his “**clearness meeting**.”

“Clearness meeting” is a term familiar to Quakers. It is a time of deliberate listening to God, gaining clarity or clearness for spiritual growth. We would do well to periodically return to our spiritual roots to gain clearness for our spiritual lives. Return to the early days of Methodism and discover how seriously our spiritual ancestors took faith. Our founder John Wesley arose daily at 4 a.m. spending two hours in prayer. He fasted twice a week for most of his ministry. He said, "Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergyman or laymen, they alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the kingdom of Heaven upon the earth." He also gave us a pithy warning: “What one generation tolerates, the next generation will embrace.” Beloved, in our current church culture of numerous programs and fellowship opportunities yet where spiritual mediocrity abounds, we must find our “Mount Horeb.” It is a love-gift not only to us but to the next generation.

**“What are you doing here?”** That’s how the clearness meeting began between God and Elijah. Three signs of judgment—a familiar mindset for the fiery prophet—had manifested atop the mount: a hurricane-like wind, an earthquake and a blazing fire. But “God was not in [them].” Finally, God came to the prophet of power in *a gentle and quiet whisper*: “What are you doing here?” Elijah may have said under his breath, “I thought that’s what you were going to tell *me*.” But God was asking Elijah to be a part of the discerning process. “Think about it...why are you here? What has brought you to this place in your life?” It’s amazing to me how often Christians assume that faith is blind trust without any thought. Consider how entertainment oriented our society is. Some have asserted that we are addicted to amusement. We love football or basketball or golf or shuffleboard or bridge or the theater or video games. But ponder the word *amusement*. It comes from the word *muse* which means “to think deeply; to meditate.” But when we place an *a* in front of it—*amuse*—it means the opposite, literally, *to take no thought*. A society addicted to amusement is one that takes no thought for spiritual growth. Out of love, God brings us to a place where our *amusement* is turned into *musings*—thinking more deeply about our existence.

Interestingly, for Elijah's spiritual growth, God sends him back through the desert "the way you came," but this time with a different insight, in other words, **the old path with a new direction**. Elijah had complained to God that *he had been zealous but no one really cared and now he was all alone and the bad guys wanted to kill him*. So God turned him around to retrace his steps—to keep living this daily life—but this time with a **shifted perspective** from God: 1) You're not alone in all you've gone through. There are 7,000 others with you...so get out of the pity party; 2) You've got more to do. Anoint two kings and train your successor, Elisha. In a word, God is saying to Elijah, *This journey of life isn't about you; it's about Me. Out of love, I'm making you fit to live in my kingdom.*

When we encounter God in the "Mount Horebs" of our lives, we come away with **a new (or renewed) purpose**. A lot of believers assume that to be a Christian means you don't do bad things, try not to cuss and try to be honest. The rest of our time is pretty much our own. But there's so much more...

My father-in-law is a godly man. As a dairy farmer, he had cause to cuss, but didn't. Larae told me, though, if Howard started singing, "Sugar in the morning/ sugar in the evening/ sugar at summertime," he was mad. You need to know that to understand the significance of a few years ago. Howard was helping Larae's cousin in the field when the combine broke down. They pulled into the grass and cousin Doug took the truck into town to get parts. Howard got tired and decided to take a nap, lying in the tall grass perpendicular to the combine. Doug came driving back and, not seeing Howard, accidentally drove over his legs. Howard started shouting and Doug jumped out to check on him. Thankfully he was okay. Later we asked Howard what he was yelling when the truck ran over him. Howard said, "Well, let's just say it wasn't 'sugar in the morning.'"

There are people who would never think of cussing and yet who might slander and gossip and hold bitterness. Not to condone profanity, but we must allow God to shift our perspective and to give us a new, dynamic and deeper understanding of what following Christ means. For Elijah (and I think for us) his new purpose was found in becoming an example to others, especially Elisha. The great prophet had become preoccupied with his own life. Now Elijah's purpose was to train another in such a way that his faith and life would continue on through someone else.

Not a bad way to live, huh? Consider a new direction with a renewed purpose...to walk in love. But love, not defined by God making *us* feel warm and cozy, but love as an active commitment for the spiritual growth of ourselves *and* for others. We could say it this way: "Lord, *reign* in me that your life in me might *rain* on others."