

“A Chariot of Fire”

1 Kings 17:1-7; 2 Kings 2:5-14 ¹

Some days just don't go as you expect them to go. Have you noticed? My own adventures began one long-ago morning as I was working in my father's vineyard.

We lived in Gilead, east of the Jordan River, about twenty-five miles northwest of what you know as Amman, Jordan. I was twenty-six years old; the year was 875 B.C. In those days, our village of Tishbe was located in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Ahab son of Omri was King.²

I'm sorry to say that King Ahab did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than any of the kings before him. You complain about your government, I know; but we really had something to complain about! Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and soon after he began to join her in worshipping Baal, a pagan fertility god.

Oh, I haven't told you who I am, have I? My name is Elijah, which means “My God is Yah,” or Yahweh—the LORD God of Israel.

Dad complained about Ahab over supper every night. “The country's going down the drain,” he'd say. I didn't pay too much attention to all that—twenty-somethings weren't usually much into politics. Our family worshiped the LORD, but I really wasn't too much into that, either.

On the morning my adventures began, I was working alone in the vineyard when I heard someone call my name. I answered and turned around, but there was no one there—and what happened next was just *too weird*. The Voice spoke again, and I had a conversation with someone I couldn't see, who said He was the LORD for whom I was named.

The LORD told me to go to the king and tell him that an awful drought was coming as judgment on his wickedness. Didn't seem like a good idea to me. But that night as I lay in bed I remembered the ancient story about how the LORD first spoke to Moses in the wilderness. That story sounded a lot like what had happened to me that morning. Like Moses, I didn't want to be God's messenger; and like Moses, I finally agreed to go.

It was a bit of a chore to get to see Ahab, but when I finally did, the meeting was short. “*As surely as the LORD, the God of Israel lives—the God whom I worship and serve,*” I said, “*there will be no dew or rain in Israel until I give the word!*” And I turned and walked out, while Ahab laughed.

But do you know what? The next morning, there was no dew . . . or the next morning . . . or the next. And the LORD said to me, “Ahab is going to become angry pretty soon, and he's going to come after you. Go hide by Kerith Brook east of the Jordan. You can drink from the brook and you can eat what the ravens bring you, because I have commanded them to bring food to you.”

There were two interesting things about that. First of all, since Baal was thought to bring bountiful harvests, the LORD's obvious control over the dew and the rain exposed Baal for the fraud he was—a powerless idol made by men. And second, ravens were unclean animals—

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 3, 2015.

² Some of this information goes beyond what the text tells us. We do know that Elijah began prophesying in 875 B.C. and that Elisha began prophesying in 848 B.C. (*NLT Study Bible*).

scavengers who will eat any sort of meat they can get their beaks on—so it took a pretty strong stomach to be willing to eat what they brought to me. But the ravens really did bring me fresh bread and fresh meat every morning and evening as long as I stayed at Kerith. I had no idea where that was coming from, and still don't. That was pretty amazing!

Since there was no rain, the brook eventually dried up. When that happened, the LORD told me to “Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. There is a widow there who will feed you. I have given her my instructions.”

Zarephath was a coastal village about eighty miles away. I had to hide from Ahab's men until I crossed over into Phoenicia, so I traveled mostly at night; but after several days I neared the village. As I approached the village gates I saw a woman gathering sticks, and I asked her for a drink of water and some bread. She replied, “I swear by the LORD your God that I don't have a single piece of bread in the house. The crops have failed because of the drought. I have only a handful of flour left and little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I've gathered these sticks to cook one last meal for myself and my son, and then I suppose we'll die.”

“Don't worry,” I said, although I couldn't believe I was saying it, “fix a little loaf of bread for me, and there will still be plenty for the two of you. For this is what the LORD says: ‘There will always be plenty of flour and oil in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again.’”

The words just seemed to form themselves in my mouth. And having seen what I'd already seen with the rain and the ravens, I wasn't too surprised when what I'd said came true.

The food thing was pretty cool, so we knew that the three of us weren't going to starve, but the crises weren't over yet. Several weeks later, the widow's son got sick. He got worse and worse, and he finally died. I took the boy up to my room, laid his body on my bed, and cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, why have you brought tragedy on this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die?”

I stretched myself out over the boy and cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, please let this child's life return to him!” And as I lay on the boy's lifeless form, I began to feel life return to his body. Talk about amazing! The widow said, “Now I know for sure that you are a man of God, and that the LORD truly speaks through you.”

I lived with the widow and her son for quite a while. It may actually have been a year or two. As the LORD had told us, the flour and the oil never ran out, even though the drought continued. The drought was in its third year when the LORD told me, “It's time to leave Zarephath. Go to Ahab and tell him that I will soon send rain.” Now I wasn't all that keen on going to see Ahab. Surely his fury was murderous by now. But I had long since learned to obey the Voice, no matter what I was told to do.

When Ahab saw me, he said, “So it's you, is it—Israel's troublemaker?” And I answered, “I've made no trouble for Israel. It is you and your family who are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the LORD and have worshiped Baal instead. Now bring all the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, with all 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, all of whom are supported by Queen Jezebel.”

It took several weeks for the word to get out, but finally a day was set for the showdown on Carmel. I wasn't too excited about going through with it, because failure would surely mean death; but I was resolved to obey the Voice.

So there we were. The people of Israel were gathered in a multitude beyond number. The king and the 850 false prophets stood on one side of the meadow; I stood alone on the other.

When all was ready, I shouted to the people, “How long are you going to waffle and waiver? If the LORD is God, follow him! And if Baal is God follow him!” Nobody said a word.

