

### **3. THE SMELTING FURNACE**

#### **1 Kings 17v8-24**

When I lived on the south coast one of my friends was a young man who had been rescued, by the grace of God from a living death addicted to heroin. He had cried to God for mercy, surrendered his life to Jesus, been born again, baptised in the Spirit, and gradually delivered from his addiction. One evening he was gloriously healed from his liver damage; he gave up his disability allowance because God had made him whole again.

A few years on he sensed God speaking to him about beginning to get trained up for a ministry that would be opening up for him. He had just recently married a lovely young woman in our church and she was very supportive. I travelled with him to a Bible college interview, but on the way back he said he sensed that this was not what God had in mind.

Two years later all became clear. God was using his own home as his training ground. This training involved developing daily disciples, working out a stable relationship, being a faithful husband and learning the skills of being a dad. He had to be self motivated about getting down to study his Bible, learn how to be hospitable, shoulder responsibility in the home, serve with his wife as a group leader in the church, and trust God for their finances. The home was the very best training ground for my friend. Later he went on to head up a ministry among people with dependency issues in the Brighton area.

The home is the best training ground of all. This was true for Jesus Himself. For most of his first 30 years he lived in his family home in Nazareth, at first subject to his parents, and living alongside brothers & sisters, uncles, cousins and neighbours. He never did go to a rabbinic school to study theology. The home was his seminary.

This morning we will see that God also led the prophet Elijah to a family home as a vital part of his development as a man of God. In our first two studies we have seen him first in the royal palace fearlessly pronouncing judgement, and second, sitting all alone by a brook. Both were important steps in Elijah's development as a man of God, but now he is sent to a family home in Zarephath, a Mediterranean coastal village just south of Tyre in present day Lebanon.

Significantly Zarephath means "smelting furnace", a place where valuable metals are extracted from ore by being melted in intense heat. And this is how God can use a home – as a place where all that is artificial & superficial can be found out; a place where all that is really valuable & genuine can shine out. The home is a "smelting furnace",

Let's see two ways in which this was true for Elijah, and is also true for you and me.

## 1. In the home your character can be refined.

Every one of us needs our character worked on through relationships, and the home is one of the places where this happens. Elijah was a loner by nature, so God sent him to a family home to live alongside a woman and a boy.

Back in the Genesis account of creation it is made abundantly clear that to be a whole person you need relationships. We need to take a few minutes to grasp some theology here.

First God Himself enjoys relationship within His own Personhood. There is, and always has been, community in God Himself. There are two big clues to this in the first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1v1. The word for "God" is the ordinary Semitic word for God, and yet when it is used of the God of the Bible it is always plural in form. Not 'El' but 'Elohim'. But the noun, though plural is always construed with a singular verb to show that Only One God is meant. Genesis 1v26. "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." Again, a plural is used of God. Early Christian exegetes understood this as a reference to God addressing Christ, (See John 1v1-3) or perhaps the Spirit, mentioned in v2. The Trinity may not have been in the mind of the human author of Genesis, but was it in the mind of the Divine Author?

There is, and always has been, community in God Himself. Unity and diversity, love, communication, co-operation and interdependence. God did not create the universe & humanity because he was a lonely God, as if He needed His creation to make up for some lack in Himself. There was no lack in God, especially not a lack of relationship.

Second we are made in the image of God. Genesis 1v26. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'" 1v27 "God created man in his own image, in the image of God, male and female he created them" 5v1. "When God created man, he made them in the likeness of God." Man is more like God than anything else in all creation. We reflect God Himself! And integral to God's personhood is relationship. Therefore it is not good for man to be alone. God was satisfied with everything He had made in all creation. It was "good. The first thing that God said was not good was: "It is not good for the man to be alone". (Genesis 2v18) Even though Adam had a one to one relationship with God Himself! Built in to our humanity is a need for relationships. We were made to be with others.

In the Genesis account, having said "it is not good for the man to be alone", God gave Adam a woman and marriage.

Marriage is, perhaps, the greatest refiner of character! The marriage vows lay it on the line from day one; "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health." Many decide they do not want this aspect of marriage and they run away from it. But when we are faithful and persevere through the challenges we face throughout married life our character is refined. Many couples testify that the most important advances in their

relationship and growth as people came when the smelting furnace was at its' hottest.

