

## CHAPTER 1

### Elijah the Tishbite

Reformers. What does the word bring to your mind? Radicals, revolutionaries, incendiaries, fanatics? Or trailblazers for truth, pioneers of progress, champions of justice, defenders of the downtrodden?

In his youth Abraham Lincoln saw the activities at a slave market in New Orleans. Seeing the cruel oppression of a whole race of God's children who differed from their buyers and sellers only in skin color, Lincoln determined to abolish slavery by all lawful means the future might place in his hands. The resolution he formed that day shaped his character and lifework and changed the destiny of his nation. He spearheaded a social and political reformation that kept the United States from declining into an assortment of parasitic fiefdoms dependent for their prosperity on others' servitude.

This world owes much to reformers but rarely acknowledges its debt to them in their day.<sup>1</sup> And when it does, it hardly takes in the full scope of their work and the permanence of their legacy. Still more rarely does it give reformers encouragement in the early days of their mission. Yet all true reformers are in voluntary bondage to a mission - that of liberating the human soul. Such was Elijah, one of the greatest reformers the world has ever known.

Elijah lived in Israel during some of the brightest days of its material prosperity. To worldly minds Israel had never been in better circumstances. Life was good. Crops were abundant, wealth was available to the ambitious, Israel's borders were large and seemingly secure. But Israel dwelt in the midnight of spiritual apostasy. Baal worship, with all its degrading practices, had virtually replaced the worship of the true God. The majority of Israel's populace was inclined to give Baal credit for the nation's prosperity, and enthusiasm for pagan worship was on the rise.

At this time Israel's ten northern tribes, under Ahab's rule, had been a separate power for no more than seventy-five years.<sup>2</sup> During that short period the nation had quickly become paganized. Israel's faithful priests who had escaped martyrdom moved to Jerusalem to serve the Lord there without interference (see 2 Chron. 11:13-17). Jezebel, a licentious heathen princess, ruled Israel through her weak, godless husband, Ahab. She established idolatry on a grand scale in his

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court, maintaining a large retinue of prophets and priests devoted to Baal, the god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites. Sexual immorality and witchcraft were the main features of Baal worship,<sup>3</sup> the chief object of which was to practice licentiousness in the name of religion. “Feel good about yourself while violating the commandments of God” was the force of Baalism. Satanic warpage of character was the fruit. And that fruit abounded in Israel during Elijah’s day.

What could one man do to reverse the tide of such rampant apostasy engulfing the nation? Elijah began where so many great movements have begun - in prayer. Not despairing, dejected prayer, not listless petitions tinged with doubt, but fervent, effectual prayer, motivated by love (see James 5:17). And he did something else besides pray. He also pondered Israel’s deep fall from true worship and sought a solution.

As Elijah saw Israel going deeper and deeper into idolatry, his soul was distressed and his indignation aroused.... Viewing this apostasy from his mountain retreat, Elijah was overwhelmed with sorrow. In anguish of soul he besought God to arrest the once-favored people in their wicked course, to visit them with judgments, if need be, that they might be led to see in its true light their departure from heaven. He longed to see them brought to repentance, before they should go to such lengths in evil-doing as to provoke the Lord to destroy them utterly.<sup>4</sup>

Elijah was not vindictive. He wasn’t stirred with animosity toward Israel but with heartbroken love. What could be done to awaken Israel from its sensual sleep and set the nation free from idolatry? When gentle reasoning and persuasion won’t change obstinate sinners, sometimes discipline will. The wages of sin is death. Pure justice demands the death of the rebellious, but Elijah was a representative of God’s mercy tempering His justice. Therefore he prayed that “it would not rain” (James 5:17). Elijah didn’t want to see the people suffer but to recognize life’s true Source of blessings. He longed to see them restored to worshiping the Creator, which in turn would restore them to spiritual soundness. He saw that such moral renovation would never be possible while his people continued in idolatry, whose degrading effects they failed to recognize.

Scripture repeatedly states that idolatrous worship pollutes the human soul and ultimately debases it to a level lower than that of beasts. See, for example, Psalms 106:34-39, 115:4-8, Isaiah 44:9-20, and Romans 1:18-32. Why does such extreme degradation result from

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idolatry? Because those who engage in it are actually worshiping devils, even if unwittingly. The Lord said to Israel that when His people in their prosperity forsook worshiping Him, the provider of all blessings, and turned to heathen rites through the influence of surrounding nations, they “sacrificed to demons, not to God” (Deut. 32:17).

In his typically forthright way, Paul deals with this same subject in the context of Christian versus pagan worship: “What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons” (1 Cor. 10:19-21).

No wonder the Israelites’ moral behavior grew progressively worse as they plunged deeper and deeper into heathen worship! They were worshiping devils, even if they thought themselves too sophisticated to believe in them. One does not have to believe in the existence of one’s enemy in order to come under his control. In fact, it puts Satan on vantage ground if people do not believe in him. Then he can go about his nefarious work with less interference, just as a burglar can steal more if no one believes he exists, not suspecting his presence or pilferage.

In America today, outright heathen worship is relatively rare. But this does not mean that idolatry, or devil-worship, is becoming extinct.

The present age is one of idolatry, as verily as was that in which Elijah lived. No outward shrine may be visible; there may be no image for the eye to rest upon; yet thousands are following after the gods of this world - after riches, fame, pleasure, and the pleasing fables that permit man to follow the inclinations of the unregenerate heart. Multitudes have a wrong conception of God and His attributes, and are as truly serving a false God as were the worshipers of Baal. Many even of those who claim to be Christians have allied themselves with influences that are unalterably opposed to God and His truth. Thus they are led to turn away from the divine and to exalt the human....

