

Malvern Mashal 21

The Shrinking Brook

The Shrinking Brook and Kingdom Attitudes

And it came to pass after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. (1 Kings 17:7 KJV)

For several long months Elijah lived in enforced seclusion. Unstructured time is hard enough for most people to cope with, but isolation presents still greater challenges. Most of us can cope with a surprising number of difficulties – *provided* we have sufficient social and emotional support.



Not only did Elijah have *no* such support, he had to wait day by day for the ravens to bring him food, while Ahab the Vengeful continued to scour the country for him. As if all these pressures were not enough, Elijah now faced a still more imminent danger: his supply of drinking water was drying up!

Whichever way you look at it, Elijah's situation was critical. The Lord had said that Elijah would drink from the brook, but He had also promised to *withhold* any rain. As the full weight of his predicament settled on him, any hope of being of use again to man or nation must have seemed like a distant mirage. All too acutely he would have felt the extreme poverty of his circumstances, the harshness of his environment and the monotony of his days. Everything had been bearable so long as the brook flowed – he might even have counted it a privilege to make do with so little – but what is life without water?

As Elijah watched the brook shrinking, and as we face challenging situations too, it is easy to cry out, "Truly, You are a God who hides Himself!"¹ With no interesting assignments to absorb himself in, it is greatly to his credit that Elijah did not waste time and energy blaming God for his situation.

All of us approach life with certain assumptions. In many ways, the more we have seen the Lord's deliverances at times when find ourselves faced with life or ministry-threatening situations, the more buoyed up we ought to be to reach out for more than is humanly possible. Since many of us are facing situations in which we have stepped out in obedience, only to find circumstances contradicting all that we believe God has promised, I would like to share a spiritual pattern with you which may, perhaps, speak to your own condition.

Suppose we find ourselves confronted with a serious difficulty, much as Elijah faced a shortage of water. We are thrilled if He does speak to us about it, but

what He says may leave us feeling bewildered, because we can see no way by which His promise can be fulfilled. If He does not appear to be saying anything at all about the situation, we are still more dismayed, because it feels as though we are being left on our own to work out what to do. Worse still, we sense that certain others are look askance at our apparent failure: quick to judge us for our “lack of faith”, or for some hidden sin that they assume must be holding God’s full blessing back.

Those things may indeed be the root cause, in which case it is entirely appropriate to consult the Lord about them, but what the Lord may primarily be looking for is our trust and perseverance. Sooner or later, further revelation will be granted, and a fresh set of circumstances unfold. Unless we miss His prompting to action, all that has been promised (or that is truly necessary) will come into view.

There may well be other occasions when we need to eat humble pie and admit that we have been mistaken in supposing that it was the Lord who was leading us in some particular direction. Sadly, some of us are too proud, or too stubborn, to retrace our steps at this point. Hanging on grimly to what we mistakenly believe to have been a word from the Lord, we are in danger of ensnaring others in our lopsided way of thinking as we continue to bulldoze forward “against the goads”.

If I may be allowed to alliterate for a moment, we might summarise the process like this: first we have some extreme Difficulty (which inclines us to feel Despondent). Then, if Discernment comes, we become Deliriously happy to know that God knows what is going on. Once this has worn off, however, we are still left confronting such an acute Dilemma that we risk entering a further period of Darkness. Provided we do not open the gate to Doubt or Delusion, on the one hand – or to the “spirit of Dither” at a time when we really do need to be Doing something, we will – to our great Delight – live to experience God’s Deliverance.

Perhaps you can “customise” that sequence in the light of things you, or others whom you care, are going through at the moment. Most of us have things to repent of concerning times when we dithered when we should have acted decisively, releasing the purposes of God by our words and actions. Having repented, however, it is so important to *receive* the Lord’s forgiveness rather to become bogged down in the swamps of failure.

“Don’t panic!”

“A diamond is a lump of coal that stayed on the job under pressure and was transformed into something exquisitely beautiful.”

Elijah, a rough diamond if ever there was one, *knew* that the Lord had *led* him to this brook. He dared not desert his post, therefore, until the Lord showed him what to do next.

This is faith on the line. Unless God intervened, Elijah was going to be just one more fatality this devastating drought had brought about. How important that word *unless* is to hold onto. If the Lord closes down one means of support, will He not open up another?

Bear in mind, though, that God has different plans for each situation that we face. Would the Lord cause water to pour from a rock for Elijah as He had done for Moses? By no means. We can never afford to rely on yesterday's guidance. Also, it is entirely consistent with the way the Lord works that He allowed Elijah to watch the water-level shrinking from one day to the next *before* telling him what He was going to do about the situation. The grace of God shields us from many difficulties, but sooner or later faith, which is of such great worth to God,² is always put to the test.

