

for eight years encouraging  
believers to know God and  
His ways, and to enjoy a  
more intimate communion  
with Him

## Running from Jezebel

*Why do you boast of evil, you mighty man?  
Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?  
Your tongue plots destruction;  
it is like a sharpened razor, you who practice deceit.  
You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. Selah  
You love every harmful word, O you deceitful tongue! Psalm 52:1-4*

### Reading the Entrails

The movie that night had been *Camelot*, with Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave. The overpowering sense of ennui and nostalgia with which the movie ended sent me outside into the black of the night—a night so black the ship cutting through the waves became an envelope of sound, wrapping me inside, sightless and soundless, like the roar of silence in an empty desert. I groped my way along the deck, feeling the waves closer than they really were, and thinking any wrong step would be my last. Refuge found, I sat alone on the cold metal deck, staring into the invisible night, feeling profoundly and irrevocably alone.

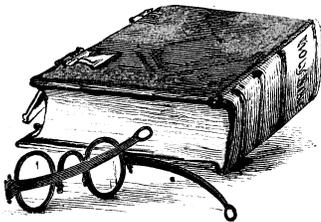
Vietnam, for me, was one-thousand guys on a gray-metal Cruiser, traveling in circles around the Tonkin Gulf. The ship never came within sight of the Vietnamese shore. It stayed well away, training its radar and missiles on an invisible enemy lying somewhere over the horizon. My Vietnam was days of boredom and sleep, and nights of aimlessly roaming about the darkened passageways, dreaming of a footing more steady than the rolling deck of the ship. During those six months of my very young life I made myself intimately acquainted with the smallest nooks and crannies of that Naval vessel. As a member of the admiral's band I was thoroughly despised by virtually every other member of the ship's company. We were routinely hated for the simple fact that while they were busy with the business of war, we were busy sleeping, reading, and practicing our instruments. Clearly this opinion of musicians was shared by even the upper ranks of officers, since our assigned station for general quarters was the ship's library—a compartment buried deep within the bowels of the vessel—guaranteeing that we, like the legendary band aboard the *Titanic*, would be accompanying the captain of the ship on any voyage down to Davey Jones' Locker. For this reason they deemed it unnecessary to assign us an "abandon-ship" station. We would never make it out anyway.

Into this foreign environment stepped a rosy-cheeked lad of eighteen years, fresh out of high school and Midwestern naiveté. My six-month tour on the U.S.S. *Chicago* was a confusing mix of the absurd and the frightening. Days were spent sleeping or reading a well-worn paperback, huddled in some out-of-the-way space of the ship. Nights were spent doing the same, or staying up with a card game for as long as the Master at Arms would permit. And all the time, the lunacy of Vietnam pressed in.

Wars are never quite as poetic as remembered. This undeclared idiocy was responsible for thousands of deaths, gruesome injuries, and the dissection of our national spirit. Strong youths returned in pieces, and healthy minds were fragmented by the noxious brew of drugs, killing and frustration.

*"If you wish to know God,  
you must know His Word.  
If you wish to perceive His  
power, you must see how He  
works by His Word. If you wish  
to know His purpose before it  
comes to pass, you can only  
discover it by  
His Word."*

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON



This particular war was, for some, just another job. They put in their time, followed orders, and went home to live a normal life. They experienced little of the lingering aftereffects realized by others.

Some returned home on crutches or in a wheelchair; others returned home to embrace their loved ones with only one arm. Some came back on stretchers, their face to the clouds and an uncertain future in a VA Hospital. Still others returned to lead lives of unspeakable violence or crime—as if to perpetuate the war they so hated.

My war wound was invisible, for awhile. There was no gaping sore, no missing limb, no head swathed in bandages. I felt no need for counseling from a veteran's group. I discounted the impact of Vietnam on my life; after all, I had only been on a ship off the coast, never even in sight of Vietnam. I had no experience with the jungles, the shooting, the killing. I had never even *held* a real gun all my time in the service!

Years later, however, the wound began to bleed. There was the time in Egypt, locked in the middle of a crowd of tourists who had been jammed into a tiny holding room, when the panic hit; the time in Kenya, when, coming down the mountain in a crowded bus, it seemed like the air was all dust, and no oxygen; and then the many times in crowded grocery and department stores, the terror of feeling trapped and helpless, needing to flee to a place of quiet safety.

## The Huddling Place

Daily the headlines and network talking heads bombard us with tales from a society turned upside down—of criminals being termed victims, of *real* victims being left with shattered lives; of the old rules being discarded and replaced by new rules that aren't even rules at all; of good people being ridiculed for having integrity, and bad people who haven't any getting away with murder.

