

The Long and Winding Road

Elijah

When you follow God, you never know what might happen! God's plans rarely match my own. In this sense, walking with God today isn't much different than walking with God in Biblical times.

Almost two-thousand years ago, Jesus and his immediate followers were walking the gentle rolling hills around Galilee. For six days, nothing notable happened, at least that we know of. But a new day began and Jesus took Peter and two brothers named James and John and had them accompany him to a tall hilltop.

If I were one of them, I would have been eager to see what was up. Being near Jesus could be quite an adventure. Crowds would often assemble near him, and sometimes he would miraculously feed them. One never knew when someone lame, deaf, blind, or otherwise infirmed might be miraculously healed. Danger could accompany Jesus as well, with his enemies often seeking to hurt or kill him. Jesus wound up going to some pretty bizarre parties, occasionally with people that no normal Jew would be seen. Of course ,many times Jesus would tell a story or teach an important lesson that illuminated God, his law, or the human condition.

So as Jesus took them away from the larger group, I suspect I would have sensed something might be up! I would be wondering what surprise God might have in store that day.

As Matthew related the story, when Jesus got up to the top of the hill, he changed forms! The Greek word is *metamorphoō* (μεταμορφώω), and it is frequently translated "transfigured." Jesus' changed form was shown in his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming pure white as light.

As Peter, James, and John looked on, they saw Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus, deep in conversation. Peter than chimed in, offering to build three shelters. This would enable Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to talk in the shade with a shelter that would give the dignity the three deserved for such a rare meeting.

In a sense, Peter likely thought his words complimentary of Jesus, for he was putting Jesus on equal footing with Moses and Elijah, Israel's greatest two prophets. The next event, however, changed that. A cloud overshadowed Jesus and the others. God didn't need Peter to build shade, God had that covered. From the cloud, God then spoke,

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him (Mt. 17:6).

Peter, James and John were scared! They fell on their faces in wonderment and awe. It couldn't have been lost on them, that with Moses and Elijah present, God was pointing out the importance of Jesus! Jesus trumped even Moses and Elijah, Israel's greatest prophets.

Jesus touched the men and told them not to be afraid. The men then looked up and the scene was over. Jesus was there with them alone.

Yes, for Peter, James, and John, going with Jesus that day was not just any ordinary day. It was a day of surprises. The significance of the surprises must have grown in the apostles minds as time passed and they learned more of Jesus. Why is this? Let's consider some factors, with the greater emphasis on Elijah since we have previously worked through Moses as a foreshadowing of Jesus.

The Story of Elijah

The story of Elijah is found in greatest detail in the Old Testament books First and Second Kings. 1 Kings 17 opens with the wicked King Ahab on the throne of Israel, and Elijah the Tishbite went before Ahab as God's prophet announcing God's judgment and the punishment of no water ("neither dew nor rain") until further notice.

Elijah went into hiding where God saw to his provision of food and water. Once the brook from which he drank dried up, Elijah went to Zarephath and found a widow almost dead from lack of food and water. Elijah asked the widow for a bit of water. He also asked her to give him a morsel of bread from the last oil and grain she had. Elijah promised the widow that she would never run out of grain or oil if she did as he instructed.

The widow followed through as requested and God saw to Elijah's promise. The oil and grain were self-sustaining.

Sometime later, the widow's son fell ill and died. The widow lashed out at Elijah, correlating the death to Elijah's reminding her of her sinfulness. Elijah took the boy to his bed and laid him on it. Crying out to the Lord ("three times"), "the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived" (1 Kings 17:22).

At some point in time, God told Elijah it was time to rain. God instructed Elijah to announce the coming rain to King Ahab. Elijah did so, rather indirectly at first, and met with Ahab, instructing the king to get his idolatrous priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mount Carmel for a showdown on who is the real God and who isn't.

Ahab assembled 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Elijah came representing YHWH, the true God. Much of Israel showed up to see what would happen. Elijah challenged Baal, the prophets, and the king, calling forth two bulls, one to be sacrificed to Baal and one to YHWH.

The key to the challenge was sacrificing the bulls, setting them on altars with wood, but not lighting the fires. The prophets were to leave it to God and Baal to prove their power by divine ignition of the sacrifices. The drama is marvelous to read, but in the end, only YHWH lights the fire and consumes not only the bulls, but the wood, stones, and even water poured on Elijah's bull to make it more awe-inspiring.