During these times when the "stream" of our life appears to be drying up, it is not surprising if we are more conscious of the "absence" of God than of His presence. After all, if we knew what was going to happen in advance, we would sit back complacently, waiting for the outcome, rather than seeking the Lord in humble dependency and fervent prayer.

If the Lord allows us, like Elijah, to watch the stream of our earthly provision drying up before He shows us what He is going to do about it, then this is, in one sense, only to highlight the contrast between our helplessness and His all-sufficiency. He who sent us out will also provide us with all that we need to make it to the end of our journey, for His commissions contain His hidden provision.

When I called, you answered me," the psalmist declares. *"You made me bold and stouthearted. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with Your right hand you save me. The Lord will fulfil His purpose for me."*³

In His great faithfulness the Lord will yet fulfil His purposes for our lives, and the very dryness we are going through can sharpen our longing and purify our prayer. Has He ever let His loved ones down? Time and again we suffer needless worry because we cannot see how He is going to handle some dilemma that is beyond our control. The Lord is not anxious: He knows what He is doing, and He wants our hearts to be made *stronger*, as opposed to *harder*, through the things we go through.

Ponder this thought: *Before the Lord does something special, He allows us to see the extent of the problem. Before He does something magnificent, however, He allows it to appear completely impossible.*



The Sinai Blues

If we have been led to believe that everything ought to continually grow and expand, we will usually need an adjustment period in which to come to terms with our shock and disappointment when events prove otherwise. Obviously, the fault often lies with our expectations – rather like the naïve driver who bought himself a large RV (Roving Vehicle) and then, under the impression that his impressive new vehicle ought to be able to steer itself, set the cruise control and wandered into the back of the cabin to make himself a cup of tea. The impact on the local hedgerow was predictable!

Truth to tell, there probably are times when the Lord allows us to drive “off piste” because He needs to deepen the fear of the Lord in us, and to fundamentally realign us. Painful though this is in the short run, it is far better than continuing on the long road to nowhere.

By definition, shrinking brook experiences tend to feel alarmingly narrow. The Latin word for “narrow” is *angustia*, from which we get the word *anguish*. God ordains these narrow times because they are the only way by which He can take us from where we are to the broader places beyond.

I cannot speak for you, but I am well aware of my propensity to fall into ‘moan-mode’ when the going gets sufficiently tough, or when I am feeling over tired. On the basis that we may not be responsible for the things that happen to us, we assuredly are for our response.

One of the most unhelpful things we can do during these times of uncertainty is to succumb to the sin which plagued the children of Israel during their long years in the wilderness – that grumbling spirit that I have nicknamed “The Sinai Blues”.

Because our lives tend to centre round the role that we play, and the position that we hold, it is hardly surprising if we feel disorientated when we lose some prized place in church or society. Apart from feeling the loss acutely, we may feel uncertain how to relate to others now that our role and status have changed. In the last analysis, we are *who* we are, rather than *what* we do.

May the Lord give us a generous spirit when, for a longer or shorter period (and we often do not know at the time which it will be) , our horizons begin to shrink. Although fewer opportunities may appear to be coming our way, there are usually ways in which our love and prayerfulness can continue to increase.

The Scattering of our Fears

Christians who have learnt the secret of praising God during times of testing and distress will be far less prone to those faith-crippling bouts of the “But what if” mentality.⁴

Humanly speaking, Elijah had good reason to be afraid. This man of the mountains knew, far better than us, that ravens, as members of the crow family,

are scavengers rather than distributors of food. Just imagine how unhappy Elijah would have been if he had spent his days worrying whether the ravens would come the next day, instead of thanking God that He was thinking of him. Where was their seemingly inexhaustible secret store of food coming from anyway?

In our terminology, what would happen if some trigger-happy farmer fetched his gun and made himself a raven pie? And just what *was* going on in the rest of Israel while he was stuck in the middle of nowhere? (Any of you who been out of phone or e mail communication for an extended period range may be familiar with *that* feeling).

We waste so much mental energy worrying about things the Lord already has in hand. It is rather like driving with one foot on the brake. We cannot change the past, but we can easily ruin a perfectly good present by worrying about the future. Given how inclined most of us are to it it may sound harsh to say that worry is a sin, so let's put it the other way round: it is not a sin not to worry!

Convicted?

In the Hebrew text, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast,"⁵ the word "peace" is repeated twice. "Perfect peace" captures this concept perfectly. It encourages us to maximise the positive, minimise the negative and expect the Lord not just to intervene when He needs to do so to bail us out, but to show us what to do and pray.