In the land once called Yugoslavia a madman orchestrates slaughter on an epic scale, and the world fusses and threatens, but ultimately leaves him to do as he pleases. In Iraq another madman still plays with nuclear weapons—and gets away with it because the President of the United States has a girlfriend. And in that "land of the free and home of the brave," leaders who vote their conscience are labeled, with a contemptuous sneer, 'bipartisan'—as if standing on principle reduces them to the level of an axe murderer.

HELP, LORD, FOR THE GODLY ARE NO MORE; THE FAITHFUL HAVE VANISHED FROM AMONG MEN. EVERYONE LIES TO HIS NEIGHBOR; THEIR FLATTERING LIPS SPEAK WITH DECEPTION. PSALM 12:1-2

It's all enough to make one cross back over his moat and pull up the drawbridge. Like the one who is afraid of crowds after being pressed from all sides by a ship-load of sailors, we want to somehow pull away from this backwards society living on the wrong side of the looking glass. We want to pull our loved ones in with us, close and secure, and shut the rest of the world out. We want to scream back, "Enough! Is there anyone left who is good?"

The prophet Elijah once found himself in a similar situation. Even though he had just demonstrated the power of his God in a most dramatic, public way, he suddenly found himself running for his life.

NOW AHAB TOLD JEZEBEL EVERYTHING ELIJAH HAD DONE AND HOW HE HAD KILLED ALL THE PROPHETS WITH THE SWORD. SO JEZEBEL SENT A MESSENGER TO ELIJAH TO SAY, "MAY THE GODS DEAL WITH ME, BE IT EVER SO SEVERELY, IF BY THIS TIME TOMORROW I DO NOT MAKE YOUR LIFE LIKE THAT OF ONE OF THEM." ELIJAH WAS AFRAID AND RAN FOR HIS LIFE. WHEN HE CAME TO BEERSHEBA IN JUDAH, HE LEFT HIS SERVANT THERE, WHILE HE HIMSELF WENT A DAY'S JOURNEY INTO THE DESERT. HE CAME TO A BROOM TREE, SAT DOWN UNDER IT AND

