

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

ZAREPHATH WIDOW LESSON FIVE

by Sandy Harber

"And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Arise get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon and dwell there." I Kings 17:8-9a

Elijah dwelt by the brook Cherith for about a year. During all that time there was no rain. The water in the brook was slowly depleted. Elijah needed that water to stay alive. He needed food, too, which God miraculously provided by ravens twice a day. Eventually, though, God allowed the brook to dry up.

Elijah was once again in a vulnerable position. That's when God spoke. The first time that God had spoken to Elijah in I Kings 17 He told the prophet to go into hiding by the brook (vv. 2-3). This time God told him to go to the Phoenician city of Zarephath, which was located 100 miles north of the brook Cherith (vv. 8-9).

It is ironic that the people of Israel received no word from God for the three and a half years without rain. But Elijah heard several times from the Lord. Of course Elijah was listening for God's message, while the people had turned their backs to Him and stopped up their ears. Paul warned that the same attitude would be prevalent in the last days: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine. . . and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (II Timothy 4:3-4). God is a Gentleman. He does not force us to listen to Him. But, we ignore Him at our own peril.

For the first year of the drought God hid Elijah away in the desert. Ahab and Jezebel sought his life but their soldiers could not find him. When the brook dried up God brought Elijah out of hiding in Israel and sent him into enemy territory in Phoenicia. Zarephath was located midway between the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. It was considered part of Sidon (Zidon) and was under the rule of King Ethbaal, Jezebel's father. "Ethbaal" means "man of Baal." And he was that. The King of the Zidonians (Sidonians) was also a priest of Baal and a high priest of Ashtroth.

Baal, and his female counterpart, Ashtroth, were worshipped at altars set in "groves." A "grove" consisted of two tree stumps set on either side of an altar. Male sex organs were hand carved into one stump and female sex organs were carved into the other stump. Worshippers publically practiced immoral sex acts including incest and sodomy (homosexuality).

God sent His prophet into the midst of a country lost in idolatry and steeped in sin. Elijah would spend two and a half years among people whose religion and behavior were opposed to everything he held sacred. Perhaps it was this experience that made Elijah so determined to turn the people of Israel back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wanted them to know the God Who had protected him and provided for him in the midst of adverse circumstances.

God may lead us into places or situations that are distressing. Or, He may simply allow us to be in uncomfortable circumstances for a time. We may not understand why. But while we are there we are gaining knowledge and experience that may become useful at a later date. Some day we may be able to point back and say, "Now I understand! God was preparing me for this." For Elijah "this" was a contest on Mount Carmel where he withstood 450 priests of Baal (I King 18:22).

"For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou are come to the kingdom for such a time as this." Esther 4:14