

A PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THE LORD

by Allan A. MacRae, Ph.D.

Nearly 2000 years ago Hebrew priest went into the temple to do his service and an angel appeared to him and told him that his wife would have a child whose name would be John. He would be great in the sight of the Lord and be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. He would turn many in Israel to the Lord and he would go in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

God wants a people prepared to have fellowship with Him through all eternity. He uses people who are filled with His Spirit to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Elijah served God in times very similar to our times today. We live is a time when people have turned away from God and forgotten Him. We have a situation where individuals with good brains but with a hatred of God have received positions in educational institutions where they seek to turn people away from God. Some of their brightest students have been turned away by them and become professors who are turning people away from God in larger and larger numbers. As a result the bulk of our educated class is thoroughly indoctrinated in anti-Christianity. This indoctrination does not mean that they have been given a strong logical argument. Most people do not take their attitudes as a result of strong logical arguments.

Lord Keynes was an Englishman well-known for his great influence in economics. In his book My Early Beliefs he describes

his experiences in philosophy classes in England and points out that victory was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility. He describes G.E. Moore, founder of a dominant British school of philosophy, as a master of this method in which one's remarks are greeted with a gasp of incredulity -- "do you really think that?" The expression on his face was one of wonder verging on imbecility, with his mouth wide open and wagging his head in a negative so violently that his hair shook. "Oh!" he would say, goggling at you as if either you or he must be mad, and no reply possible.

That is a good description of the fact that logical arguments are rare these days. People who think things through are looked down upon and ridiculed. A few people get into positions where they can make other people feel silly and unworthy of attention if they do not go along with them. Consequently most departments of philosophy, English and history in our colleges and universities are staffed with instructors who will make you feel utterly silly if you don't accept their anti-Christian attitudes and views. As a result we have a situation that is very similar to the time in Israel when Elijah was living.

God sent two men -- Elijah and Elisha -- very different from each other. In God's providence Elijah came first and Elisha second. Their influence would not be a fifth as much if their order had been reversed. Elijah came to a people who had turned from God and wanted to put Him out of their thoughts. He came with a

powerful voice doing great miracles, standing for God against the multitudes, and attracting tremendous attention. He concentrated on God's power, control, and reality. When he passed off the scene, Elisha took over, traveling up and down the land, visiting, teaching, healing the sick, raising the dead. If Elisha had come first few would have listened to him. "What does he know? We're following Baal just as are the king and queen," they would say. He would have had little influence. Elijah was needed first but if he had not been followed by Elisha there would not have been a fraction of the effect that was made.

The difference in the effect is brought out clearly in the death scene of the two men. In Elijah's death God sent a chariot of fire and horses of fire to take him to heaven. Elisha saw it and cried, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." He is referring to more than the fact that horses took Elijah to heaven. He is saying, "Elijah is the great bulwark of this land which is headed for destruction. Elijah is God's chariot, God's horsemen, God's protecting force that has delivered this land." That this is the meaning is made absolutely clear in 2 Kings 13 where later we read of the death of Elisha. He had fallen sick and King Joash came to see him and wept over him. "Oh, my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof", he cried. There were no chariots of fire there or anything like the case of Elijah. The king means, "Here is the man who has been the bulwark of our land" which, whether he sincerely meant it or not, echoed the attitude of the people who recognized

in Elisha's work God's bulwark of protection to their nation.

Although Elisha's words may have been suggested by seeing the chariot of fire and horses of fire that took Elijah to heaven, his meaning was the same as that of the king. The only difference being that in one case the words were said by one man, Elisha, at the Jordan to Elijah, and in the other case they were said of Elisha by the king, representing the entire nation. Together these two prophets had a tremendous effect upon Israel -- an effect they could not have had if they had not come in the order they did.

In our service for the Lord it is important to remember that people not only need to be attracted and awakened to facts about God's power and greatness as Elijah did, but also they need teaching, guidance and compassionate help such as Elisha gave. Both emphases are tremendously important in reaching people for God.