NOW SUMMON THE PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER ISRAEL TO MEET ME ON MOUNT CARMEL. AND BRING THE FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY PROPHETS OF BAAL AND THE FOUR HUNDRED PROPHETS OF ASHERAH, WHO EAT AT JEZEBEL'S TABLE." SO AHAB SENT WORD THROUGHOUT ALL ISRAEL AND ASSEMBLED THE PROPHETS ON MOUNT CARMEL. ELIJAH WENT BEFORE THE PEOPLE AND SAID, "HOW LONG WILL YOU WAVER BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS? IF THE LORD IS GOD, FOLLOW HIM; BUT IF BAAL IS GOD, FOLLOW HIM." BUT THE PEOPLE SAID NOTHING. THEN ELIJAH SAID TO THEM, "I AM THE ONLY ONE OF THE LORD'S PROPHETS LEFT, BUT BAAL HAS FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY PROPHETS. GET TWO BULLS FOR US. LET THEM CHOOSE ONE FOR THEMSELVES, AND LET THEM CUT IT INTO PIECES AND PUT IT ON THE WOOD BUT NOT SET FIRE TO IT. I WILL PREPARE THE OTHER BULL AND PUT IT ON THE WOOD BUT NOT SET FIRE TO IT. THEN YOU CALL ON THE NAME OF YOUR GOD, AND I WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD. THE GOD WHO ANSWERS BY FIRE—HE IS GOD." THEN ALL THE PEOPLE SAID, "WHAT YOU SAY IS GOOD." ELIJAH SAID TO THE PROPHETS OF BAAL, "CHOOSE ONE OF THE BULLS AND PREPARE IT FIRST, SINCE THERE ARE SO MANY OF YOU. CALL ON THE NAME OF YOUR GOD, BUT DO NOT LIGHT THE FIRE." SO THEY TOOK THE BULL GIVEN THEM AND PREPARED IT. THEN THEY CALLED ON THE NAME OF BAAL FROM MORNING TILL NOON. "O BAAL, ANSWER US!" THEY SHOUTED. BUT THERE WAS NO RESPONSE; NO ONE ANSWERED. AND THEY DANCED AROUND THE ALTAR THEY HAD MADE. AT NOON ELIJAH BEGAN TO TAUNT THEM. "SHOUT LOUDER!" HE SAID. "SURELY HE IS A GOD! PERHAPS HE IS DEEP IN THOUGHT, OR BUSY, OR TRAVELING. MAYBE HE IS SLEEPING AND MUST BE AWAKENED." SO THEY SHOUTED LOUDER AND SLASHED THEMSELVES WITH SWORDS AND SPEARS, AS WAS THEIR CUSTOM, UNTIL THEIR BLOOD FLOWED. MIDDAY PASSED, AND THEY CONTINUED THEIR FRANTIC PROPHECYING UNTIL THE TIME FOR THE EVENING SACRIFICE. BUT THERE WAS NO RESPONSE, NO ONE ANSWERED, NO ONE PAID ATTENTION. THEN ELIJAH SAID TO ALL THE PEOPLE, "COME HERE TO ME." THEY CAME TO HIM, AND HE REPAIRED THE ALTAR OF THE LORD, WHICH WAS IN RUINS. ELIJAH TOOK TWELVE STONES, ONE FOR EACH OF THE TRIBES DESCENDED FROM JACOB, TO WHOM THE WORD OF THE LORD HAD COME, SAYING, "YOUR NAME SHALL BE ISRAEL." WITH THE STONES HE BUILT AN ALTAR IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, AND HE DUG A TRENCH AROUND IT LARGE ENOUGH TO HOLD TWO SEAHS OF SEED. HE ARRANGED THE WOOD, CUT THE BULL INTO PIECES AND LAID IT ON THE WOOD. THEN HE SAID TO THEM, "FILL FOUR LARGE JARS WITH WATER AND POUR IT ON THE OFFERING AND ON THE WOOD." "DO IT AGAIN," HE SAID, AND THEY DID IT AGAIN. "DO IT A THIRD TIME," HE ORDERED, AND THEY DID IT THE THIRD TIME. THE WATER RAN DOWN AROUND THE ALTAR AND EVEN FILLED THE TRENCH. AT THE TIME OF SACRIFICE, THE PROPHET ELIJAH STEPPED FORWARD AND PRAYED: "O LORD, GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND ISRAEL, LET IT BE KNOWN TODAY THAT YOU ARE GOD IN ISRAEL AND THAT I AM YOUR SERVANT AND HAVE DONE ALL THESE THINGS AT YOUR COMMAND. ANSWER ME, O LORD, ANSWER ME, SO THESE PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT YOU, O LORD, ARE GOD, AND THAT YOU ARE TURNING THEIR HEARTS BACK AGAIN." THEN THE FIRE OF THE LORD FELL AND BURNED UP THE SACRIFICE, THE WOOD, THE STONES AND THE SOIL, AND ALSO LICKED UP THE WATER IN THE TRENCH. WHEN ALL THE PEOPLE SAW THIS, THEY FELL PROSTRATE AND CRIED, "THE LORD—HE IS GOD! THE LORD—HE IS GOD!" THEN ELIJAH COMMANDED THEM, "SEIZE THE PROPHETS OF BAAL. DON'T LET ANYONE GET AWAY!" THEY SEIZED THEM, AND ELIJAH HAD THEM BROUGHT DOWN TO THE KISHON VALLEY AND SLAUGHTERED THERE. 1 KINGS 18:19-40

PRAYED THAT HE MIGHT DIE. "I HAVE HAD ENOUGH, LORD," HE SAID. "TAKE MY LIFE; I AM NO BETTER THAN MY ANCESTORS." THEN HE LAY DOWN UNDER THE TREE AND FELL ASLEEP. 1 KINGS 19:1-5A

What is the Christian to do when society struggles so persistently against everything he or she believes? What is the Christian to do when just about everything outside the sanctity of the home runs counter to that believed within? What should be the response when even the leaders of the land have turned against things holy and righteous?

Elijah's response was to run. The detached observer could easily point out to the prophet that he had just demonstrated the supernatural strength of his God. What had he to fear from mere mortals? Why didn't he just call upon that same righteous power to protect him from this new threat?

Does it really matter that our circumstances are difficult? Why shouldn't they be! If we give way to self-pity and indulge in the luxury of misery, we remove God's riches from our lives and hinder others from entering into His provision. No sin is worse than the sin of self-pity, because it removes God from the throne of our lives, replacing Him with our own self-interests.

OSWALD CHAMBERS

There are, essentially, three possible responses to conflict: Fight back, change sides, or retreat. Elijah had just fought back, in a most dramatic way, dealing a serious blow to the opposition. But suddenly, when faced with the schemes of one evil woman, he chose to turn tail and run. Worse, he fled with a thoroughly shattered spirit, whimpering and pouting that since he couldn't be better than his fathers, then he may as well shake off the dust of this mortal plane and return to his Maker.

