

From Nothing to Something

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Devotional Message

Theology of Ordination Study Committee

January 22, 2013

The Bible is full of very provocative stories that nourish our thinking and motivate the actions of every reader or believer who pays attention to them. The Bible presents wonderful scenarios of women and men called by God to play a definite role, to represent a character full of lessons that transcend specific time and space, place and culture. It is with a renewed joy that we read again those biblical narratives that form part of our young age apprenticeship or our adult devotional life. But, it happens that we become so accustomed with those narratives that we have painted a complete picture of the events, and set a fixed list of lessons, and classified once and for all those biblical characters.

Today, I would like to invite you to follow me in the very familiar story as we find it in the first book Kings chapter 18 (1 King 18). We will not stop at the event on Mount Carmel, rather we will consider the experience of the prophet of God in the time that followed the extraordinary performance of the fire that consumed everything, the offering, the altar, the wood, the stones and the soil, even the water around in the trench (v. 38), leaving all protagonists and spectators at the scene with the loud cry: “The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!” (“God is the true God! God is the true God!”- The Message) v. 39

I’ll refer to the experience of the prophet Elijah on the Mount Carmel. 1 Kings 18: 41- 46

Elijah the Tishbite is suddenly introduced to our notice in 1 Kings 17:1 as delivering a message from the Lord to Ahab. We know nothing about his family, his childhood or his life. We know nothing or very little about the place where he comes from. The record we have in the narrative says: “Elijah, the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead” (with the LXX), “Elijah the Tishbite who was of the inhabitants of Gilead”(NKJV), or “Elijah the stranger from the strangers of Gilead”. It is difficult to say whether Tishbe was the place referred to in the name given to the prophet or whether it referred to his vocation and life. (Some translations: “Elijah, the converter”). We find Elijah entering the stage of history abruptly out of nowhere, with a word of faith and power presenting himself to the king.

The timing is very important. In the preceding chapters, the inspired historian had dug through the wall, and made us discover the horrible abominations in which Israel, during those melancholy times, was so deeply immersed. Clouds and thick darkness covered the whole land; the images of Baalim and Ashtaroth fiercely gleamed everywhere; idolatrous temples and pagan altars occupied the sacred soil; every hill smoked with their sacrifices, every vale resounded with the blasphemous yells of cruel priests. The people drank in iniquity like water, and sported in shameless rites around their idols. All was under the complacent and accomplice attention, yeah, under the instigation of the king house. Things

were not only bad, they were getting worse. During the long reign of Ahab it is said: “Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.” (17:30)

Looking at this spectacle, the reader is longing to see a change, to see a takeover so that the people of God (because it's the principal entity concerned) may benefit of something better, may come back to a better relation with God. The situation described is chaotic. Nothing to please the Lord and to secure the bien-être of the community!

There comes Elijah with a Word: “As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew or rain these years, but according to my word.” (I Kings 17:1)

Following this first intervention of the servant of the Lord, we would expect a reaction of the king or something like that, to rebuke or to call for grace, mercy. But instead, we find nothing. The narrative apparently goes in another direction. But in reality, we find a fine description of the situation that affects the entire country and its inhabitants, including the servant of the Lord. There is nothing: no water, no food. In order to survive, they had to rely only on God. It is a reminder for all that God is the great giver, provider. Each and every day, God renews its favor, great is his faithfulness. (cf. Lam. 3:19-23)

The days passed and the years also. After three years (3 and half, according to James 5), the word of God comes to Elijah to announce the end of the drought and penuries. The record states: “After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: ‘Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.’” (18:1). And Elijah met with Ahab. But again the narrative takes another direction, the scene becomes complicated with the confrontation of Elijah with a large group of prophets (false prophets: 400 + 450) who spent time crying louder and louder, using all kinds of religious tricks and strategies they knew, but nothing happened. Elijah finally won the conflict not by the sword or by his strength, but because God listens, and intervenes directly with power and might. Everybody recognizes that the Lord is unique, He is God.

And the main frame of the whole story is this: God stops and sends the rain when he pleases; to His word, all elements of the nature submit. “He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood.” (Psalm 33:9) He is the creator, the God almighty, the God who rules over all things.

Elijah came to Ahab and said: “Up on your feet! Eat and drink—celebrate! Rain is on the way; I hear it coming.” (1Kings 18:41)

Elijah is very confident. Israel, being thus far reformed, had acknowledged the Lord to be God, and had consented to the execution of Baal's prophets so that they might not seduce them anymore. Though this was far short of a thorough reformation, yet it was so well accepted that God consequently is ready to open the fountain of heaven, and to pour out blessings upon his land, that very evening (as it should seem) on which they did this good work, as if to confirm them in their reformation.

