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A SNACK BAR IN THE WILDERNESS

Today's Text: 1 Kings, Chapter 17; Matt. 4:4

Extracts:

1. **“And Elijah, the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these days, but according to my word. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. *So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook”* [1 Kgs 17: 1-6]**
2. **“But He [Jesus] answered and said, It is written, *man shalt not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord”* [Matt. 4:4]**

In the now defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), popularly known as Communist Russia, Christian worship outside of the Orthodox Russian Church was discouraged and persecuted. There is the story of a group of foreign missionaries who set up an underground gospel church in a remote part of the country, with a membership approaching 500. One Sunday, as the service was in full swing, the door suddenly burst open and two heavily armed soldiers barked orders at the congregation, saying, “clear out or we shoot!” Seventy percent of the worshippers ran for safety, abandoning their Bibles and personal effects. The soldiers, aiming their guns this time at the remaining people, shouted, “we are serious. Get out or we kill all of you!” Only five persons were left. The rest rushed for the door. Soon after their departure, the soldiers dropped their guns, pulled off their outer military uniforms and with a broad smile told the pastor, “Let the true worship begin!”

The great majority of worshippers in many denominations today are like those who ran away in our story above. As long as the church is user-friendly and prosperity preaching, all is well. One day, God may call them out into the wilderness to prepare them as labourers for His vineyard. That is when trouble begins! That is when they begin to doubt the word of God and to question His messengers. Yet, the wilderness experience is unavoidable for any believer who really wants God to use him/her. Moses, David and Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul, all passed through their wilderness. Some of us have had theirs. Some of us are there now. Some of us are trying to avoid it.

In today's lesson, we shall use Elijah's experience to understand what the wilderness is all about and what it takes to survive it. The good news is that there is a rich snack bar in the wilderness!

1. What is a wilderness?

A wilderness can be seen as a place *as well as a situation*. As a place, it can be seen as the wilds, which are uninhabited [**Ps. 107: 4-5**] and full of wild creatures [**Deut. 8:15**]. It is a dreaded and desolate place that nobody in his/her right senses would like to go to unless there is a big prize, such as the gold rush to California in the early days of the European colonization of America. However, whilst the gold-diggers carried guns and supplies, people who go into spiritual wilderness carry *nothing* with them! Moses was in the Sinai for 40 days and nights without food and water [**Ex. 34:28**], as did Jesus [**Matt. 4: 1-2**]. John the Baptist lived on “locusts and wild honey” [**Matt. 3: 1,4**].

As a situation, the wilderness in the modern sense may not necessarily be going into a forest or desert or isolated place. Rather, it may take the form of giving up all the material gadgets that have given us a semblance of comfort all these years. It could take the form of giving up a lucrative job or career, moving from a familiar place to an unknown world, or accepting a much lower social status. In all the cases, *it is God Himself who chooses your wilderness*. We are told, “Then was Jesus *led up of the Spirit* into the wilderness” [**Matt. 4:1**]. Elijah went into the wilderness because “the word of the Lord came unto him” [**1 Kgs 17: 2**].

If the wilderness is such a dreaded and desolate place, why does it seem unavoidable for those that God has called? How does He take us through it? What are we supposed to be doing while we are in the wilderness? These are the issues that we shall attempt to address in today’s lesson. We shall use Elijah’s story as our case study.

2. Elijah in his wilderness

In the last few weeks, we have traced the history of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah since the death of Solomon. We have seen that the northern kingdom of Israel has had an undue share of evil-minded and wicked kings who have made sin popular and fashionable. The latest of such kings is Ahab who “did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” [**1 Kgs 16: 33**]. God performed the word of the prophet Elijah that there would be drought that would last for as long as the prophet would command [**1 Kgs 17: 1**]. In deed, it lasted for three-and-a-half years [**1 Kgs 18: 1; James 5: 17**]!

As the drought took its toll, hunger descended on the land. As the people would turn their anger on the king, just as we would today turn our anger against the government if it were doing nothing about our economic hardships and natural disasters, the king was bound to look for Elijah’s head. So, to protect him, the Lord commanded Elijah to go and “*hide* thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan” [**1 Kgs 17: 3**]. While there in the wilderness, God made adequate arrangements for his food and drinks, all free of charge! For breakfast and dinner,

Elijah would have sandwiches (or hamburgers), that is, “bread and flesh” delivered by ravens. For his drinks, the brook Cherith [**vv. 4-6**]!

Back in his home in the city of Gilead, Elijah might have been used to eating thrice a day, choosing his menu and drinks. Certainly, he would not eat hamburgers twice a day for almost three years or so before the brook dried up. The food was not even dressed up or properly packaged in MacDonalld or KFC home-delivery bags! There were no extras, such as ketch-up or onion rings or pickles! How are we sure that the food had not been contaminated? How about the water? It was not filtered. How are we sure that the wild animals who also drank from the brook had not contaminated the water? So, if Elijah were looking at his situation by the ways of the world, he would resent God’s arrangements and wonder why he should be so humiliated!

To make things worse, the food was delivered by ravens (see picture). The raven is a flesh-eating bird of the family of the crow. It is an opportunistic bird that would rather take than give. God regards it as an unclean animal for food [**Lev. 11:15**]. After the floods, it was the first creature sent by Noah to go and check on the state of the earth but it never came back [**Gen. 8:7**]. Why would God use an unclean and selfish bird to deliver Elijah’s food? How come that Elijah did not protest the fact that an unclean animal had touched the food that he would eat? After all, the bird used its beak or feet and the sandwich was not wrapped!