In His mercy, God meets us at our needs; He is not one to throw hard currency at a starving mother and child. Elijah may have needed a swift kick in the posterior, but in His compassion, the Lord first met the prophet's more physical needs. First things first.

ALL AT ONCE AN ANGEL TOUCHED HIM AND SAID, "GET UP AND EAT." HE LOOKED AROUND, AND THERE BY HIS HEAD WAS A CAKE OF BREAD BAKED OVER HOT COALS, AND A JAR OF WATER. HE ATE AND DRANK AND THEN LAY DOWN AGAIN. THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME BACK A SECOND TIME AND TOUCHED HIM AND SAID, "GET UP AND EAT, FOR THE JOURNEY IS TOO MUCH FOR YOU." SO HE GOT UP AND ATE AND DRANK. 1 KINGS 19:5B-8A

## Visitation

On our missionary trip to Mexico in 1969 I became troubled by some things that were going on. Where the year before (during an earlier visit to the area with a group from our church) I had observed in the leaders an honest love and compassion for the residents, and a tireless zeal to share with them the good news of Christ, now the group was becoming more of a *business* intent on its own survival, rather than the eternal survival of souls. We, as a group, seemed to be more detached, and disinterested in those to whom we had come to minister.

Over a period of days I wrestled with what I should do about the situation. In my youth, I felt powerless to affect any change. My personal options seemed to be reduced to two: stay or leave. When I brought my troubled misgivings to those in charge, rather than the discussion focusing on my spiritual and emotional turmoil, it focused instead on what would become of the money I had paid them.

So, while everyone else was busy in an evening preaching service, I retired into our old bread truck and spent the rest of the evening on my knees.

For something more than an hour I poured my heart out to God, seeking His will in the matter. What should I do? After only a few weeks into the summer, should I pack up my things and return home? Or should I stay put and learn to live with the hypocrisy around me? Maybe I was wrong, imagining hypocrisy where none existed. What did He want me to do?

My anguish and confusion filled the inside of our truck like a thick, heavy cloud. My tears drenched the seat cushion of the old, overstuffed chair. The truck became a powerful prayer closet as I sought His face.

Then He showed it.

Through the haze of my uncertainty the face of God came to me in the person of Jesus Christ. It was no apparition, no ghost conjured by religious ecstasy. Neither was it the Savior in bodily form. It was, in reality, the *spirit* of Christ come to comfort me in such tangible power as to seem that His presence actually filled the interior of that truck. Even then, in the throes of passionate prayer, I knew that what I was seeing through closed eyelids was really emanating from the confines of my own heart—not that my bruised heart was manufacturing this comforting image, but it was somehow releasing, in more tangible form, the spirit of Christ dwelling there.

IN MY DISTRESS I CALLED TO THE LORD; I CRIED TO MY GOD FOR HELP. FROM HIS TEMPLE HE HEARD MY VOICE; MY CRY CAME BEFORE HIM, INTO HIS EARS. PSALM 18:6

In my moment of pain and lonely indecision, my very personal Savior came to me, and in His compassionate embrace I found peace—and the answer to my youthful uncertainty.

HEAR MY CRY, O GOD; LISTEN TO MY PRAYER. FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH I CALL TO YOU, I CALL AS MY HEART GROWS FAINT; LEAD ME TO THE ROCK THAT IS HIGHER THAN I. PSALM 61:1-2

His body refreshed by the Lord’s sustenance, Elijah journeyed to God’s mountain—the holy mountain on which Moses had received the tablets from the Lord. Once there, however, it became clear that the prophet had lost none of his self-pity. In fact, he had spent the last forty days letting it fester and ripen.

STRENGTHENED BY THAT FOOD, HE TRAVELED FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS UNTIL HE REACHED HOREB, THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD. THERE HE WENT INTO A CAVE AND SPENT THE NIGHT. AND THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO HIM: "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, ELIJAH?" HE REPLIED, "I HAVE BEEN VERY ZEALOUS FOR THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY. THE ISRAELITES HAVE REJECTED YOUR COVENANT, BROKEN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND PUT YOUR PROPHETS TO DEATH WITH THE SWORD. I AM THE ONLY ONE LEFT, AND NOW THEY ARE TRYING TO KILL ME TOO." 1 KINGS 19:8B-10

To the one who is focused upon himself, earthly trials can seem overwhelming, as if sufficient to block out the strength and all-powerful justice of the Lord God. In a moment of petulance and doubt we remove the Infinite from our list of possible solutions.

