

James 5 – Job and Elijah

James chapter 5, which is our New Testament reading for today, brings our attention to 2 Old Testament characters: Job and Elijah. For the basis of our exhortation for today, we shall consider both in turn.

THE EXAMPLE OF JOB

Verse 11 of James 5 reads:

“Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (Jas 5:11).

The Divine assessment of the character of Job is seen in the Lord’s word to the adversary:

“... Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?” (Job. 1:8).

Perfect/complete

The word “perfect” signifies “complete”, and is used again in chapter 2, verse 3. Job was complete in his service to God, and was evidently not lacking in that regard. The words of the Psalmist are very applicable here: “Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace ... the salvation of the righteous is of Yahweh: he is their strength in the time of trouble” (Psa. 37:37). Having passed through his trials, the end for Job was salvation and peace, as he was granted twice as all that he had before – hence James described that “the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy”.

One that feareth God

The Proverbs provide a very helpful definition here: “the fear of Yahweh is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate” (Prov. 8:13). Job feared the Lord, and rather than to be arrogant and froward in his speech, he recognised his true position before the Almighty: “... Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: Yahweh gave, and Yahweh hath taken away; blessed be the name of Yahweh. In all this, Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job. 1:22).

Escheweth Evil

Again, in the context of speech, Peter writes:

“... he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it” (1 Pet. 3:10-11).

To fear Yahweh is to hate the evil way: Job eschewed the evil, and instead sought to do good. Peter continues a few verses later: “... having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ” (vs 16). This reminds us of the so-called friends of Job, who falsely accused him of all sorts of things that they thought he must have done, to deserve the displeasure of Yahweh towards him. Yet at the end, they were put to shame, and it was necessary for Job to intercede for them.

It seems that throughout his trials, Job’s primary concern was his relationship with his God, and that he had somehow sinned for God to be distanced from him. To cite two examples:

“I have sinned; what shall I do unto thee, O thou preserver of men? Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself? And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away mine iniquity? ...” (Job. 7:20-21).

“Thine hands have made me and fashioned me together round about; yet thou dost destroy me” (Job. 10:8).

Zophar compounded the problem, saying to Job:

“... know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth” (Job. 11:6).

But Zophar also seemed to think that God is somehow remote from the sufferings of his servant:

“Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst thou know?” (Job. 11:7-8).

This, according to the inspired Apostle is a voice of unbelief:

“... Say not in thine heart, *Who shall ascend into heaven?* (that is, to bring Christ down from above), Or *who shall descend into the deep?* (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.). But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach” (Rom. 10:6-8).

The point is, that whilst we cannot find out the ways of our Maker through natural observation, or seeking natural things, He has revealed them to us in His Word. And that Word must obtain a lodgement in our mouth and heart. God is not afar off, but is near to those who receive His Word.

The Latter End

James writes: “ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (Jas 5:11). We can see the mercy of the Lord in Job’s latter end:

“So Yahweh blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning” (Job. 42:12).

Again, we read:

“And Yahweh turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also Yahweh gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job. 42:10).

Notice that here, Job was blessed once “he prayed for his friends” – and this he did willingly. He did not demand an apology for their false accusations: rather he forgave, and prayed for their benefit. Such is a wonderful example of patient endurance in humility for us to follow!

James continues to describe the way in which brethren should pray for one another: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that he may be healed” (Jas. 5:16). He then considers another example of this in the case of Elijah:

THE EXAMPLE OF ELIJAH

The example of Elijah is expressed in terms of how “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas. 5:16). So James writes:

“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. And he

prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit ..." (Jas. 5:17-18).

The effectual and fervent prayer of Elijah then, provides us with an example of how we ought to pray for one another, "that ye may be healed". His prayer for a national famine was motivated by a desire that the spiritually diseased people would take heed to the Divine chastisement and be healed.

The detail of how that the famine came because of Elijah's prayer is omitted in the Old Testament account. But in so praying, Elijah would suffer the effects of famine himself. He prayed for the famine with scant regard for his own needs. He would suffer hunger with his people: yet he had the faith that somehow if it was Yahweh's Will for the famine to take place, that He would also provide for Elijah's needs. A passage which comes to mind is Matthew chapter 6:

"Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on ... Behold, the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" (Mat. 6:25-26).

