

Teaching for 8-13-08

Breaking the Cycle of Low Expectations

It does not take much for us to fall into a cycle of low expectations of God. To read through the history of Israel is to see this demonstrated in unmistakable ways. In I Kings, we clearly see how king after king lowered his expectations of God, what He could do, and what He expected of them. Rehoboam, King of Judah, was satisfied to substitute bronze shields for the gold shields taken by the Egyptians (I Kings 14:25-28), and *Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him...and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him* (I Kings 16:30-33).

The Seedbed of Low Expectations

Where do these lowered expectations come from? How do we so easily fall into accepting little or nothing from the God who can do all things? There are certainly plenty of examples to be found throughout I Kings, but clearly sin is the root of every journey that leads away from God. The downfall of Rehoboam began with pride (I Kings 12: 5-24). When Jerusalem was defeated by Egypt and the treasures of the temple were taken away, Rehoboam, who lost sight of what God expected of Israel, simply decided that bronze would do rather than the gold of the original shields. His sin robbed Israel of peace and led to continual warfare between himself and Jeroboam. Because of sin, Israel, a people who were to be God's light to the nations suffered continual difficulties and bondage. Sin hardens us from allowing God to work in and through us for the glory of His name and the furtherance of His kingdom. We easily settle for less than all God would have for us.

A Man to Break the Cycle

In a grim socio-political environment and a time of great spiritual darkness, when Ahab was king, God raised up Elijah who did not compromise his beliefs but went on to declare the greatness of God and break the cycle of low expectations. We are not told much about Elijah or how he came to be at this place in history, but his actions and words boldly declared him to be God's spokesman for the hour. Even though much has been written about Elijah, much remains a mystery. In I Kings 17, we are given a glimpse of how God began to prepare Elijah to confront the prevailing mindset of all Israel. In each of our lives, just as in the life of Elijah, God will tailor circumstances to form us and give us the experience with Him that will enable us to expect greater and greater things from God. Not out of our own vanity, but out of having spent time in the presence of God so that we know the very character of the God whom we serve.

Make Up Your Minds!

Elijah confronted the people of Israel to come to terms with their unstable expectations, *How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow him; but if Baal is God,*

follow him (I Kings 18: 20). It wasn't that there were no expectations. It was that sin and compromise had divided the hearts of God's people so that they had no idea what God was really capable of. So the test was on. The God who would answer by fire would be proven to be the true god. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to ask their god to consume a sacrificial bull by sending *fire*. After hours of empty pleading by the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, there were no results. Now it was up to Elijah. He made sure that the level of expectation was set as high as possible. Elijah had the people prepare the altar of the Lord which was in ruins. He then had them dig a pit around the altar and pour four large jars of water over the entire thing—not only once, but three times! Elijah wanted to make sure that everyone knew God was up to the challenge. And, of course, God was more than up to the challenge. He not only answered with fire, but burned up the entire sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the soil, as well as all the water (I Kings 18: 38)!

Standing at Mt. Carmel

In many ways, we stand at our own Mount Carmel today. God would challenge our own lowered expectation of who He is and what He can do. We continue to cry out to our own gods of Baal: self-efforts, people, programs, and human or religious systems. All are empty substitutes unable to answer with *fire*. We don't really expect God to answer with *fire*—but He will. He is looking for an Elijah. A person who walks in His Presence in such intimacy, that his level of expectation is in line with the purposes and the power of who God really is. This Elijah, or these Elijahs, will not settle for bronze shields. They will expect their God to answer with *fire*, even if the altar is dripping with *water*. Are you an Elijah? Are you ready to break the cycle of low expectations? Are you ready to believe God, not because you get yourself hyped-up, but because you believe that God is true to His word when he says, *If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land* (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is the time to call forth the Elijahs of God to break the cycle of low expectations.