Almighty God took a moment to graciously remind His despairing prophet that He was still near. In the words of the apostle Paul, the Lord revealed His “eternal power and divine nature” to him.<sup>1</sup>

THE LORD SAID, "GO OUT AND STAND ON THE MOUNTAIN IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD, FOR THE LORD IS ABOUT TO PASS BY. "THEN A GREAT AND POWERFUL WIND TORE THE MOUNTAINS APART AND SHATTERED THE ROCKS BEFORE THE LORD, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE WIND. AFTER THE WIND THERE WAS AN EARTHQUAKE, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE EARTHQUAKE. AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE CAME A FIRE, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE FIRE. AND AFTER THE FIRE CAME A GENTLE WHISPER. WHEN ELIJAH HEARD IT, HE PULLED HIS CLOAK OVER HIS FACE AND WENT OUT AND STOOD AT THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE. 1 KINGS 19:11-13A

Jesus says, in effect, “Don’t worry about whether or not you are being treated justly.” Looking for justice is actually a sign that we have been diverted from our devotion to Him. Never look for justice in this world, but never cease to give it. If we look for justice, we will only begin to complain and to indulge ourselves in the discontent of self-pity, as if to say, “Why should I be treated like this?” If we are devoted to Jesus Christ, we have nothing to do with what we encounter, whether it is just or unjust. In essence, Jesus says, “Continue steadily on with what I have told you to do, and I will guard your life. If you try to guard it yourself, you remove yourself from My deliverance.”

CHAMBERS

Though He controls it all, and can inhabit any phenomena He chooses, we take comfort in the fact that our God most often shows Himself in the quiet whisper. God is a spirit,<sup>2</sup> and that gentle Breath washes over us and through us, holding us up, patiently reminding us of His presence, inviting us to participate in His life.

Lo, God is here! Let us adore,  
And own how dreadful is this place;  
Let all within us feel His power,  
And silent bow before His face;  
Who know His power, His grace who prove,  
Serve Him with awe, with reverence love.

Lo, God is here! Him day and night  
United choirs of angels sing;  
To Him, enthroned above all height,  
Heaven’s host their noblest praises bring;  
Disdain not, Lord, our meaner song,  
Who praise Thee with a stammering tongue.

Being of beings, may our praise  
Thy courts with fragrance fill;  
Still may we stand before Thy face,  
Still hear and do Thy sovereign will;  
To Thee may all our thoughts arise,  
Ceaseless, accepted sacrifice.

GERHARD TERSTEEGEN

JESUS ANSWERED, "I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, NO ONE CAN ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD UNLESS HE IS BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT. FLESH GIVES BIRTH TO FLESH, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES BIRTH TO SPIRIT. YOU SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED AT MY SAYING, 'YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN.' THE WIND BLOWS WHEREVER IT PLEASES. YOU HEAR ITS SOUND, BUT YOU CANNOT TELL WHERE IT COMES FROM OR WHERE IT IS GOING. SO IT IS WITH EVERYONE BORN OF THE SPIRIT." JOHN 3:5-8

## The Assignment

The “God” of so many in this world is one of insipid detachment. Because their concept of God is so simplistic, and his grace so all-encompassing (why else would the hymn “Amazing Grace” have become the unofficial anthem of virtually every celebrity death and/or public tragedy?) they are practically struck dumb when faced with the reality of His true personality. “How could a loving God have done this?” they cry in their ignorance.

The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote eloquently of ‘cheap grace’ – that “grace we bestow on ourselves,”

the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.<sup>3</sup>

Those words were first published in 1937, shortly before the beginning of the second World War in 1939. During the ensuing fifty years, I fear grace has gained little in price, but its stock has, rather, plummeted in value. Grace to *this* world is not cheap, but worthless. Grace is bubble gum, it is cotton candy: sweet and rotting to the teeth.

WHEN ELIJAH HEARD IT, HE PULLED HIS CLOAK OVER HIS FACE AND WENT OUT AND STOOD AT THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE. THEN A VOICE SAID TO HIM, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, ELIJAH?” HE REPLIED, “I HAVE BEEN VERY ZEALOUS FOR THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY. THE ISRAELITES HAVE REJECTED YOUR COVENANT, BROKEN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND PUT YOUR PROPHETS TO DEATH WITH THE SWORD. I AM THE ONLY ONE LEFT, AND NOW THEY ARE TRYING TO KILL ME TOO.”  
1 KINGS 19:13-14

God displayed immeasurable grace toward Elijah. From the moment he chose to flee from those who hated him, Elijah received from His God only patience, mercy, assistance, and grace. But it was *real* grace, not the sickening-sweet grace imagined by the world. It wasn’t cotton candy, but fresh vegetables. Even after the prophet repeating his lament, God was still demonstrating grace when He said