But the biblical narrative takes time again to come to the point. Nothing happened. No rain.

Instead, the text pictures the prophet who retires himself to pray (for though God had promised rain, he must ask it). What Elijah said we are not told. But he withdrew to a strange place, to the top of Carmel, which was very high and very private. There he is alone; he set himself, as it were, upon his watchtower (like the prophet Habakkuk will experiment - Habakkuk 2:1). He put himself into a strange posture. He cast himself down on his knees upon the earth, in token of humility, reverence and supplication, and put his face between his knees (that is, bowed his head so low that it touched his knees), thus abasing himself in the sense of his own meaninglessness before God.

He sends his servant out to look toward the sea if there is any evidence of a change coming, to see if there is a sign of the rain coming.

His servant comes back with a bad report, an empty report, a negative report. He comes back with nothing. He reports to the man of God, "There is nothing".

Six times, the servant leaves the man of God to wrestle with God while he scans the heavens for a sign, for any evidence that God has heard his prayer. Six times, the report comes back the same, "There is nothing". There was no mistaking his words, they were clear, they were sharp, and they were to the point.

There is nothing.

When there is nothing.

How many times, we have heard those words: "There is nothing". Not once, not twice, not three times, not six! But over, and over again!

There is no money.

There is no hope.

There is no way.

There is no love.

There is no chance.

There is no change.

There is nothing left.

There is no consensus.

There is nothing we can do.

Those words are meant to signify the end. In other words: you can quit praying now. Quit confessing. Quit believing. Quit hoping. Quit expecting. Quit dreaming. Quit looking. Quit praising. Quit marching.

They may mean your doctor, your banker, your lawyer, your husband, or your wife saying to you there is no solution, no way out.

They may mean the horrible condition of the world is not favorable; it is dry outside, same injustice, same violence, more immorality, more sorrow, famine, death.

They may mean out there is a world of distressed persons in large number who don't know God, who don't care about the real God, who are interested in all kinds of tricks and strategies to live without God.

Or they may mean your prodigals, who have said to you "I'm never going to serve God, so quit wasting your time praying for me".

They may even be colleagues around you, who are telling you to give up on your dream, your vision; they say "There is nothing; it's never going to happen."

They may be your circumstances that stand in absolute contradiction to your faith.

We have been talking for so long about the coming rain, the latter rain that would transform the church and make possible the coming of Jesus. And "There is nothing".

Keep praying. Keep looking.

The big lesson I need to bring to your attention today is that God is faithful to his Word; He is still all powerful, the sustainer, the provider, the life giver, the Only God, the One who keeps His promises, the one who expects us to stay constant in prayer, depending on Him. He called us from nowhere with a message and mission in our personal life and the community, in a time like this. And we have to exercise our faith in him at all time.

Look at Elijah. Six times his young servant goes to the point of the hill and sees nothing, brings no good news to him. "There is nothing". No doubt these words had an effect on Elijah. But a true man of faith is not shaken by what he sees or doesn't see. Instead of being discouraged and giving up, Elijah turns up the heat, he presses his request, he intensifies his prayer. He takes the negative report as a challenge to the Word of God. God has told him to appear before Ahab and he would send the rain. He stands on the Word of God (and the Bible says: "he prayed fervently" James 5: 16-18).

Take note, though the answer of our fervent and believing supplications may not come quickly, yet we must continue instant in prayer and not faint nor desist. For "at the end it shall speak and not lie."

At the Inter-American Division, we have this threefold motto, in the context of the movement of Revival and Reformation set to happen in our Church: "Constant in prayer", "Heading the Word", "that the world may know". We believe that in order to make a positive influence in our family, in our church and in the community, we need to stay in constant communion with God, to look for his guidance at every step of our life, and be available, opened to the action of his Spirit.

They are a number of brothers and sisters praying persistently and waiting for the fulfillment of the divine promises in their individual life as well as the collective life of the Church, a large number of members who are praying at this very moment for us, for the process and progress of our Church in unity.

On a personal note, I would tell you that I love to go to Haiti when my itinerary so permits, because it is an opportunity to go to my father's house. My dad lives alone – my mother passed away some years ago – and my visit is for him something special, and for me is a wonderful experience to talk to him and discuss different topics from the social situation there in the country to the last book he/we have read. We have a special connection: he is Elie (I am Elie); he is a pastor (now retired); he is a former professor and he loves reading. We were together debating when the earthquake hit and destroyed the city of Port-au-Prince, (Haiti) four years ago (2010).

