

The Trouble With Elijah **Wilson L. Thompson**

The record of Elijah's life is filled with enigmas that often trouble God's people. James reminds us that "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months" (5:17). His simple prayer on Mt. Carmel and God's fiery answer are still riveting even for casual readers. "LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me . . . Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." (I Kings 18:36-38). Israel was overwhelmed and "they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God" (18:39).

Yet, the next day Elijah, in response to Jezebel's death threat, fled Israel "and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah" (I Kings 19:3). Incredible! Elijah later demonstrated sufficient power to call down fire repeatedly upon those threatening his person (II Kings 1:9-15). Was Elijah doomed to go down into the slough of Despond after his complete triumph on Mt. Carmel over Baal's prophets? Must every military victory be followed by a disastrous Waterloo? Are "busts" the inevitable price for successful business? The short answer, of course, is "No." Paul urges the saints to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58).

Elijah was a failed reformer who unhappily had departed from God's law. He had ordered the execution at the brook Kishon of 450 prophets of Baal which did "eat at Jezebel's table" (I Kings 18:19,40). But, King Ahab, God's anointed supreme court judge in Israel, had not appointed Elijah as a judge or executioner. The death threat from Jezebel meant she was still the power behind the throne. Empty seats at Jezebel's table would soon be filled. Baby-killing Baal worship would continue unchecked in Israel (Jeremiah 19:5). In despair, Elijah prayed "O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers"(I Kings 19:4).

Elijah then traveled to Mt. Sinai where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. It was at Sinai that Elijah received some needed mid-course correction. After a mild rebuke, the Lord directed Elijah, to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, Elisha to be his successor and Jehu to be king over Israel. It was to be the bloody King Jehu who was God-ordained to wipe out state-sponsored Baal worship in Israel (II Kings 10:18-28). Finally, God revealed to the prophet Elijah the presence of "seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (I Kings 19:18). These households sorely needed and were destined to be blessed by the prophetic, preaching ministry of Elijah.

Before Israel demanded a king, Samuel served as the last prophet also charged with enforcing God's law as a judge. Samuel warned Israel of the tax burdens of royal government and also warned them that "ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day" (I Samuel 8:18). It is ironic that God's strict separation of the ministries of church and state should be revealed in a dramatic retreat and subsequent re-commissioning of the great prayer warrior Elijah to be a prophet in Israel.