“GO BACK THE WAY YOU CAME, AND GO TO THE DESERT OF DAMASCUS. WHEN YOU GET THERE, ANOINT HAZAEL KING OVER ARAM. ALSO, ANOINT JEHU SON OF NIMSHI KING OVER ISRAEL, AND ANOINT ELISHA SON OF SHAPHAT FROM ABEL MEHOLAH TO SUCCEED YOU AS PROPHET. JEHU WILL PUT TO DEATH ANY WHO ESCAPE THE SWORD OF HAZAEL, AND ELISHA WILL PUT TO DEATH ANY WHO ESCAPE THE SWORD OF JEHU.” 1 KINGS 19:15-17

God’s grace is full-bodied, tangible, real. It is sober, realistic, clear-minded. The world would have the Almighty pat Elijah lovingly on his shoulders, purring, “There, there. You poor thing. Now you just take as long as you like. Yes, I understand; you’ve been under a lot of stress lately. We’ll just have to do something about your low self-esteem. Maybe a vacation—even a sabbatical. Yes, you need some time off! You’ve been under so much *stress*.” Instead, God took Elijah firmly by the shoulders and said, “All right! It’s time to get back to *work*.”

There will be days when, faced with the prospect of going out amongst them, we would rather just crawl back into our cave and forget about all that’s out there. Certainly Elijah would have preferred staying in the relative comfort and ease of *his* cave. But the Lord God had much more work in mind for His servant.

## A Communion of Saints

No one has ever been as alone as was Christ upon this earth. He left the pristine communion of heaven to sojourn upon this soil a unique, solitary soul. There was not, for Him, anyone here of common rank or experience in whom He could confide. Though cloaked in like appearance, no one around Him shared His roots—nor could they share His future.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is costly because it cost God the life of His Son; above all it is grace because God did not reckon His Son too dear a price a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

BONHOEFFER

God among men, Christ was high above them in intellect, depth of thought, and religious faith; the Lamb to be slain, He was beneath them, as something less than human to bear the weight of their sins in His blood. Human friendship is born in common experience, and though He could participate in their moments for awhile, He was not, in His essential being, *like* them. Spiritually, Christ's disciples were His brothers and sisters, closer than those from Mary's womb. But even at their best, they could not share His singular perspective, His infinite life experience, His depth of soul. Jesus was not of this world.

"I AM THE ONLY ONE LEFT, AND NOW THEY ARE TRYING TO KILL ME TOO."

The prophet's words echo those of the Savior,<sup>4</sup> but, since he was not God, the prophet Elijah could not bear being the only one of his kind. Since, from his perspective, he was left as the sole righteous one in Israel, his choice was for God to take his soul up to be with Him—to be united with those of his kind. And we need not dwell too long on Elijah's arrogance at thinking that he alone was sufficiently righteous toward God, for to one degree or another we have all entertained such thoughts. In the present societal milieu it takes very little time before rampant deceit, hypocrisy, or crass disingenuousness raises our paranoia to even greater heights. It's not hard at all, today, to imagine that 'I alone am left.'

But no Christian is ever alone. We carry around in us that sublime connection to the Father: the Holy Spirit—the great revealer of God's mind left us by Jesus when He returned to His home. Save eternal life itself, there is surely no more precious gift in our possession than that gentle Counselor.

Though, in a sense, one might say that in His printed word we carry around with us the Father—for that document contains His very personality, will and wisdom—as holy as its contents are, the Bible is still just a book. It's too easy for it to be lost amidst all the rest on the shelf. But the abiding Spirit is an actual *person*—as real a companion as a spouse, a best friend, a mother or father. He is the channel through which we hear the voice of God speaking to us, as well the channel for our muffled groanings to pass in the opposite direction.<sup>5</sup> He is the one who illumines God's printed word, so that we might find Him in its pages; He is the one who reveals God's presence in the whisperings of nature; He is the one who chides and corrects, and restores us after confession.

MAY THE GOD WHO GIVES ENDURANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT GIVE YOU A SPIRIT OF UNITY AMONG YOURSELVES AS YOU FOLLOW CHRIST JESUS, SO THAT WITH ONE HEART AND MOUTH YOU MAY GLORIFY THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER, THEN, JUST AS CHRIST ACCEPTED YOU, IN ORDER TO BRING PRAISE TO GOD. ROMANS 15:5-7

In addition to the Holy Spirit, the believer enjoys the fellowship of a unique collection of like-minded souls: the Body of Christ—the church. It is our relationship with God, through the blood of Christ, that permits us to enjoy true fellowship with other believers. Without that mutual point of focus, we would have nothing in common. Yes, plumbers would meet other plumbers and have the basis for conversation; mothers would chat with mothers; and clergy would seek out other clergy for meaningful dialogue. But that would not be *koinonia*—that deeply spiritual joining found only in those bound together by the blood of Christ.