The Father of Creation feeds the birds of the air, and therefore will also feed those who trust in Him. Elijah provides a powerful example of this: Divine sustenance in a day of evil. In his case, not only were the fowls of the air (the ravens) provided for, they in turn provided for his needs. It is interesting to note in this connection a few verses later: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mat. 6:33). Elijah is a case in point: putting his concern for his nation above his own natural needs, Yahweh provided for him – as it is written elsewhere: "Yahweh will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish: but he casteth away the substance of the wicked" (Prov. 10:3). King Ahab sought after the affairs of this life only, and was deprived of his sustenance, whereas the righteous soul of Elijah did not famish.

Being provided for by the ravens and a flowing brook, Elijah was sustained for a short period – how long, we do not know. But in due time, the brook dried up, and another means of provision was needed. So the word of Yahweh came again to Elijah: "arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zion, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee" (1 Kings 17:9).

The Widow Woman

It is interesting to notice that the record in 2 Kings portrays this arrangement as being for the benefit of Elijah, that he might be sustained. But again, the New Testament, particularly the words of Christ, provides additional commentary:

"I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow ..." (Lu. 4:25-26).

Here, we learn that Elijah was to go to sustain the widow, being "sent" to her for that purpose – despite her evidently being a Gentile. It was for pointing this out, coupled with another similar teaching regarding Naaman the Syrian, that "all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath. And rose up and thrust him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way" (Lu. 4:28-29). To this day, Jews still cannot accept the preference of faithful Gentiles over their unfaithful nation, and reject Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah.

It is interesting to note that the word came to Elijah: "I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee" (1 Kings 17:9). A little earlier in the chapter, a similar thing was said of the fowls: "thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there" (vs 4). Neither the ravens,

or the widow woman were aware of this commandment: it was evidently not a spoken instruction that they were to obey. This is rather an illustration of the ways of providence: Yahweh had determined a role for the birds and the widow woman, which they would duly fulfil – it was therefore a non-verbal ordinance that such a thing would surely come to pass (see *The Ways of Providence* by Bro Robert Roberts for more on this aspect).

When Elijah approached the widow's house, he found that all the woman had was a handful of meal, and a little oil, which she and her son were about to eat before their expected death. But how could such a small amount cater for the three of them until the rain came again? The power of Yahweh will always prevail on behalf of his saints. Just as many years later, Messiah would feed the multitudes with a few loaves and fish, even so the cruse of oil and the barrel of meal were increased daily, ensuring there was sufficient for the purpose. There are 2 verses which come to mind:

“better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:6).

“better is little with the fear of Yahweh than great treasure and trouble therewith. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith” (Prov. 15:16-17).

The woman only had a handful of meal, yet was greatly blessed with provision to meet all her needs. The food that the three individuals of faith ate was not luxurious, a stalled ox, but a simple meal, a dinner of herbs. Yet there was a love of the things of God, and so Elijah was sent there for his needs to be met, and also to sustain the widow woman in her affliction.

A Cloud like a Man's Hand

As a sign that the rain was coming, there was provided a cloud shaped like a man's hand. Elijah told his servant to go and look towards the sea, and this he did seven times. On the seventh time, he saw the cloud:

“And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea like a man's hand” (1 Kings 18:43-44).

The word for 'hand' in this place, we are told, signifies an open hand. It was not a man's hand shaped like a fist, which would have spoken of anger, and judgment: it was rather an open hand, speaking of the provision of plenty. A similar idea is found in Psalm 145:

“the eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing” (Psa. 145:15-16).

Now that the nation had learned their lesson, the famine had accomplished the desired effect. Yet sadly, it was very soon afterwards that the people turned back to their idolatry, and the abominations of the heathen – and they remain faithless to this day. Rejecting Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah, they do not trust in Yahweh's provision for their sins to be forgiven, and so there remains a work of reconciliation – which Elijah shall surely accomplish (Mal. 4:5-6) when he is raised from the dead, and rewarded when our Lord shall come.

When we consider the examples of Job and Elijah, a common theme is that despite personal difficulty, they prayed for others. Job for his friends – despite them having accused him of awful things, and Elijah for the people of Israel, who were deep in affliction and idolatry. We must endeavour to do likewise, praying for one another, that we will be brought into the Kingdom to come, and that Yahweh will be magnified in our salvation.

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