

Elijah, the Occasions of Prophecy, and the Three Orders of Prayer

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The Occasion of Prophecy — Always Ruin

In Solomon's time, when the temple was built and the glory of God filled the house and tens of thousands of animals were sacrificed at its dedication, there was no prophet sent. Solomon himself led the worship. Prophecy comes when there is failure and ruin — not when things are going well. That pattern runs through the entire historical record. Every time a prophet appears in the historical books, he is appearing into a situation of decline and departure. This is also the state of things in Revelation 3 and the Laodicean period: I am rich and have need of nothing, while in fact being wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

New Testament prophecy, according to 1 Corinthians 14:3, is not the giving of new revelation — that was completed with the apostles. It is edification, exhortation, and consolation: building up those who hear, stirring their consciences toward what God requires, and encouraging them in the hope that is set before them. The intent is the same as in the Old Testament — the Lord wanted to exhort His people, instruct them in His ways, and encourage them. The occasion is the same: failure and ruin. And so in a day when Christendom is at its lowest point and yet declares itself rich and in need of nothing, the faithful word that edifies, exhorts, and consoles is exactly what is needed.

Elijah — Before Whom I Stand

First Kings 16 describes Ahab as the worst king Israel had yet produced — worse than all before him. He served Baal, built a temple for Baal, made the Asherah.

Into that darkness, Elijah the Tishbite suddenly appears with a single sentence: as Jehovah the God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years except by my word.

Two things in that sentence are worth dwelling on. First, the declaration that Jehovah the God of Israel is living. You could not tell that from looking at Israel. From every outward appearance, Baal had displaced Jehovah. The visible evidence was entirely against it. And yet Elijah declares it as a fact, in the presence of the king who had done everything to promote the opposite. The God of Israel liveth. That is always the starting point — an inward apprehension of the living God that the circumstances around us cannot shake.

Second, before whom I stand. Elijah was not merely asserting something about God for effect. He was a man who conducted his life in the consciousness of standing before God. Everything he said, everything he did, was in that awareness. He was not a person airing grievances at Ahab, pointing out the king's failures and demanding change. He was a servant of God who stood in God's presence, and that was visible in everything about him.

James 5:17 tells us what came before that public moment: Elijah was a man of like passions to us, and he prayed with prayer — fervently — that it would not rain, and it did not rain for three years and six months. The bold word to Ahab was the outcome of earnest, persevering prayer. He had not simply decided that a drought would be a good idea. He had been fervently supplicating the Lord for the people of Israel, from love for them, not contempt. And the Lord told him to go and say this to the king.

The fervent supplication of the righteous man has much power. — James 5:16

Cherith — The Path Marked Out and the Water Drying Up

First Kings 17:2–7 gives the Lord's instruction to Elijah immediately after his word to Ahab: hide yourself by the torrent Cherith, before the Jordan. I have commanded the ravens to feed you there. Note the word there. The promise of provision was not general. It was specific to the path the Lord had marked out. If Elijah had reasoned that there was a better river nearby, or that he should position himself strategically elsewhere, the promise was not attached to his preferred location. It was attached to Cherith.

This is the lesson of the path. Joseph went from the pit to slavery to prison before he stood before Pharaoh. Moses spent forty years on the backside of the desert before God called him at the burning bush. The Lord Himself went through forty days in the wilderness before entering His public ministry. In each case, the time of hiddenness and privation was not a detour — it was the path, and the Lord's provision was on that path. Elijah sat by Cherith and was fed by ravens twice a day. Ravens are unclean birds — the last thing you would expect God to use. But God commanded them, and they came.

And then the water dried up. Not suddenly — it dried up gradually, and Elijah sat there and watched it happen. He was still there when it dried up completely. He did not launch a reconnaissance expedition to find a better water source. He was still on the path. And the word of the Lord came to him immediately in verse 8 — arise, go to Zarephath. The Lord had not abandoned him; He had something else for him, a household that needed blessing, a service that would demonstrate His power in ways the torrent Cherith could not. Sometimes the Lord takes away what He has provided not because He has forgotten us, but because He wants to give us something better — and because He wants us to value Him more than what He provides.

The Three Orders of Prayer

Ephesians 6:18 follows directly from the whole armour of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints. Prayer is not a separate piece of armour — it is the breath of the whole armour. Without it, the rest would avail nothing for long.

Luke 11:5–13 describes the first order: a man pressing his friend at midnight for three loaves because a guest has arrived and he has nothing to set before him. What characterises this prayer is persistence driven by pressing need. The petitioner has nowhere else to go. He knows the one he is asking can supply what is needed. He will not stop until he receives it. That persistence, that consciousness of absolute need and of God as the only sufficient one, is the first character of effective prayer.

Philippians 4:6–7 gives the second: be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. The result is peace — the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. In the second order, the soul has committed everything to the Father and rests. It has peace. Elijah, watching the torrent dry up day by day, had this — he was still there when the water was gone. Something sustained him in that, and it was not self-sufficiency. It was the peace that comes from having committed the matter entirely to God.

First John 5:14–15 expresses the third: if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us — and if we know that He heareth us, we know that we have the petitions we desire of Him. The third order is joy — the fullness of joy that the Lord Himself promised when He said, ask that your joy may be full. When the soul prays in the confidence that the Father hears — not presuming on its own will, but asking according to His will — the result is not merely peace but joy. Joy when the brook is drying up. Joy in the midst of a dark world.

These three orders — persistence, peace, joy — are not stages to pass through in sequence. They are the character of a prayerful walk with God, the air that the saints breathe. Elijah's whole ministry was sustained by them. The man who prays with prayer is the man who can stand before a king and say: the God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand.

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