Many years ago, I flew from California to the Midwest on an airline that changed planes in Las Vegas. The plane ride, with its claustrophobic packing of people like sardines into the narrow tube of the fuselage, had been in itself sufficient to raise my level of anxiety. My custom on such journeys was to take every opportunity to disembark to the nearest exit, to drink in as much fresh air and open space as possible to reinvigorate myself for the next leg. On this occasion, however, I stepped off the plane and into a terminal that was a smoke-fogged den of poor souls feeding their dollars into rows of mechanical thieves—an environment no less oppressive than the interior of the airplane from which I just exited.

I suddenly felt very much alone and alienated from my world. The noise was deafening, the people milling about, pushing, shoving. The cigarette smoke was so heavy that I couldn't breathe. I hadn't time between planes to make it outside; somehow I would have to find a way to survive in this one, intolerable room. Looking around, I

### The loneliness of the Son . . .

THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE; WITHOUT HIM NOTHING WAS MADE THAT HAS BEEN MADE. IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THAT LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF MEN. THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, BUT THE DARKNESS HAS NOT UNDERSTOOD IT. HE WAS IN THE WORLD, AND THOUGH THE WORLD WAS MADE THROUGH HIM, THE WORLD DID NOT RECOGNIZE HIM. HE CAME TO THAT WHICH WAS HIS OWN, BUT HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM. JOHN 1:3-5,10-11

"AND I WILL ASK THE FATHER, AND HE WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER COUNSELOR TO BE WITH YOU FOREVER—THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH. THE WORLD CANNOT ACCEPT HIM, BECAUSE IT NEITHER SEES HIM NOR KNOWS HIM. BUT YOU KNOW HIM, FOR HE LIVES WITH YOU AND WILL BE IN YOU. I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU AS ORPHANS; I WILL COME TO YOU. BEFORE LONG, THE WORLD WILL NOT SEE ME ANYMORE, BUT YOU WILL SEE ME. BECAUSE I LIVE, YOU ALSO WILL LIVE. ON THAT DAY YOU WILL REALIZE THAT I AM IN MY FATHER, AND YOU ARE IN ME, AND I AM IN YOU." JOHN 14:16-20

discovered that the crowd of people had not yet invaded one small area of the terminal, so I sought refuge in that out-of-the-way corner.

I stood there, huddled and feeling miserable, wishing for it all to end quickly. I felt, like Elijah, surely the last sane human being in a world gone wildly insane. But then I spied a young black man in the crowd. He wore a satin warm-up jacket, the back of which was emblazoned with the words "King Jesus." I didn't speak to this young man and I knew nothing about him, but just the presence of a kindred soul in the same room brought comfort to me. Just the nearness of someone who called upon the same Lord brought a certain peace to my troubled spirit. We may have had nothing else in common, but for the moment I had found a brother.

There was only one link between the stranger and me: Jesus Christ. Without Him, that stranger would have been just another face in the crowd. But with that holy connection in place, that was all that was needed. We were related. We instantly had a bond more personal and substantial than if we shared the same friends or occupation. And suddenly I knew: I was not alone.

When Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being 'in Christ' or of Christ being 'in them,' this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.

C.S. LEWIS

JEHU WILL PUT TO DEATH ANY WHO ESCAPE THE SWORD OF HAZAEL, AND ELISHA WILL PUT TO DEATH ANY WHO ESCAPE THE SWORD OF JEHU. YET I RESERVE SEVEN THOUSAND IN ISRAEL — ALL WHOSE KNEES HAVE NOT BOWED DOWN TO BAAL AND ALL WHOSE MOUTHS HAVE NOT KISSED HIM." 1 KINGS 19:17-18

In His mercy, God reminded Elijah that the prophet was certainly not alone, that, in fact, there were *seven thousand* others who yet called upon the true God, and had not bowed to the heathen god, Baal. And He constantly reminds us that none of *us* are alone. Until the day Christ returns to take us to our true home, we will always have both the comforting, always-abiding Holy Spirit within, and the communion of saints about us.