In the ensuing melee, Elijah had all the prophets of Baal slain. Elijah then delivered God's promise of imminent rain. The rain was coming, but so was the wrath of Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel. She pronounced a death sentence on Elijah to be filled within 24 hours. Elijah was terrified of the Queen's judgment, but he found strength and protection from God.

Over time, Elijah continued to be the mouthpiece for God to the King and to Israel. Eventually King Ahab died and Elijah continued to be God's prophet to the succeeding king, Ahaziah. Ahaziah was wounded from a fall and rather than seek God's blessing and help, Ahaziah sent word for an idol's intervention and insight. Elijah announced that God's judgment would fall on the unfaithful king and he would die from his wounds. The king tried to arrest and bring Elijah in for a face-to-face, but Elijah refused to go. Within a set time, the king died as Elijah prophesied.



As the time drew near for Elijah to die, he took his protégé Elisha and headed across the Jordan near Jericho. Elijah struck the Jordan with his robe and the waters parted so that the two could cross on dry land. Elisha asked Elijah for a double portion of God's Spirit, and Elijah assured him it would be his if Elisha saw Elijah's departure from the life.

Then a chariots and horses of fire appeared and Elijah climbed on and was caught up in a whirlwind into the sky. Elijah was no more.

Elijah's Prophetic Role Regarding Jesus

Elijah was one of Israel's greatest prophets. A pious man aptly named ("Elijah" means "YHWH is my God"), Elijah stood up for what was right, called kings to account for paganism in lieu of faithful worship, worked hard to turn hearts to God, ferreting out the worshipping of idols, and exhibited awesome displays of the power of the Lord. He ministered to the people, providing food to a poor family and bringing a grieving mother's dead son back to life. At the end of his life, he did not die, but was taken up in a flaming chariot. In these things, Elijah provided a prophetic glimpse into the life and ministry of Jesus, both through John the Baptist and through the events in Jesus' life.

Malachi, John the Baptist and Elijah

In the Christian ordering of the Bible, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. In protestant Scriptures, it comes immediately before Matthew 1, which layouts out the birth of Jesus.

Malachi is built around six dialogues with God. In each of these six sections, the ordering of the dialogue is clear and concise: God speaks, the people reply, and then God responds. Each dialogue is a wake-up call, telling the people that their lives need to reflect genuine holiness, not simply a half-hearted effort following certain prescribed rules or laws. If we are reading our New Testaments, the cry of Malachi would remind us of both the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. In each we find Malachi's wake-up call to genuine holiness.

Then right before it's closing, there is a section of Malachi that stands apart from the six dialogues. In this final section (4:1-6), Malachi draws out a different group of people – those who fear the Lord. Those who fear God, will have their names written in a book of remembrance, and they will be spared the fate of the wicked. Everyone should know that while the wicked may seem to prosper, a day is set when burning will reduce the arrogant and evildoers to stubble. But for those who fear the LORD, there will be healing as the sun of righteousness rises. But on that day, the wicked will be ashes under the soles of the feet:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 4:1-3).

One may recognize that phrase “sun of righteousness,” as it is found in one of the great Christmas carols. Charles Wesley’s third stanza in *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* recounts the passage: “Hail, the Sun of Righteousness, Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His Wings.” Wesley wasn’t the first to see Jesus as Malachi’s “sun of righteousness.” The early church preachers and writers also saw Jesus as this fulfillment. (See, Allison, Dale “Healing in the Wings of His Garment,” *The Word Leaps the Gap*, (Eerdmans 2008), at 132ff, references at footnote 31.) Allison also explains this as a likely reason why the synoptic gospel writers included the detail of healings from touching “the fringe” of Jesus’ garment (Mt. 9:20; 14:36; Mk 6:56; Lk 8:44). The Greek for “hem” or “fringe” (κρασπεδον) referenced the tassels that Jews were commanded to wear in Numbers 15:37-41. The same Numbers passage (15:38), said that these tassels were to be attached to the כנף or “wings” of the garment. The synoptic writers confirm the literal nature of Christ having “healing in his wings!

Following this as Malachi 4 concludes, Malachi promised that “before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (when Jesus, the sun of righteousness appears), God would send “Elijah the prophet” to “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 4:5-6).