The home also plays a vital part in a child's character development e.g. honesty, respect for others, kindness courtesy. When you have brothers or sisters you learn how to get along with others who are close to you. Your parents give you your first glimpse of how to treat the opposite sex, what it means to be a husband or wife, how to be a mum or a dad. By their teens many young people are desperate to leave home, but when they share with friends or other college students they find that they are still in a smelting furnace. "Why am I the only one who washes up? Who is taking more than their fair share from the fridge? Why should I turn my music down just because you have an exam tomorrow?"

Of course, many single people also share a home with others. The phenomenon of the TV series "*Friends*" tapped into that constituency. When young people leave home to go to university or college they get a taste of the "Smelting Furnace" when they start to share a house with others. In Brighton and City Church they have had "Discipleship Houses", which are more purposeful and intentional about refining character.

But many people live on their own. Some have had a painful experience of marriage and now live alone. Some are not married, and live alone. Some are single parents, and are bringing up a child or children as a sole adult. Others live alone as widows or widowers, after having lived with one partner for many years. If you live alone you can miss out on the character shaping influence of living in intimate relationship with others in a home. This is such an issue in this generation.

More and more people are living alone, and it has never been easier to carry on life with the absolute minimum of contact with others. You can do your shopping and your banking on-line. You can drive in your car alone and pay at the pump instead of the kiosk and get your money from a cash-point rather than over the counter. You don't need to go the cinema, you can get a DVD and watch it alone at home away from all that nasty rustling of crisp bags and coughing. You can play chess against your pc or spend hours on the latest video game. And you can develop relationships with "soap" characters on TV.

But the Biblical principle remains as true today as ever: "It is not good for a man or woman to be alone", even those who see themselves as loners. Elijah, a single man, needed to learn dependence on God *through* ordinary people. He was probably in his element all alone in the Kerith ravine living by faith, depending on God alone via ravens. So God sent him to Zarephath, to a poor widow and her son. He must now trust her not to betray him to Jezebel's spies. He must now see at first hand the harsh implications of the drought & famine for ordinary people. He had to learn how to relate to a woman, and to a small boy; how to handle tensions and crisis. At times the temperature in this "smelting furnace" must have been turned up very high.

There's nowhere quite like a home with its day to day relationships for knocking jagged edges off your character. For humbling you, teaching you about putting others before yourself, learning to depend and be dependable. As a church we need to face the challenge of this even at this early stage of our development. How can we be counter-cultural and thoroughly biblical in the way we view our homes? What might we be able to offer or find in a local church like ours to support married couples and single people as we grow?

- Loving personal support & accountability comes out of friendship. Getting together regularly, sharing at some depth, watching out for each other, sharing interests. Sometimes a single person has to cope alone with disability, or unemployment or illness. They have no one to share it with in the home.
- Small group life in the church: socials, prayer, fun, mixing the generations. Being with people you wouldn't normally mix with.
- Practical teaching: e.g. Seminars: The Marriage Course. The Parenting Course. (Single Parents / First time parents)
- Hospitality: Meals. Open house. Students (UK and foreign) are often desperate for someone to invite them home. Newcomers to the area are the same; they can feel like "aliens". Single people usually appreciate contact with children - not just as baby sitters, but building a relationship with them!

There will also be times when it is helpful for some who are going through a difficult phase to spend some time living with a family. Psalm 68v6. "God sets the solitary in families".

So, whether you live alongside others or live alone, the Lord wants us to be people shaped and refined by relationships. In the New Testament letters "*one anothering*" is a major feature. Love one another, forgive, encourage, serve, be loyal to one another. He doesn't seem all that impressed by gifted individualists wrapped up in their own private worlds. He wants a body, a company of people who can live together and relate well to others. We are "members of God's household" (Ephesians 2v19) through Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters, we are family. The home, as a smelting furnace, has a key part to play in this process.

## **2. In the home your faith will be seen.**

The real you / the real me surfaces at home! Living day by day with people who know you inside out, in all kinds of circumstances where our actions, words, attitudes and reactions can be closely observed. Sometimes we can hide what we are really like from visitors but not from those we live with. This "smelting furnace" called a home is the place where *who* you really are and *how* you really act and *what* you really cherish are there for all to see.

