

ELIJAH AND HEART-TURNING

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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, only this one is to be “fire” (vs. 1). It's something God Himself cannot avoid, for “the wages of [our] sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). 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” (4:5, 6). That domestic “turning-of-heart” is the only thing that can avert a global “curse.” It concerns marital fidelity and families. Malachi's context is the “curse” of marital infidelity, for God says “I hate divorce” (2:11-16, NEB). The only remedy for heart alienation is a “turning-of-heart.” Marital infidelity was a prime factor in the wickedness before the flood (“they took them wives of all they chose,” Gen. 6:2). No one can “turn” his/her own “heart.” Jesus predicted that “the love [yes, marital] of many shall wax cold” and “iniquity shall abound” (Mt. 24:12, 13).

When love turns cold and the fire in the coals has gone out and hearts are estranged, only “Elijah's message” can reconcile the desolated hearts and cleanse the pollution. But it can! God has promised to “send him” BEFORE the “seven last plagues” shall be poured out. The story of sinful humanity in the last book of the NEW Testament tells how the curse will come (Rev. 15, 16). But the Elijah message

must come FIRST, perhaps has come to you already. It's more than “promise keepers” 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.

What can be done for fathers? Fathers are the family entity most in need of help today. In most single parent families something has happened to father; he's gone. And in many prosperous two-parent families, father is so stressed out trying to keep the family economically on top that he has little if any spiritual or emotional energy left for being a father to the children (let alone, a husband to his wife). Millions of children don't “know” their father. He's too “busy.” Few if any boys are taught in school how to be fathers. And it seems that biologically speaking human fathers don't have much of a DNA bank that equips them for the spiritual challenges that fatherhood implies. In the animal kingdom, often “father” does his procreation bit and then he's off; could it be that humans, instead of evolving out of animal life are descending toward it? Ask the welfare specialists, the divorce lawyers.

But where there's a need, there is a Savior. The very last verse of the monumental Old Testament contains a divine promise of special blessings for fathers: turning of “the heart of the fathers to the children . . .” (Mal. 4:5, 6). Something foreign to DNA! A miraculous intervention.

But who is “Elijah”? Some white-haired old man in a robe? Jesus made plain that the answer is No, “he” is a message. The message of John the Baptist was the initial fulfillment of the prophecy (see Mt. 11:7-14). Therefore the final fulfillment will also be a message; a message that grips the heart, that heals old wounds, that reconciles alienated hearts to God and to one another.

When the “Elijah message” comes, what will it do? How can we recognize it, so we don’t treat it as the Jews treated John the Baptist? (cf. Mt. 17:10-13).

It will not be a revival of legalism, harsh, vindictive, condemnatory. Just the opposite: heart-turning. A message of reconciliation! And that means “atonement”—the cosmic Day of Atonement ministry centered in the sanctuary’s Most Holy Apartment.

Elijah had no patience with the “prophets of Baal,” but he had enormous patience and tenderness for the people. The people were sheep who had been led astray by their shepherds who had been supported from the national treasury. (Anyone who gains his livelihood administered from the sacred tithe should tremble before God). Elijah’s indignation was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was the “righteous indignation” God expresses in Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 22 and 34 where He says “Woe be unto the pastors,” the “shepherds,” who are “profane,” “who do feed themselves.” Self-worship disguised as the worship, the ministry, of Christ! That is the essence of Baal worship. God hates it.

But His heart yearns toward the people who are led astray, especially the youth and the children. “Elijah’s” message will heal alienated hearts. Hardness will be melted. Through “the grace of God,” not through harsh legalism, buried “roots of bitterness” will be exposed for what they are and a people will realize a precious oneness with Jesus (cf. Zech. 13:1; Heb. 12:15). And, of course therefore, a precious oneness with one another! “Elijah’s” message will do for God’s people what it did for him—it prepared him for translation. Don’t kid yourself: Satan will oppose that message hell-bound. But “the grace of God” will be much more abounding. God’s people *will* respond to their High Priest.