## Her Ultimate Demise

THEN JEHU WENT TO JEZREEL. WHEN JEZEBEL HEARD ABOUT IT, SHE PAINTED HER EYES, ARRANGED HER HAIR AND LOOKED OUT OF A WINDOW. AS JEHU ENTERED THE GATE, SHE ASKED, "HAVE YOU COME IN PEACE, ZIMRI, YOU MURDERER OF YOUR MASTER?" HE LOOKED UP AT THE WINDOW AND CALLED OUT, "WHO IS ON MY SIDE? WHO?" TWO OR THREE EUNUCHS LOOKED DOWN AT HIM. "THROW HER DOWN!" JEHU SAID. SO THEY THREW HER DOWN, AND SOME OF HER BLOOD SPATTERED THE WALL AND THE HORSES AS THEY TRAMPLED HER UNDERFOOT. JEHU WENT IN AND ATE AND DRANK. "TAKE CARE OF THAT CURSED WOMAN," HE SAID, "AND BURY HER, FOR SHE WAS A KING'S DAUGHTER." BUT WHEN THEY WENT OUT TO BURY HER, THEY FOUND NOTHING EXCEPT HER SKULL, HER FEET AND HER HANDS. THEY WENT BACK AND TOLD JEHU, WHO SAID, "THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD THAT HE SPOKE THROUGH HIS SERVANT ELIJAH THE TISHBITE: ON THE PLOT OF GROUND AT JEZREEL DOGS WILL DEVOUR JEZEBEL'S FLESH. JEZEBEL'S BODY WILL BE LIKE REFUSE ON THE GROUND IN THE PLOT AT JEZREEL, SO THAT NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO SAY, 'THIS IS JEZEBEL.'" 2 KINGS 9:30-37

Not all 'Jezebels' are the product of troubled, paranoid minds. There *is* evil in this world, and much of it is directed quite specifically at the followers of Jesus Christ. Even He warned His disciples that they would be confronting isolation, loneliness, and trouble.

"BUT A TIME IS COMING, AND HAS COME, WHEN YOU WILL BE SCATTERED, EACH TO HIS OWN HOME. YOU WILL LEAVE ME ALL ALONE. YET I AM NOT ALONE, FOR MY FATHER IS WITH ME. "I HAVE TOLD YOU THESE THINGS, SO THAT IN ME YOU MAY HAVE PEACE. IN THIS WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TROUBLE. BUT TAKE HEART! I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD." JOHN 16:32-33

Our 'huddling place' must ultimately be found in the arms of the Savior. Only there will we find our spiritual and physical sustenance; only there will the Lord God reveal Himself to a searching, expectant believer; only there will we find motivation to continue working in obedience to Him; only there will we enjoy not only His presence, but the supporting presence of fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord.

It all boils down to faith—faith and trust developed into a mature state by a life submitted to Him. In that condition, when doubts and frustrations rise and, like Asaph, we cry out over life's inequities, and want only to slink away into our protective cave, we will instead walk boldly into the presence of God—into His sanctuary—and there find our solace.

WHEN I TRIED TO UNDERSTAND ALL THIS,  
IT WAS OPPRESSIVE TO ME  
TILL I ENTERED THE SANCTUARY OF GOD;  
THEN I UNDERSTOOD THEIR FINAL DESTINY.  
WHEN MY HEART WAS GRIEVED  
AND MY SPIRIT EMBITTERED,  
I WAS SENSELESS AND IGNORANT;  
I WAS A BRUTE BEAST BEFORE YOU.  
YET I AM ALWAYS WITH YOU;  
YOU HOLD ME BY MY RIGHT HAND.

YOU GUIDE ME WITH YOUR COUNSEL,  
AND AFTERWARD YOU WILL TAKE ME INTO GLORY.  
WHOM HAVE I IN HEAVEN BUT YOU?  
AND EARTH HAS NOTHING I DESIRE BESIDES YOU.  
MY FLESH AND MY HEART MAY FAIL,  
BUT GOD IS THE STRENGTH OF MY HEART  
AND MY PORTION FOREVER.

PSALM 73:16-17,21-26



Long-time subscribers to this journal know that there is no consistent, standard format for the publication. It can resemble, from time to time, a systematic Bible study, a prompt-sheet for worship and praise, a sermon, a play, or—as last month—a narrative story.

We thought that some people might like to have a collection of similar stories—for themselves, or to share with someone else. So, for our latest ‘thank-you’ gift, we have compiled a selection of narratives from past issues, entitled *The Living Word: Favorite Narratives from the monthly devotional journal Aspects*.

This seventy-two page booklet will be sent—along with our deep appreciation—to those who include a request along with their gift to this work. If you would like to receive a copy of this booklet, fill out the accompanying form and include it with your gift—and be sure to check the box stating that you would like to receive the booklet!

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Romans 1:19.

<sup>2</sup> John 4:24.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan, 1963), p47f.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 18:31-33; John 17:11-13.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:26.

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