As the drought took its toll on the brook, the water dried up and Elijah had no more to drink. God sent him to Zarephath where a widow woman had been commanded to sustain him [**1 Kgs 17: 7-9**]. When he came to the gates of the city, he saw a woman gathering sticks. He called to her, “Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” As she was going to do that, he added, “bring me a morsel of bread in thine hand” [**vv. 10-11**]. The woman was already down to her last drop. She told him that she could not afford the cake that he had asked for, that all she had were “an handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse” and that she had gathered two sticks to make the last meal for herself and her son “that we may eat it and die” [**v. 12**].

It is here that some of us would be discouraged. Didn’t God say that He had told this woman to sustain me? Why is she now making excuses? Am I sure I am speaking to the right lady? Doubts, complaints, grumbles! However, Elijah was acting on God’s word. He assured the woman that after making and delivering his own “little cake *first*,” she should go and make for herself and her son “for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruise of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth” [**vv. 13-14**]. She did as she was told and she and her family survived the drought miraculously.

What else did Elijah do while he was in the wilderness? Already, he had demonstrated to the Zarephath widow that the God of Israel was alive, in spite of

the idolatry that Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, had brought with the worship of Baal [1 Kgs 16: 31]. There was one more miracle to perform. The widow's son fell ill and died. The woman called on the man of God to help her. He "cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" God heard his prayer and the child was revived [1 Kgs 17: 17-22]. Let us understand Elijah's prayer here. He was not blaming God. Rather, Elijah was reminding God that it was he, Elijah, who alone was called into his wilderness; it did not include that woman. This point is important to enable those of us called out into the wilderness to appreciate that our family members or those helping us may not also be called into their wilderness! Only Jesus was called to die for us all, not His disciples. So, while He agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, they were fast asleep! When He was arrested, they fled!

There is evidence that Elijah came out of the over three-year wilderness experience disciplined and faith-filled. He had stayed with this family for some time and they had given him his living chamber. After he had handed over her revived son, the widow said, "Now by this, I know that thou art a man of God and that *the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth*" [vv. 23-24]. He had preached the word of God to them and the signs that follow believers [Mk 16: 17-18] had confirmed it!

3. Lessons for surviving our own wilderness

The following lessons will help us to cope with our own wilderness experiences:

a) *God proposes and disposes!*

It was not Elijah's choice to go into the wilderness. After all, Zarephath was a city like Gilead, and if God could provide for Elijah there, He could also have kept and provided for him in Gilead, in the comfort of his home. However, it was God's choice to take Elijah first into the wilds where he was fed by ravens, and later to a widow who could barely feed herself. It was God that proposed and disposed. Although Elijah was "a man subject to like passions as we are" [James 5: 17-18], he obeyed without asking any questions. That should also be our attitude.

b) *The snack bar comes from heaven!*

God asked Job, "Who provideth for the raven his food? When his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat" [Job 38:41]. This is consistent with the promise that God made to Elijah when He sent him to the brook Cherith, "I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there" [1 Kgs 17: 4]. Therefore, the bread and flesh that the ravens brought to Elijah twice a day came from heaven. You also recall that the children of Israel were fed on *manna* from heaven for forty years in the wilderness. When

the people asked about it, Moses told them, “This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat” [Ex. 16: 15].

Speaking on this subject, Jesus said:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world....Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you [Jn 6: 51-53]

Clearly, the Elijah experience is figurative of Christ as the following parallels confirm:¹

- ✓ Just as an unclean animal, the raven, was used to deliver Elijah’s snack of bread and flesh [a shadow of the Incarnate Christ], so also the Cross, a degrading method of execution reserved only for non-Roman citizens, was used to deliver Christ, the bread of life, to us. Under the Law of Moses, a person who had committed a sin worthy of death was hanged on a tree “for he that is hanged is accursed of God” [Deut. 21: 22-23].
- ✓ Elijah survived the drought. He never died a natural death, but was instead taken to heaven in a whirlwind [2 Kgs 2:11]. Jesus has said, “he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever” [Jn 6:58].
- ✓ Elijah drank of the brook and it dried up. Then, he went on to the Zarephath widow’s house where the oil never failed until the end of the drought. Jesus has said, “whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” [Jn 4: 14], and when we believe in Him, He will dwell in us and then out of our bellies “shall flow rivers of living water” [Jn 7: 37-38]. We know that nobody can call Jesus Lord “but by the Holy Ghost” [1 Cor. 12: 3], the oil of the New Covenant!

Therefore, we have no reason to fear to go into the wilderness because Jesus is already there waiting to stock our snack bar full of nutritious meals!

c) *What should we be doing while in the wilderness?*

Elijah was busy doing the work that God had called him to do. He demonstrated faith and unquestioning obedience. His own comfort was not

¹ See “Order your next hamburger from heaven,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2, No. 18: 15 July 2001; p. 3

important and he never complained. He preached the word of God to the family of the widow and God answered his prayer to raise her dead son back to life. It was God who determined the end of the drought and we were not told that Elijah was praying for it to end so that he could return to his old comfort. In like manner, we should wait on God while we are waiting for Him to end our wilderness experience. The less we worry about our sufferings, the sooner they end!

4. Conclusion

The Holy Spirit's training ground is not the Bible College. It is the wilderness where He teaches you "man doth not live by bread only but by *every word* that proceedeth from the mouth of the Lord doth man live" [**Deut. 8:3**]. He will take you through a life experience where you cannot rely on your material wealth or intellect, social status or the colour of your blood or skin. He will not end the experience until you are fully harnessed, disciplined to know when God is speaking to you!

If in deed God has called you, your wilderness experience will come, if it hasn't already. You cannot avoid it. But be of good cheer. Jesus, the bread of life, has already stocked your snack bar by shedding His blood and giving His life. You shall lack nothing. So, step forward and take a bow!



Common Raven
by James Coe