1 Kings - Commentaries by Amy Catherine (Deck) Walton

Elisha: God's Messenger of Grace, Chapter 1: The Heir of the Valley of the Dance

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1 Kings 19:16-21

In front of us stands a large door. We pass through it, and where do we find ourselves? In the great central hall of the Crystal Palace. How brilliantly it is lighted! Rows of gaslights are to be seen in all directions. The place is a perfect blaze of light. A short time ago the hall was crowded, but now the audience has dispersed, and the brilliant hall is empty. See, it is beginning to grow dark as a man goes up and down that vast building putting out the lights. One bright light after another is put out. The place grows more and more dim, until at last only a few flickering lights in distant corners are visible. Then these also are extinguished, and the vast hall is filled with the darkness of night.

Just such a scene as that is brought before us on the pages of the Bible story which we open today. We see in front of us a country full of light, heavenly light, the light of the knowledge of the true God. This favored land is filled with those who are letting their light shine for God, holy and devoted men and women. There they live, and there they go about their daily work, and as they do so they are constantly shedding light around. Dark places are difficult to find in that happy country, for hundreds and thousands of God’s light-bearers are to be found there.

But even as we watch the blaze of light throughout the land, it begins slowly but surely to fade. The lights are beginning to go out. One by one we see them disappearing; the darkness is beginning to be felt. What is the matter? Someone is putting out the lights. Who is it? Wicked king Jeroboam started the work by getting the people to worship an idol. But, in spite of all that rebellious king’s efforts, countless true worshippers of God were to be found in the kingdom. It is left to another hand to complete the work which Jeroboam began and to leave the once-favored land in darkness. Who is it who now goes around the land of Israel blotting out the lights that remain?

It is a woman. Yes, a woman, the very one who ought to be doing all in her power to give light to all around her; a woman, whose mission should surely be to bring sunshine and not shadow into this world. A woman is the light-extinguisher!

A beautiful, wealthy, powerful, royal woman, the wife of the king, is the one who goes around that once brilliantly lighted land and turns its light into darkness.

Her name is Jezebel. Look at her, as she sits at the window of her wonderful new palace at Jezreel. It is a magnificent building, built not of stone or marble or wood, but of pure white ivory, which had been brought to Samaria on the backs of camels across the vast eastern desert. The palace is built on the city wall, and as Jezebel looks from her window, she sees, stretched out before her, a lovely fertile plain, the Plain of Esdraelon. Far out on the western horizon, she can distinguish Mount Carmel, while on the east she can see the deep, beautiful valley through which the Jordan River flows.

Bright sunshine is streaming down on the land, and yet, as Jezebel gazes from her window, she looks upon a country black as night, dark as the land of Egypt when God overwhelmed the land with a plague of darkness. The earthly sunshine is truly bright and glorious, but the heavenly light is gone. Jezebel, ever since she came as a bride to Israel from Tyre, has been busy putting out the lights. Now she sits in her palace to rest and congratulates herself on the fact that her work is done.

She cannot think of a single worshipper of Jehovah left in the land. If she could, she would at once send someone to the place in which he lived to have him put to death. From village to village and valley to valley, Jezebel’s soldiers had passed. Every altar to the true God had been overthrown; every known prophet of the Lord had been murdered or driven from the country; worshippers of Jehovah had been hunted to the death. Those bearing the heavenly light of the true God were hunted down even when hiding in the caves and even when they fled from the country to a foreign land. Each one that was murdered made one light less in the kingdom.

But Queen Jezebel’s anger and hatred of the light still burns in her, for there is one man whom she cannot extinguish. He is a burning and a shining light, which she has not been able to put out. She has tried to lay hands on him, but she has tried in vain. First his light flashes out in one direction; then it appears in another. But as soon as her soldiers come up to the place where the light has been seen, the light-bearer is gone.

In what extraordinary places that man had been hidden: in the deep ravine, in the lonely cave, among the ravens’ nests, and in outlying hamlets and farms! Once his light had shone forth in the very country from which she herself had come and which was ruled over by her father, the king of Tyre, a great upholder of Baal worship. Still, even then, the wicked queen had not been able to lay hands upon him. She had hunted him from place to place, from kingdom to kingdom, but she had hunted him in vain.

At last he had actually come boldly forward and gathered the whole nation together on Mount Carmel. He had challenged Jezebel’s heathen prophets and had made such a wonderful burst of light flash upon the land that the people had cried out as one man, “The Lord, He is the God.” And they had stood calmly by while he put to death Jezebel’s prophets, the vile prophets of Baal.

But just as Elijah’s light burned the brightest, it suddenly went out. She sent him a message the next day, a message very short and very much to the point. “And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.”

That message accomplishes what Jezebel has wanted for so long. Elijah’s light suddenly goes out. He disappears, and the queen fondly hopes he has disappeared forever. Nothing has been heard of him for months. She hopes he is either dead or too terrified ever to return.

So Jezebel fondly dreams, as she smiles to herself in her ivory palace at Jezreel. Now at last the burning light is extinguished, and she cannot see throughout the whole length and breadth of the kingdom even the faintest sign of a worshipper of Jehovah. All is dark.

Were any true followers of the Lord God of Israel still to be found in the land? Yes, there were. Unseen by Jezebel, seen only by the all-seeing God, there were still no less than seven thousand followers of Jehovah who had never bowed the knee to Baal. They were men and women of no fame, true souls, unknown to wicked Jezebel and unknown even to the great prophet Elijah, but well-known to the great God of Israel.