The Elijah message is the only hope this strife-torn human race has. That will be the most far-reaching reconciliation we have seen since Pentecost. (Think how much Afghanistan and all the Middle East needs “Elijah”!)

It’s not idle words. God has made this promise. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on His cross is the only reconciling agency in existence; therefore it follows that the coming of “Elijah” must be proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in all His reconciling power. It will be what unbelieving hearts find almost inconceivable: a proclamation of what the Bible calls “the atonement” that will work miracles of grace worldwide. The mention of “fathers” and “children” means the entire human race in all our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural alienations. A blessed unity will be realized as people kneel together at the cross of the Son of God, at last “beholding” or perceiving its full significance.

No, it will not be 100 per cent successful. It would be, except for one anti-Elijah-message factor that will intrude: the Battle of Armageddon. Side by side, two movements will develop—on the one hand, a blessed reconciliation (“at-one-ment”) of human hearts with each other and with the heavenly Father, and simultaneously on the other hand, the exacerbation of enmity between humans and God (Rom. 8:7): it will be the ultimate polarization of the human race, “the hour of His judgment” (Rev. 14:6). No one will be neutral.

A big job for one “prophet” to accomplish! The already-translated Elijah (2 Kings 2:1, 11) will be “sent” to do the work worldwide as he was sent personally to encourage Christ at His Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-3). (That was a work of reconciliation!) Elijah will have “144,000” to help him (Rev. 14:1-5).

The “you” that Elijah is sent to is the entire human race corporately? The entire church corporately? The answer

may be yes. But each of us as individuals can latch on to the promise and ask the Lord to send Elijah to us personally—if we will welcome him. Yes, the Lord is serious; He has promised. How would you like to have a personal visit with the man who confronted King Ahab and all Israel? He will tell the truth if you are prepared to hear it. But remember: there is no truth except in love (*agape*; Eph. 4:15). Elijah is a man of true love. He is not unkind, harsh.

What will Elijah's work be? "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). It will be "heart work"! Melting human hearts; reconciling alienated hearts; restoring the ministry of love; as hearts forgive one another in love, some tears will come; hearts that have been dead will be quickened (an old fashioned word that means made alive again); communication between estranged hearts will be opened again; forgivenesses will be given one to another; cold relationships will become warm; Elijah's coming will be Ephesians 4:31, 32 *redivivus*: "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you."

Elijah will come, that's for sure, because the Lord promised to send him. He will be sent to this generation "if [we] will receive it" (see Matt. 11:14); if not, then he must await a future generation. But for sure the Lord doesn't want to send Elijah if he will have to take refuge again outside of "Israel" at some Brook Cherith or at some widow woman's house in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:9).

There may be a little treasure of truth buried in the story of Elijah that illustrates the kindness and compassion of the Lord. The faithful but lonely prophet has been directed to seek shelter in the home of the widow of Zarepath. He

appreciates her hospitality and her faith. But a terrible sickness suddenly takes the life of her young son (1 Kings 17:17, 18).

At first Elijah has brought sunshine and gladness into her widowed life. But now the bereaved mother imagines that the man of God has ministered this grief to her in that his holy presence in her home has brought all her sins into memory and judgment. (Evidently she has had a checkered past—well, who hasn't!) She wails in her anguish, "Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?" (vs. 18).

Elijah takes it personally; he knows he is hated in Israel and Phoenicia, everybody everywhere blames him for this famine. Now it seems that God has humiliated him by bringing this bereavement on this widow. When he takes the dead son from her, he doesn't pray a quiet, unimpassioned prayer as he did later on Carmel; he agonizes his distress. "He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?'" (vs. 20). A prayer from a broken heart! In mercy, the Lord answered his prayer of distress and resurrected the child.