One day my dad called all his children and families for a special celebration, his 80th birthday. And then, in the sermon that he preached to the family reunion, he shared one of his secret in life: he has been praying for each one of us, dedicating one day of the week for each one of us and our family. We are five siblings. My turn is on Wednesday, the 4th day of the week; you guess well, I am the 4th child. Today is Wednesday, I feel great, because someone is praying for me. It is so revitalizing to know that someone is praying regularly for you. On Friday, my dad continued saying that he prays for the Church, interceding all day for the fulfillment of God promises in the life of the people of God, the Remnant and in the hope of the second coming of Jesus.

Invariably, when I visit him, his interest is expressed by this question: “what do you see out there?”

Elijah continues praying, will not be diverted so far as to go and see with his own eyes, but still sends his young servant to see if he can discover any hopeful cloud, while he keeps his mind close and intent in prayer, and abides by it, as one that has taken up the resolution of Jacob, his father: “I will not let thee go except thou bless me”.

So many are praying in our Church! We are praying!

But note what E.G. White wrote:

“What we need is the quickening influence of the Holy Spirit of God. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.” Pray without ceasing, and watch by working in accordance with your prayers. As you pray, believe, trust in God. It is the time of the latter rain, when the Lord will give largely of His Spirit. Be fervent in prayer, and watch in the Spirit.” (Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 516)

“We must pray that God will unseal the fountain of the water of life. And we must ourselves receive of the living water. Let us, with contrite hearts, pray most earnestly that now, in the time of the latter rain, the showers of grace may fall upon us. At every meeting we attend, our prayers should ascend that at this very time God will impart

warmth and moisture to our souls. As we seek God for the Holy Spirit, it will work in us meekness, humbleness of mind, a conscious dependence upon God for the perfecting latter rain. If we pray for the blessing in faith, we shall receive it as God has promised.” (Same book, p. 508)

Be ready for action. The rain is coming.

The young servant comes back the seventh time with a side note. He says: “I don’t know what this mean, but I see a little cloud the size of a man’s hand”

Elijah knew what it meant, it meant my prayer has been heard, your prayer has been heard, and the answer is on its way. God has changed the nothing to something.

The poor servant was ready to hear those familiar words: “go, look again”. Instead, Elijah jumps up off his knees and sends his servant a different direction with a new order, a new instruction. It is time for action.

Elijah didn’t send that servant to look again to see if another cloud came up or even if the cloud had gotten bigger. Instead, he said: “you better go tell Ahab to get out of here quick because it’s on the way.” There is the sound of a downpour, a deluge, an extremely heavy hard rain. And the picture we have from the narrative is a man running, Elijah running so fast that he outran the horses and chariots back to Jezreel.

When the rain falls and the Spirit of Lord gets a hold of you, there is no telling what could take place. David said “By thee I have ran through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall” (Psalm 18:29).

I am ready for the rain to fall. God has changed nothing to something. I’ve got my ear tune to heaven and I believe I hear the sound of abundance of rain.

When I visit my father, I tell him there is a little cloud out there. I share the news about the growth of our Church. I present a glimpse of what is happening in our fields, in the last places where I have been. I talk about the little things in my personal life and my ministry. It is for him as hearing the sound of abundance of rain.

You may be standing in the middle of the desert and you may be staring at nothing but sand or you may be standing in the middle of the valley of dry bones with nothing but death and desolation and emptiness and confusion all around you. But let me remind you that it was into Ezekiel boneyard that the wind of God began to blow and put back together everything that had been stolen, everything that had been broken and raised up a mighty army.

The story of Elijah is a constant reminder that among the great desolation, any misconception, misperception, a drought that it is experienced out there, God is working to change the situation into something new, something filled of his presence. He is about “to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20). He is the extraordinary God, the One who is coming, yeah the One who is already acting among us. He is the God of small beginning.

Today, I believe that God has called us together as a small group from the large Seventh Day Adventist Church because he is willing to empty all his power, all his glory and pour out his Holy Spirit upon us, to start the action of the Latter Rain in our world Church. Do you see the little cloud growing among us?

I am ready for the rain to fall. God has changed nothing to something. I've got my ear tune to heaven and I believe I hear the sound of abundance of rain.

Let us pray earnestly, with perseverance, trusting that He is at work. Let us be constant in prayer, and move to action fulfilling our mission called us to do. He has changed the nothing in something.