“Here is my challenge.” I shouted. “Bring two bulls. I will build an altar and the prophets of Baal and Asherah will build an altar. We will slaughter the bulls and put them on the altars, but without fire. You call on your gods, and I will call on the LORD. The God who answers with fire is the one true God!” And so we did.

I let them go first, because I already knew how this was going to go. The 850 of them danced and shouted all morning, but nothing happened. About noon I shouted, “Oh, my, you’re going to have to shout louder, I think. Baal must not hear you! Maybe he’s deep in thought. Maybe he’s gone to the bathroom. Maybe he’s on vacation. Maybe he’s asleep!”

So they raved and shouted all afternoon, cutting themselves with knives and doing all kinds of other foolishness. As the afternoon shadows deepened, Baal had still made no reply, no answer. There was no voice. It was time to go for broke.

I called the people to come over to me. During the day, while the other prophets were carrying on, I had rebuilt the altar of the LORD that had been destroyed. I had used twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel.³ Now I killed the bull and put it on the wood on the altar, and then I dug a trench around the altar. I had the people bring water from a nearby spring and pour twelve jars of water over the bull and the wood, one jar for each of the tribes of Israel. There was so much water that the trench filled up and overflowed!

At the appointed hour for the evening sacrifice I stood before the altar and prayed loudly, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. O LORD, answer me! Answer me so that these people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”

At the very moment when I finished speaking, in that instant, fire from the LORD flashed down from heaven! The fire burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones of the altar, and all the water in the ditch! Where a moment before the altar had stood, only a charred crater remained!

The people fell on their faces and cried out, “The LORD is God! The LORD is God!” And I cried out, “Seize the false prophets! Not a one must remain alive!”

While all that was going on, I took my servant to the top of the mountain. I fell to the ground and prayed to the LORD, and I sent my servant to go look out over the sea. Six times he went to look and came back to report “I don’t see anything.” But the seventh time, he returned to say, “I saw a little cloud about the size of a hand rising out of the sea.” “The rains come,” I said.

And indeed they did! A terrific storm blew up out of that tiny cloud, and the three-year drought was ended . . . but trouble wasn’t. When Ahab got home and told Jezebel what I had done to her precious prophets, she sent a message to me: “May the gods also kill me if by this time tomorrow I have failed to take your life like those whom you killed.”

As brave as I had been on the mountain, things looked very different in the muddy valley, and Jezebel’s threat scared me to death. I ran away to the desert, running all the next day. As evening came, I sat down under a lone broom tree and prayed to God to let me die. And then I fell asleep.

³ 1 Kings 18:16-46

I was startled awake in the night by a hand on my shoulder. I jumped up ready to fight, but discovered that there was no danger. I found myself face to face with a creature like a man, but who seemed to glow in the dark. The “man” said he was an angel from God. He pointed to some fresh bread and water and told me to get up and eat. Toward dawn, the angel woke me again. “Get up and eat some more,” he said. “There is a long journey ahead of you.”

Somehow that angel food gave me the strength to travel for 200 miles, all the way to Sinai, the mountain of God. I climbed part way up the mountain and spent the night in a small cave. Toward morning I heard the Voice: “What are you doing *here*, Elijah?”

“LORD,” I said, “I’ve worked hard for you, and you can’t deny it. But the people of Israel have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets. I alone am left, and now they’re trying to kill me, too.”

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” said the Voice.

As dawn came, a terrible windstorm hit the mountain, so strong that it sent mighty boulders rolling down the cliffs . . . but I could tell that the LORD was not in the wind. After a while, there was an earthquake, shaking all of Sinai to its roots . . . but the LORD was not in the earthquake. About noon, there was a firestorm on the mountain such as it must have been when Moses stood where I stood . . . but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire had burned itself out, I heard the Voice ask me once more, “What are you doing *here*, Elijah?”

I gave the same answer, and the Voice said to me, “Elijah you are not alone. I AM with you! And I have seven thousand besides yourself who have been true to me in Israel! Get up and return to Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael to be king of Aram. Anoint Jehu to be king of Israel. And anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel-Meholah to replace you as my prophet. Now go!” And I went.

Oh, my, there is so much more that I’d like to tell you! I’ve left out a great deal already, and there are many things I haven’t mentioned at all! I was the LORD’s prophet for twenty-seven years, and when I was 53, the LORD took me directly to heaven in a chariot of fire! My, what a ride that was!

Well, so what’s the point of all this? Why have I come to visit you today? Let me quickly mention five things I want you to remember:

1. The terrible effect Jezebel had on Ahab is a good example of why it is that those who follow the LORD are forbidden to marry persons who follow other gods. Don’t make that mistake!
2. The widow’s oil and flour illustrate the principle of tithing that God had given through Moses: “Give to me what I ask at the beginning, and I’ll see to it that what’s left is enough for what you need.” I hope you’ve experienced that reality yourselves.
3. God warned my people about their wickedness for 300 years, and the people thought nothing was going to happen, but the promised judgment came in God’s time. There are many nations in the world today—yours among them—that are in great danger of God’s judgment for your worship of false gods. Do what you can to stand in the gap.
4. The LORD calls you, just as the LORD called me, to take a stand against the evils and the idolatries of your time. Take a stand for what’s right, even if you seem to stand alone. You are NOT alone, and the LORD is with you!

5. Finally, all of this is predicated on your learning to recognize God's Voice. Don't be deceived by those who promise earthquake, wind, and fire. There will be Fire, all right, in God's own time. Until then, the LORD has work for you to do. Will you do it?