Do you suppose that the Lord granted this precious interlude blessing as a way to strengthen the faith of Elijah when he stood alone and friendless before the king, the priests of Baal, and the multitude, on Mt. Carmel? He remembers: the Lord has honored his prayer by raising a dead child to life. Wouldn't that recent memory nerve his spirit and encourage him? Since he had been hidden from the murderous hatred of Israel, no one on Carmel knew of this recent happening in Sidon; Elijah shared this little secret with the Lord. That should be enough to fortify his faith: yes, the fire will fall! When God promised to send us "Elijah the prophet" just before the second coming of Christ ("the great and dreadful

day of the Lord”), his message is not to be a thunder and lightning denunciation of mankind reminiscent of his slaying the 450 prophets of Baal at the Kishon River (1 Kings 18:40). Rather, “Elijah’s” message will perform the most effective reconciliation of alienated peoples the world has ever known: “he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:6). That is the last message of much more abounding grace this world will hear—that of the fourth great “angel” in Revelation 18 that “lightens the earth with glory” (vss. 1-4).

Only one Bible message can close the great gospel commission with such glorious success—the lifting up of Christ on His cross as He predicted: “‘When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to Me.’ (In saying this He indicated the kind of death He was going to suffer)” (John 12:32, 33, TEV). The message of the three great angels of Revelation 14 appears superficially to be the most terrorizing ever proclaimed, the scariest fear possible for human hearts (whoever takes the “mark of the beast” “shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, . . . poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. . . . tormented with fire and brimstone.... in the presence of the Lamb. . . . for ever and ever: . . . no rest day nor night,” etc. (vss. 9-11). Could any message be more blood-curdling? But wait a moment: it’s introduced as “the everlasting gospel” of Good News (vss. 6, 7). Look more closely! It’s the last effective call: “Be reconciled to God!” (2 Cor. 5:19, 20). How? By His love at last fully revealed at His cross (vss. 14, 15)!

The last verses of the Old Testament are a promise from God: “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers. . . .” (Mal. 4:5, 6). Reconciliation of alienated hearts will be the burden of his message and the subject of his success in ministry and of his identification.

A literal appearance of the translated Elijah may not be the necessary fulfillment of the promise because Jesus said that the coming of John the Baptist fulfilled it in His day. In fact, it was not the personal presence of the Baptist that was the fulfillment; it was his message (Matt. 11:7-14).

Elijah was a frail mortal man “subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17), and the Baptist, also. But both men identified themselves with God so closely that they stepped into the emergencies of their day and took action as though the cause of God depended on them individually. The way the Bible introduces Elijah on the stage is strange: he just suddenly appears in the office of King Ahab without the normal fanfare of introduction for a prophet, nothing that says “the Lord spoke to Elijah. . . .” Elijah appears as one who came out of Gilead moved by his own deep convictions. He did not seek to become the Lord’s messenger, but he responded to what was for him an overwhelming motivation of truth. We could say, “the love (*agape*) of Christ constrained him” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14), that is, love for Israel and love for the honor of the God of Israel. In this respect, Elijah is a true forerunner of those who will await the coming of Christ—they are so concerned before the world and before the universe for His glory that they would rather sacrifice their own personal salvation than be disloyal to Him.

Thus there will be thousands of individuals in all lands and cultures who will be little “Elijahs” manifesting the faith-inspired courage of this one man, reproducing in their little environment or culture a fresh display of the power of the true gospel—all together enlightening the earth with the call, “Babylon the great is fallen. . . . Come out of her, My people” (Rev. 18:1-4). “Elijah” may be here already, or very near! Let’s not overlook him.

You remember the last two verses of the great Old Testament where the LORD declares: “I will send you Elijah

the prophet before the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” But Elijah’s work will be different than the popular idea of a stern disciplinarian who chops off the heads of the prophets of Baal. He will minister a message of reconciliation: “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” That of course cannot be unless he also “turns the hearts” of husbands and wives, and love will be reawakened.

Such “turning hearts” is what the word “atonement” means; here is God’s prophecy of the greatest ministry of heart-reconciliation the world has ever known since the days of Jesus. Elijah’s message is the solemn call of the great antitypical Day of Atonement that closes the work of Christ as the world’s High Priest. It’s the “Loud Cry” of the angel of Revelation 18.