Human theories are exalted and placed where God and His law should be.... There is seen a spirit of opposition to the plain word of God, of idolatrous exaltation of human wisdom above divine revelation.... A faith such as actuated Paul, Peter, and John, they regard as old-fashioned, mystical, and unworthy of the intelligence of modern thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

And yet it was the old-fashioned faith of the apostles that opened the way for the blessing of Pentecost. It is that same old-fashioned

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faith that will open the way for God's remnant to receive the latter rain, God's final outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

But to return to Elijah's challenge; he prayed that it might not rain until the people came to their senses spiritually. Here Elijah appealed to God on the legal basis of His promise and warning to Israel, uttered through Moses centuries before: " 'And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.' Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you" (Deut. 11:13-17).

We can see that Elijah did not arbitrarily choose the form of discipline that he asked God to employ. He prayed in harmony with God's Word, asking only that, since all milder measures had failed, His threatened punishments now be strenuously applied until they accomplished their purpose - to humble Israel's rebellious spirit and bring them to a repentance that would free them from Satan's control and turn their hearts to the true God.

This was a warning judgment, not a final casting off. It was sent in mercy, not in enmity to God's people. How often has God had to deal with your life and mine in similar fashion to awaken us from our carnal trances, our deluded dreams, our rebellious wanderings? "But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32).

Consider Manasseh, the worst king Judah ever had. Although the son of Hezekiah, a godly ruler, Manasseh was a renegade. Upon his father's death, he terminated public worship of the true God and imposed the most flagrant forms of heathen worship on his people. As though he were the devil himself, Manasseh destroyed all the true prophets he could find. Merciless, cold, greedy, and oppressive, not a spark of decency flickered in Manasseh's heart. His throne was a stronghold of destruction and death, a seat of evil as cruel as any ever occupied by a tyrant. God sent the king of Assyria to punish Manasseh,

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who was led in chains to Nineveh, there to molder in a dungeon without hope of pardon or reprieve.

In this prison Manasseh came to his senses and truly repented of his desperate wickedness. His was no calculated “jailhouse conversion.” It was true, sincere, and deep. Before he was afflicted Manasseh went astray, but under the rod of divine discipline he genuinely repented. Prison did not convert him, the Lord did; but He had to surround Manasseh with grim walls of stone before He could penetrate his stony heart. Manasseh fell repentantly on the Rock Jesus and was broken. Then the Lord moved on the heart of the Assyrian king to free Manasseh and restore him to his throne in Judah.

Broken and feeble, Manasseh did his best to repair the damage he had inflicted on his nation. Although his credibility was wrecked in the eyes of his people, he was redeemed in the eyes of God and died a saved man. This story is told in 2 Chronicles 33. Read it, and you will never again underestimate the power of God’s patience, mercy, and saving grace, which are often most effectively applied in His sternest acts of discipline.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Why are reformers generally feared and misunderstood?
2. Why was Elijah distressed about Israel’s apostasy?
3. Why did he pray that it would not rain?
4. In what way are God’s warning judgments really acts of mercy?

1. Henry Ward Beecher wrote: “No man can accomplish that which benefits the ages and not suffer. Discoverers do not reap the fruits of what they discover. Reformers are pelted and beaten. Men who think in advance of their times are persecuted. They who lead the flock must fight the wolf.” Quoted in *Mountain Trailways For Youth*, by Mrs. Charles E. Cowman (Los Angeles: Cowman Publications, 1956), 100.

2. In 931 B.C. Jeroboam I led the ten northern tribes of Israel into secession from the tyrannical reign of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, leaving him only with Judah and Benjamin. God gave the northern kingdom to Jeroboam with the stipulation that he should rule it in accordance with divine law. Jeroboam failed to do this and quickly led Israel into the depths of apostasy (see 1 Kings 11-13). One bad ruler after another forwarded the renegade nation in its downward path. Ahab (874-853 B.C.), Israel’s sixth ruler from Jeroboam, dragged his

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nation into previously unparalleled depths of heathenism. It would seem from the events recorded in 1 Kings 16:29-22:40 that Elijah arose in the early to middle portion of Ahab's twenty-two-year reign.

3. I do not wish to dwell on the hideous pollutions of Baal worship, but the following description of its character is helpful in ascertaining why Baalism was so strongly condemned in God's Word. "Half Sun-god, and half Bacchus [the god of wine and revelry]... Baal was worshipped under the image of a bull, 'the symbol of the male power of generation.' In the wantonness of his rites he was kin to Peor; in their cruel atrocity to the kindred Moloch; in the demand for victims to be sacrificed to the horrible consecration of lust and blood he resembled the Minotaur, the wallowing 'infamy of Crete,' with its yearly tribute of youths and maidens. What the combined worship of Baal and Asherah was like (and by Jezebel and Ahab's connivance they were now countenanced in Samaria - we may learn from the description of their temple at Apheka. It confirms what we are incidentally told of Jezebel's devotions. It abounded in wealthy gifts, and its multitude of priests, women, and mutilated ministers... were clad in splendid vestments. Children were sacrificed by being put in a leather bag and flung down from the top of the temple, with the shocking expression that 'they were calves, not children.' In the forecourt stood two gigantic phalli. The Galli [eunuch priests], maddened into a tumult of excitement by the uproar of drums, shrill pipes, and clanging cymbals, gashed themselves with knives and potsherds, and often ran through the city in women's dress. Such was the new worship with which the dark murderess insulted the faith in Jehovah. Could any condemnation be too stern for the folly and faithlessness of the king who sanctioned it?" Frederick. W. Farrar, D.D., *The First Book of Kings*, second edition (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 352, 353.

4. *Prophets and Kings*, 119, 120.

5. *Ibid.*, 177, 178.