We can learn much both from Elijah's great success and from his sad failure. His thrilling success came when he challenged the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and proved to the people that "the LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God." Elijah's work reached its climax there. And right after that tremendous contest with the prophets of Baal, the people's resistance to the Word of God was broken down. Now what he needed to do was to go among the people and teach them this Word and how to follow the Lord. They wanted to. They were ready to. Ahab would not have dared to say a word against them. The majority of the people now wanted to follow the Lord. They were ready to learn from Elijah but he failed them.

Elijah was a marvelous man and the probabilities are that any

of us would have failed far worse than he did at this point. But fail he did. The drought was over as God promised and what Elijah needed was to relax and rest for a few days. Then he would be in shape to go back into the land speaking in the towns and presenting the Word of God so the people could grow in grace.

But Elijah was too excited to think things through and see what was the next phase of work that should be done. He did not need to send his servant to the top of Mt. Carmel to see if the rain was coming. He could not make it come any faster. God had promised it. He had told Ahab it was coming. But Elijah was all excited and after sending his servant up to the top of the mountain seven times, the servant says, "There is a little cloud; it is arising out of the sea." Elijah tells him to go to Ahab and tell him to prepare his chariot and get down before he is stopped by the rain. The heaven became black with clouds and wind and there was a great rain. Ahab rode to Jezreel. But Elijah with the hand of the Lord upon him ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. From all the excitement and exertion he became distraught and overtired so that when Jezebel threatened to kill him for having slain the prophets of Baal, he ran for his life.

But he did not need to run. He was now the most popular man in Israel. His prayers and stand for the truth of God had brought an end to the terrible draught and had proved that the LORD was God, not Baal. Jezebel would have been torn to pieces by the infuriated populace if she dared lay a hand on Elijah in this situation. But instead of standing firm as he had done, he headed down into the

Sinai wilderness and sat down under a juniper tree and made request that he might die. After he got rested the Lord gave him a new assignment that included appointing Elisha to be prophet in his place.

The Lord got another man to carry out the next stage. But it was delayed until this person was trained by Elijah was not ready to carry on the work to the next point. Here is a tremendous lesson. As we seek to serve the Lord, we need to do our utmost as Elijah did on Mt. Carmel. But we need to realize that we need to keep ourselves in condition so that we can take the next step and carry on our work instead of dropping the work because we are not ready for the next phase and we have not gotten anyone else ready to step into that position.

In our service for the Lord we are to do it with our utmost ability. At the same time we need to think what the next step is that will be needed and get ready to take it. The excitement and exhaustion from what we are now doing should not keep us from thinking ahead and doing whatever is necessary to keep ourselves in condition so we can be used to accomplish the next step.

Elijah deserves tremendous credit, but he failed at this point and had to wait until Elisha could be trained to take over. It is easy to see how Elijah could become discouraged. It is sad to read how he got so gruff with Elisha after God told him to anoint him to be prophet in his place (1 Kings 19:19-21). Elisha performed menial tasks for Elijah all the time learning from him as an apprentice. He was humble, and intelligent. He knew what Elijah had done on Mt.

Carmel and how the people needed him. He must have wished he could serve the Lord like that and when Elijah cast his coat upon him indicating the call to come and follow him, he ran after him.

When the time came for Elijah to be taken up to heaven Elisha stayed with him and would not let Elijah shake him. Elisha said he wanted an double portion of Elijah's spirit, like the portion given to the eldest son. He indicated he wished to be Elijah's successor. Elijah said, "You have asked a hard thing, but if you see me as I am taken up, then you will know that God has granted your request." Elijah was gruff to the end. He was disappointed. He had done a tremendous work, but he failed to keep himself in condition. The work had to wait until Elisha got trained. The work had to wait until Elijah was removed from the scene and then Elisha himself had to become recognized as Elijah's successor and this took time.

God used Elijah greatly and blessed him, When he failed, God did not leave him but followed him with tender care. He showed His presence with him and prepared the man to follow him. We can learn lessons from the failures of those who have been God's faithful workers. Every human being has failed. Jesus Christ is the only one who has not made mistakes, or failed.

Though humanly speaking the world situation looks hopeless, the same God of Elijah can use us to prepare a people for the Lord. He may bring revival in our time or the company of God's people may be complete and Christ will return. The things of this earth must not be allowed to keep us from doing the work of an Elijah or an Elisha in whatever direction it may be His will for each of us.■