

Lesson 8

"Conformity, Compromise, and Crisis in Worship"

Will it not be a glorious day when the hearts and lives of God's people are free from sinning and they have grown up fully in God's agape-love? They will not be conscious that their characters have been perfected by God's grace. They will not be aware that they have received the seal of God. God will pronounce the words of His covenant before the universe: "Here are they which keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). Their only concern will be that they might dishonor Christ by some hidden defect in their lives. However, Jesus "shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isa. 53:11). The "most precious message" sets forth the prospect of sinless living in tempted sinful flesh. Jesus will demonstrate that His gospel is fully able to deliver us from sin.

"It's not pretty, but there it is--the last word of the Old Testament is 'a curse' (Mal. 4:6), not so much a threat as it is the inevitable Bad News of disaster as the unavoidable consequence of sin. It's the 'curse' that came in the flood of Noah when the earth was destroyed. The human race brought it upon themselves 'in the days of Noah,' and will do so again, unless somehow help can come.

"The 'help' that God promises is a totally impossible miracle for humans: God will 'send ... Elijah before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers' (Mal. 4:5, 6). That 'turning-of-heart' is the only thing that can avert a global 'curse.' Only 'Elijah's message' can reconcile the desolated hearts and cleanse the pollution. It's more than old covenant resolutions and works; it's a heart-turning 'faith-which-works' proclamation of the cross of Jesus, of grace which abounds more than sin" (excerpted from Robert J. Wieland, "Dial Daily Bread").

In the days of Elijah, through complacency, Israel had fallen into Baal worship. "The apostasy prevailing today is similar to that which in the prophet's day overspread Israel" (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 170). Like the end-time church, Laodicea, Israel had been blind to this perversion of truth, so compromise came easily. Content to allow an "alternative" worship style, Israel saw nothing wrong with the worship of God and the worship of Baal co-existing. Ellen White explains the parallel for our day: "Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 467, 468).

"Elijah recognized that Baal had usurped the place of Yahweh. ... Baal was solely the creation of man, a counterfeit from the beginning. He was an insult to the Creator, made for human desire "to be mighty ... in the earth," and by him cities were built and Babylon was made the capital. Plainly, Baal-worship is none other than self-worship" (Donald K. Short, "Baal-worship and the Long Delay").

God didn't abandon Israel, and as with Laodicea, He reproveth and disciplines those He loves. Elijah called for a "showdown." Echoing the Day of Atonement mandate that all must participate (Lev. 23:29), Elijah commanded that all Israel must appear. That Ahab agreed to the showdown was probably a combination of his own weakness and the desperate situation. Ahab hated this messenger who "troubled" Israel as one whose life and message served to constantly reprove his weaknesses and sins. Maybe Ahab hoped the showdown would reveal Elijah and his God to be failures, providing an excuse to rid the earth of the source of the problems.

The test was posed by Elijah: "How long halt ye between two opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21). The question called for a public declaration of belief. "When [Elijah] threw down the challenge, 'If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him,' we have in their answer a vivid video tape of the last church. The record says, 'The people answered him not a word.' This means they were not for, they were not against, they were not hot, they were not cold, they were 'lukewarm.' They did not know their condition. Unconsciously they had changed leaders" (Short, op. cit.).

Like the man attending the wedding feast without a garment, the people said nothing. They were accustomed to the entertaining and seductive demonstrations of the priests of Baal and Asherah. The satanic celebration moved to outright frenzy, when about noon, Elijah mocked them and their gods. By late afternoon, the dancers were giving up from exhaustion.

What will Elijah do, another wearisome demonstration of self-mutilation? Attention is riveted. The coarsely dressed Elijah stands alone and unafraid. The spiritual leadership of the day never demonstrated this kind of courage. His first words are unexpected: "Come near to me," words which would echo the One Who years later would say to the world "Come unto Me all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ..." (Matt. 11:28, etc.).

The "Elijah" message is probably most clearly embodied in his prayer: "Let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, ... and that thou hast turned their heart back again" (1 Kings 18:36, 37), and Malachi repeated that message (4:6).

This "turning of heart," or restoration, incorporates the idea of repentance, which is what John the Baptist called for when he came in the spirit and power of Elijah before Jesus came. Jesus described how He would accomplish this: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me" (John 12:32). In the very last days before Jesus returns, those who have identified with Christ's sacrifice when He was "lifted up" will be used to draw all to Christ. They will be so restored, cleansed, and regenerated that they will demonstrate what it means to have their hearts "turned back" again. The result will be a sympathy with Christ for perishing multitudes and an understanding heart toward sinners.

"God's people have the assurance from Malachi that before the Lord can return there will again be a great work performed by Elijah (4:5). ... In a morning talk given by Ellen White, she intimates 'Elijah' is that message begun in 1888 (Selected Messages, book 1, pp. 412 ff.). ... When we understand our situation, our relation to the 'most precious message' the Lord sent, Baal-worship will be destroyed. ... The long delay is over. Baal is cast down. The Divine Bridegroom has at last won the heart of His bride. 'That day' can come whenever the Bride says she is ready to be married. 'That day' could be sooner than we think" (Short, op. cit.).

--Arlene Hill