See Luke 2v39f; 51f. These verses are significant concerning Jesus' childhood. His glory shone through in those years when he was subject to Joseph and Mary in the home at Nazareth. Now, back to our text.

(i) Elijah was sent to a home where the family didn't share his faith.

Jesus made a point of underlining this when he spoke in the synagogue to those who had known him as a boy in the town. (Luke 4v22-30) The place is named as Zarephath of Sidon - Jezebel's home (16v31) and a centre of Baal worship. Elijah had to live out his faith among those who did not worship the Lord God. He is dependent for his safety and his food on a woman who speaks to Elijah of "**the Lord your God**", (v12) not hers.

Some of you are in the same situation in your home. i.e. living with those who do not share your faith. There are three major encouragements for those here in such a position.

- This home would be blessed because of Elijah's presence. (See 1 Corinthians 7v14 re. marriage)
- God put Elijah there. He was to be a living witness to the Lord. If you are living with others who don't share your faith, remember God has put you there with the life of Jesus inside you! It is important that even if the others in your household cannot say "the Lord my God" they should be able to say "the Lord your God".
- In this instance the woman came to acknowledge the Lord. (v24) This is not always so, but over the years I have seen this happen many times.

(ii) Elijah's faith had to handle everyday needs & an extraordinary crisis.

The two incidents selected from his time in this home illustrate these two different challenges. We face the same issues even if our actual everyday needs and unexpected crises are different from those in this passage.

**Verses 8-16: The everyday needs.** Elijah was not sent to a rich household but to a despairing, poverty stricken, widow. She looked like she needed Elijah to support her not vice versa. So here was another test in the smelting furnace. Elijah had to trust God to provide his daily needs via this woman. **v14. 'For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land."'**

Jesus taught us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread". Many of us never have to pray this in extremity. Indeed, the danger we face is that our everyday lives settle into a comfortable routine where we gradually have less and less need of the Lord. One of the families in this church is still living through everyday challenges as a direct result of moving to be with us in the county. Before moving the husband had a secure job and the family lived in their own home. Since the move he has not been able to get a permanent job and the family are in their second year of renting because they still need a buyer for their house. Yet this week he said to me. "*Before we moved I was comfortable but I was not growing as a believer. Now we face this ongoing daily challenge but I am growing spiritually.*" So was this part of God's plan for Elijah's spiritual growth?

Elijah had already proved the faithfulness of God in providing for him and this must have prepared him for this day by day dependency on God for the needs

of the home in Zarephath. But nothing prepared him for the next test which came without warning. Instead the next challenge to his faith was to prepare him for the great challenge of his life soon to come.

**v17-24: An extraordinary crisis.** We must not imagine that Elijah was an expert in raising people from the dead! This is the first time he has ever come across a situation like this. In fact it is the first time we read of someone being raised from the dead in the Bible. It is a unique crisis for Elijah. So what does he do? He “cries to the Lord”. (See v20, 21, 22) The situation is desperate and urgent. The woman has turned *on* him not *to* him. But he does not try to save face or bluff his way through – he cries out in desperation to God. This is the best way to let our faith shine through in a crisis. Admit when you are out of your depth, and bring the situation vigorously before God.

Sometimes God’s ways are mysterious. We cannot make any sense of sudden tragedies and crises. This woman faced every mother’s worst nightmare, the death of her child. At such times we need the greatest supply of God’s grace available. I was so moved recently at the dignity and forgiving spirit of the family in Liverpool whose son had been murdered by two youths wielding an axe. How could they speak with such forgiveness when they were in their agony of grief? Answer: they knew the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Some here may have faced terrible crises and tragedies. Then you will also have had to choose between the path of bitterness & blaming God, or the path of crying out to God for his grace and mercy. Make no mistake, others will watch you at such times and draw conclusions about God from your reaction.

One mother in the church was telling the Alpha course this week of the unexpected crises that surrounded one of their sons as a little boy, and of how they learned to cry out to God for help. Another of our women had to do exactly this earlier this week in the most extraordinary circumstances. Her brother, who works for ‘Medicine Sans Frontiers’ in Columbia, was kidnapped by guerrillas along with a colleague. After several days of anxiety and prayer, the phone went in the middle of the night. He had been released. He was safe.

Elijah’s faith shone through in the smelting furnace. We know this because the woman said to him. **v24. “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”**

**John Wilthew. February 2006**