The relation of this promise to John the Baptist was made by Jesus himself. Toward the end of John’s life, when John was sitting in prison, he sent his followers to make sure Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus sent them back the affirmation, in a sense, the assurance that John had done his job and could move on to God’s eternity in peace. After sending John’s disciples back to him, Jesus explained to the remaining crowd that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophesy in Malachi.

[John] is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Mt. 11:10-15).

JTB was not some reincarnation of Elijah. Malachi was not speaking of the actual person Elijah returning. There was a prophet coming, the one Isaiah predicted would “prepare the

way for the Lord,” and this was to be done in the spirit of Elijah. The angel that announced John the Baptist’s birth to his father Zachariah explained this. The point of the Malachi passage was not that Elijah himself would return for a second life on earth. Rather one was coming who would,

go before [Jesus] *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared (Lk 1:17).

Interestingly, John the Baptist refused to identify himself as Elijah. In John 1:19-23 we read,

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John the Baptist emphasized his role in fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah 40:3 (“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD’”), and at least at that point in his life didn’t understand he also fulfilled the prophetic role of Elijah from Malachi 4. But Jesus made clear that John the Baptist indeed was the Elijah.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come (Mt. 11:11-14).

John made the cry of Elijah for the people as demonstrated in Elijah’s life as well as the prophetic cry of Malachi’s Elijah.

Elijah and the Mount of Transfiguration

Even beyond John the Baptist as Malachi’s Elijah coming to set the stage for the sun of righteousness, we read of the appearance of the Old Testament Elijah with Jesus and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration detailed in Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, and Luke 9:28-36 and discussed in the introduction to this lesson.

At the mount of Transfiguration, the events unfolded in a way that spoke of multiple witnesses to the work and personage of Jesus while at the same time fulfilling multiple Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah. Jesus was transfigured where “his face shone the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matt 17:2).

One is tempted to relate this to Moses coming down from the mountain after being in the presence of God, where Scripture relates that his face shone so brightly that he wore a veil (Ex 34:29-34:35); however, there is an important distinction. Moses’ face shone because he had been in the presence of God and was reflecting God’s brilliance. Jesus’ face shone on *its own*. Jesus was the source of the face and clothes shining. This is testimony that proclaimed the deity of Jesus, in the sense of the Hebrew blessing for God’s face to shine upon his people (Num. 6:24-26), as well as the Psalm’s admonition that God wraps himself in light as a garment (Ps. 104:2).

This testimony to Jesus as God on the Mount of Transfiguration was important legally. The appearance/presence of Moses and Elijah on the mount gives two witnesses’ testimony to the validity of Jesus appearing as God. Under Jewish law, two witnesses were required to establish a truth. Then we have Peter, James and John witnessing the whole event, giving validity to the testimony of the event itself occurring (including the appearance of Elijah and Moses!) They further witnessed and could rightly give testimony in their culture and age to the voice from heaven proclaiming and explaining the events,

“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5).

Conclusion

In the Old Testament story of Elijah, we have one who was taken up to heaven without a physical death that left a body here on earth. This well-suited Elijah to be one who would return (metaphorically in John the Baptist and visibly on the Mount of Transfiguration). Returning, Elijah would bear witness to the chosen one, Jesus, the sun of righteousness and the Son of Righteousness. We should see Elijah and see Jesus!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Elijah...*” (1 Kings 17).

Elijah’s name alone inspires me. I have a lot of choices in this life for what I will give value to, for where I place my trust, for what will be my goal. If it is the Lord God, then my worship is right. If it is anything else, I am worshipping an idol. Elijah’s name meant “YHWH is my God.” For Elijah, in name and deed, the Lord

was his God. He called the people to account for chasing after other gods. He challenged the convention and culture of his day that had “outgrown” the primitive idea of the Lord as God. He showed in power that God reigned, and the gods of the people were simple fictions of their imaginations. May I worship the one true God each day.

2. *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him”* (Mt. 17:6).

God declared in the presence of Elijah, Moses, James, John, and Peter, that Jesus was God’s son. But God didn’t leave it there. God then added, “Listen to him!” This is where we need to be with God. Yes, God is God. Yes, Jesus is God. But that isn’t the end of it. That has implications! We should listen to him! Heaven forbid we should see God but not listen to him.

3. *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings”* (Mal. 4:2).

I need the healing of Jesus – each day, each hour, and each minute. He gives it. Why would I give my life to anyone or anything else? Heal us Jesus!