In the Revised Version, the word "mind" is translated "imagination". This is a useful reminder for those of us who know how dreadful it can be when we let our imagination dwell on things that weaken our will. It is always a great joy when we discover that the focus of our anxiety was an imaginary fear or problem – like the two Marys, who made their way to the tomb worrying how they were going to roll the stone away, only to find that an angel has already rolled the stone away for them.

God be praised, most of our fears are groundless. Psychologists tell us that 80% of them have no substance in reality. It is a sad indictment, therefore, that we, who are the only people on Earth who can really afford to be joyful, so rarely are. It is the inordinate passions which weigh us down: avarice, (greed) which can never have enough, ambition that knows no limit, and fear that plays on the thought that the Lord will end up letting us down. These are the emotions that inflame and bewitch the heart.

By no means all of our concerns prove misplaced, however. If Elijah was concerned that the brook would dry up, then he was entirely right. The advantage we have over unbelievers at this stage is that we trust the Lord has already factored this eventuality into His plans. As Brother Lawrence put it, "All things are possible to him who believes, they are less difficult to him who hopes; they are still easier to him who loves; they are even easier to him who practices all three virtues."⁶

Thank you Lord, that You know not only what You have in mind, but also when You must do it to get us to the next phase You have in mind for us!

Faith versus Fear: Our Part and God's

*When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this **only to test** him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do. (John 6:5-6)*

When we are faced by difficulties, we tend to veer either towards faith or towards fear. Reminding us that it is impossible to praise God and succumb to negative thoughts at one and the same time, Frank Boreham illustrates this principle with a telling parable. He suggests that, like the virgins, there are two kinds of bird: the wise and the foolish. Foolish birds are deterred by scarecrows – but wise ones realise that the very presence of a scarecrow is pointing to particularly juicy pickings!

When circumstances appear almost overwhelmingly difficult, it is essential to trust God's sovereignty. "I am here by His will in this affliction of sickness, in this painful time, when friends forsake me, and when the forces of the world and of darkness are pressing in on me. The Lord God Almighty is here with me, and since He is always faithful, He will deliver me from this dilemma too."

There are times when we are called to wait patiently for the Lord to work – and other times when we need to be highly proactive in taking authority over things that are hindering. It calls for considerable maturity to recognise the "balance" between what is only the Lord's responsibility and what is rightfully ours. Does the verse above (which was spoken at a time of shrinking food supplies!) not indicate that Jesus was concerned to develop His disciples to the point where they were able to respond with the same level of faith that He Himself always showed?

In other words, some situations may never change simply by praying *about* them, because they require us to release the word of authority *into* them. The verse, *May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands*, (Ps. 149:6) comes to mind – which reminds us of the word of release and authority we looked at in Malvern Mashal 8. See http://ruachministries.org/perspectives/malvernmashal8_awordofrelease.pdf

By praise and faith we can overcome every giant which stands in our way, and every thought that is threatening to take our mind captive. The Lord is looking for the very best way to bring His answers to our dilemmas. He needs us to be alert, however, to sense when to "push" and take authority in prayer – and when to recognise that He is actually changing direction in our lives.

A word of warning to conclude. No amount of "releasing" prayer will work if what is actually needed is our co-operation as He moves from one phase to another. In this instance, we know that the sentence of drought had been decreed, so if Elijah had tried to convince himself that this particular stream could miraculously be replenished by faith-filled prayer, he would have been seriously mistaken. Do not so many of our mistakes stem from adding our own interpretation to what God has

actually said? All deception make us that much less well equipped to handle reality u but the Lord *wants* us to get in the habit of having the courage to step out and practise the prayer of faith!

For Reflection

Make a list of “shrinking brook” situations that you are aware of. It may include businesses or organisations that are struggling to make ends meet, or marriages or friendships that are under strain. As you commit these situations to the Lord, is He you to release Kingdom authority into them?⁷



(Picture courtesy of www.freefoto.com)

Selah

Lord,

I confess that whenever I have looked at the water level rather than at You, my faith has faltered as a result.

Here and now I resolve that the very next time a situation occurs which looks as though a brook is going to shrink , leaving Your people stranded, and Your purposes defeated, that I will trust You to work the situation out to bring You glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

References

¹ Isaiah 45:15

² 1 Peter 1:7

³ Psalm 138:3,7-8

⁴ Romans 8:28, cf 1 Thessalonians 5:18, cf Ephesians 2:6-10

⁵ Isaiah 26:3

⁶ Brother Lawrence *The Practice of the Presence of God*

⁷ Matthew 17:20-21