Then the next event on God’s agenda is the close of human probation and the second coming of Christ. That will be the day which to those who have rejected this heart-reconciliation will be “the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” But the one heart that most needs “turning” is hers who figures as the Heroine in the drama of Revelation 19:7, 8—the alienated “Bride-to-be” of the Lamb, whose “marriage” has been long delayed due to her heart coldness toward Him. It’s a world church that hasn’t yet learned to recognize her own identity, to see herself as she appears pathetically on the stage of the universe.

The scholars and leaders of such a world church have long debated how the heart of such a massive corporate “body” can be “turned” and melted in personal but also corporate contrition. Let’s not be unbelieving; unbelief here becomes the sin of the ages. “Elijah” will do what seems impossible.

Queen Jezebel outright hated the prophet Elijah, but King Ahab probably feared him more than hated him. She was a

non-Israelite; her hatred was that of the wicked world against Christ. Ahab was capable of feeling guilty for his fear. The mass of the people were bewildered; not one (with the possible exception of Obadiah who hid some of the Lord’s servants in a cave) had the courage to stand with the holy prophet of the Lord. Everybody except Elijah trembled on Mt. Carmel. The air was charged with tension.

Well might we all tremble today as we inexorably approach our rendezvous at our last-days “Mt. Carmel.” It will be a preview of the last day of Judgment, when the apostle John says we shall all be judged by the one indispensable question: “Have you learned how to love (with *agape*)?” (Yes, read 1 John 4:8: “He who does not love [with *agape*] does not know God.”) The newly-sent “Elijah’s” mission will be teaching God’s people how to love: “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:5, 6). That’s his primary task, not administering lethal judgment.

Elijah’s mission will be the greatest love-and-reconciliation-building ministry ever performed on earth since Pentecost. Satan can perform physical miracles (he is a very qualified orthopedic or cardiac surgeon), but reconciling alienated human hearts is a greater miracle (a five by-pass in the operating theater may not bring husband and wife together again. Only “Elijah” can do that one; but that’s what he has come to accomplish, and if we condemn him like Jezebel and Ahab did and stubbornly disregard the fire that falls at “Elijah’s” prayer, then must come the “Brook Kidron, 1 Kings 18:40).

Elijah was very patient for 3-1/2 years; then came Carmel and the end of patience forever. God is infinite, but His patience is not. Let the one who trembles find comfort in Psalm 130. What makes one really “fear” is the awareness of His forgiveness!

Elijah the prophet is often misunderstood and unappreciated. It is true that he was a humble man from the mountains of Gilead with no official endorsement. But he was a deep and keen thinker on a level far beyond that of the leadership of Israel. As he saw the horrible effects of the national apostasy, he thought of its cosmic consequences. The great controversy between Christ and Satan was involved. The honor of the very name of the true God was in jeopardy. If God could not save Israel, how could the Messiah save the world? This was a portentous crisis.

We need to understand Elijah better. God has promised to send him again “before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5, 6). Unless we understand correctly, there is danger that we may follow ancient Israel in their national apostasy from the truth of God.

Elijah shares with one other man in the Old Testament a profound understanding of God’s character of love (*agape*). In Exodus 32 we read of Israel worshipping a golden calf within days of their forming the grand Old Covenant at Sinai. God purposed to be done with them, but Moses changed God’s mind in his plea: if You can’t forgive and save Israel, “blot [my name] out of Your book which You have written” (vs. 32). Rather than see Israel lost, he says, I choose to relinquish my own eternal salvation. In the exercise of such faith, Moses found a link that bound him to the cross of Christ, for that is what Jesus did in His love for us—the “width, and length, and depth, and height of the love (*agape*) of Christ . . . which passes knowledge” (Eph. 3:18, 19).

Now, in his love for apostate Israel, Elijah finds a link that binds him in faith to Moses. Could this be the reason why heaven sent Moses and Elijah to visit with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Only they could encourage Him in

His self-sacrifice on His cross, when He died our second death to save us!

We can be sure this kind of love is implicit in whatever message “Elijah” will bring us when he comes back.