In the large cemetery in Hull there is a curious tombstone. Upon it are engraved, not the names of those buried beneath, but simply their initials, and beneath them these striking words: “UNKNOWN, YET WELL-KNOWN.” They may be unknown to man, for they were poor, humble people, holding no position of importance in their town, but they are well-known to God. Their initials only appeared on their tombstone, but their names are written in heaven. “He calleth His own sheep by name.” “The Lord knoweth them that are His.”

Are we among the number of God’s well-known ones? Can the true Shepherd say of us, “I ... know My sheep, and am known of Mine”? What joy and peace to be known by the King of kings and to have our names enrolled in the records of heaven! Surely it matters little what men think or say of us; it matters little if we are obscure on earth. We belong, if we are the sheep of Christ, to the royal family of heaven, and our names are known to the Lord.

About fifty miles from Jezebel’s ivory palace lived one of these quiet little lights, a man by the name of Shaphat. He was a farmer, whose farm lay in the fertile Jordan valley. In his fields the village feasts were held. Those green pastures were often filled with the country people, arrayed in their best clothes, and there they danced, sang and made merry at Shaphat’s farm. So the place came to be known as Abel-meholah, which means “The Valley of the Dance.”

Shaphat had many laborers working under him, and he had probably lived all his life in that valley. He and his wife were getting to be old people when the story opens. He had a son who was his right-hand man in the farm and who would inherit the Valley of the Dance when old Shaphat was laid to rest.

The son’s name was Elisha. The meaning of his name was a beautiful one: “God saves.” It was nearly the same name as Joshua, for the meaning of the two names was almost identical.

Elisha ... ... Joshua

El Hoshea ... ... Jah Hoshea

God Saves ... ... Jehovah Saves

There, in the quiet Valley of the Dance, lived Shaphat with his wife and son, and there, in those dark times, they secretly prayed to the true God. Their knees had never bowed to Baal. Jezebel knew nothing of them. Had she known, she would have tried to put them to death. God knew them well, and God protected them.

One day the son, Elisha, is busy in the fields. He and his servants have begun the plowing of one of the meadows in the Valley of the Dance. No less than twenty-four oxen are at work in the field. Eleven servants and Elisha are guiding the twelve plows.

The oxen are yoked together in pairs. Their yokes are thin and light. The plow is small and light and consists of a long piece of wood, fastened to the yoke at one end and at the other to a cross-bar, to which is attached the plowshare for turning up the earth.

In front of young Elisha are eleven plows guided by eleven servants, while he comes last, guiding the twelfth yoke of oxen. As he plows, he has much time to think of the wretched darkness of idolatry which has settled over God’s land.

Suddenly, as he looks up, he sees a man striding across the newly plowed field. He is a strange, rough figure, brown with the Eastern sun and wearing over his clothes a sheepskin cloak. On he comes with rapid strides. As he draws nearer the young farmer recognizes him. It is Elijah, the wonderful prophet who had so mysteriously disappeared. He had not been seen by anyone since that extraordinary day when he had summoned the nation to Mount Carmel. It is the man on whose head a price has been set. What can he be thinking of, to come so near Jezreel?

Elijah comes up to the young farmer and takes off his mantle, a short cloak or cape of untanned sheepskin. He throws it over the shoulders of the young Elisha and then walks on without it. Elisha watches him stride across the field as if nothing had happened.

What does it mean? It is a sign, and Elisha understands the meaning. That mantle is the outward and visible sign of the prophet’s office. Elijah’s action says to Elisha, as plainly as words could have said it, “Follow me.” Leave your father and mother, leave your home, leave the farm and the plow, leave everything and come with me. Follow me, the outcast. Walk in my footsteps and undertake the work of Jehovah which I, the prophet of the Lord, am doing.

Elisha knows the full import of that momentous action, and, for a few moments, he stands astonished. Then he runs after the great prophet and says, “Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee.” It was a very natural request. Surely nothing could be more so. He was about to leave his home, his family and his work. Who could blame him if he craved at least a farewell kiss? But Elijah saw deeper than this. He knew there was more beneath the surface.

Elisha’s heart was being tested. He must not look back even as he put his hand to the plow of serving the Lord. No one who does this is fit for the kingdom of God. The old prophet realized this fact, and he answered accordingly. Gravely he said to him, “Go back again: for what have I done to thee?” Why take leave of your family and friends to come with me? The choice lies in your own hands; I will not force you into the work. Go back to your plowing; why leave it? It is evidently a great sacrifice to you. You can remain as you are.

But Elisha has already made up his mind to choose the better part. He turns back to the oxen and servants. Taking the two oxen he was using, he kills them, lights a fire with the plowshare, and cooks them. Then he feasts his servants with the meat. Why does he do all this? He would have them know that the day of God’s call is one of joy, not of sorrow. He kills the oxen, the very means of his living, that he might step out in faith to follow wholeheartedly the call of God. Then, leaving father, mother, servants, cattle, land and comfortable home, he sets out to

follow the homeless wanderer.

Several thousand years have gone by since that sunny day when young Elisha received his call from God. Yet our God changes not. What He was then, He is now. What He sought then, He seeks now. What He did then, He still does now.

Is he calling you today just as he called Elisha? Do you not hear His loving voice saying to you, “Follow Me”? Leave all and follow Christ. But remember, God seeks now just what He sought then: He seeks an undivided heart. He wants your all. If He tests your heart and asks, “Go back again: for what have I done to thee?” what will your answer be?

Remember, too, that God is now just what He was then, the strength-giving God. He gave Elisha the power to obey that call. He will give the same power to you. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Yes, you can even leave all and follow Him.

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