

Elijah & Elisha

A Bible Study

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Elijah & Elisha

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Preface

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” II Tim. 3:16

As we sat in a local coffee shop with our beverages of choice—me with my coffee and my friend with her southern iced tea—we talked about **Elijah & Elisha**. Digging deep into the book, she provided valuable help with editing and refining. As we talked, she asked some probing questions and finally the big one, “Joy, why did you pick this particular topic? There are so many easier parts of the Bible to focus on.” The question caught me off guard, but as I looked into my spirit, I knew the answer. I wrote this book because a year ago, I was reading in I Kings and II Kings, and I noticed my own tendency to skim over the objectionable sections and focus on the easier parts. One day I stopped short and thought to myself, “If these stories are in here, they are here for a reason. I wonder what God has in mind. What is he trying to tell me through these tough passages?” At that time, God placed the yearning in my heart to spend some serious time in study and see what truths God brought to light.

I don’t believe for a minute that it is possible to fully comprehend all that is in scripture, especially these particular stories about Elijah and Elisha. But as I see it, God provides the Bible as a unit, one book, with several central themes. From Genesis to Revelation God is saying, “I am love. I love you. I am holy. You are not. I sent Jesus into the world so that he can take care of your sinfulness through his sacrifice. Accept that love. Become one with me again.” And I see those themes of redemptive love through the words, faith and miraculous deeds of the prophets.

Once I was part of a Bible study where a woman announced, “I only study the New Testament. I don’t like the Old.” To me, that’s like eating the icing and leaving the cake. We do ourselves a disservice when we try to over explain and simplify parts of the Bible that will remain, forever, shrouded in the realm of the mysteries to be revealed at the end of time. But we also err when we skim past whole sections because they don’t make sense or because they raise doubts in our minds. Our God is able to face our questions. He says, “Bring it on!” He welcomes our engagement with his Word and can lead us to new heights in our relationship with him, if we will take the risk and accept the invitation. I invite you to join me now, in this adventure of exploring the stories of these two great men of God and the company of prophets that follow them.

Elijah & Elisha

General Introduction

Recently, we suffered through a strong winter storm and the power went out. We were unprepared and groped around in the dark trying to find candles, a lighter or a flashlight—anything to dispel the darkness and help us find our way. Having the power go out gives us an immediate understanding of just how dependent we are on electricity to function in our day-to-day lives.

The Bible, as the Word of God, is a “light to our path” and shows us God’s way through life. But that is not to say that it is an easy book to discern. Taken as a unit, the Bible points the way to Christ and the cross. But honestly, some of the individual stories leave us scratching our heads in bewilderment. Elijah and Elisha’s stories are classic examples. Some of the stories clearly bring us closer to God and others...well, they require some extra time, study, and allowance for questions when we get to heaven.

This study will take you through the wilderness of Israel in it’s early days. After King David and his son, Solomon, die, Israel breaks into two parts, the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms. What follows is a succession of kings, some more successful than others and all less than perfect. They continually fight off invaders from the outside, but they suffer more from decay on the inside, their own lack of faith, and persistent idol worship.

God sends messengers to them, prophets, to show them the way to a life of faithfulness. Elijah and Elisha, arguably the two most prominent prophets of the Old Testament, embody God’s Spirit and live lives that loudly proclaim God’s power over people, the elements, and situations.

In this study, we will begin in I Kings 16 and go through II Kings 13. The kingdoms divided in 930 B.C. and our study begins when Ahab is king in Israel (Northern Kingdom) in 874 B.C. Each chapter is divided into five days with prayer, scripture and questions for life application each day. Ideally, the reader will gather with a small group once a week to share answers and help each other gain new insights.

Can you hold your breath? Maybe for a few minutes. The world record is twenty two minutes but for most of us two or three minutes would be exceptional. Biologically, our lives are defined by our first and our last breaths. In between, we breathe in oxygen-laced air and breathe out carbon dioxide. Spiritually, we also breathe in and breathe out. We breathe in scripture and the inspiration we find in prayer and study. Then we breathe out actions that demonstrate the transformation of the heart. Rev. Eddie Fox, former Director of World Evangelism for the World Methodist Council, says, “Personal piety is the way we breathe in. Social action is the way we breathe out. You know which is most important when you know which you did last.” Our physical lives consist of breathing in

and breathing out regularly. And so it is with the spirit life; we must continually feed and enrich our inner life so that we can move out into the world with actions that reflect that enriched life. If we neglect study and prayer, we quickly find ourselves without a power source.

This study will help us to take in the scripture stories, hold them in our hearts while the Spirit illuminates meaning and then breathe out transformation in our own lives and in the lives of others. It is my prayer that we will be able to gather some new information, examine it closely and then apply it in our everyday walk with Christ so we “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)*

*All quoted scriptures are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

Chapter 1:

Day 1

Slow Slide into Sin

Prayer for Inspiration:

Lord, help me to see sin for what it is in my own life. I find that it is so much easier to identify it in the lives of others. But today, Lord, give me the grace to see it and to trust you to remove any vestiges of it. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

Read I Kings 16: 29-33

Meditate and Look for Insight

When jumping out of airplanes into unknown terrain, paratroopers are taught to quickly size up their location, determine direction, and begin to move purposefully toward their goal. As we land smack dab in the middle of I Kings, we quickly realize that we are in unfamiliar territory and that much of what we see and hear does not make sense. As we collect ourselves to move toward the goal of greater knowledge of God and his Word, let's take a moment to get our bearings.

Elijah is called to minister and prophecy during a dark time in the history of Israel. Ahab and his wife Jezebel lead Israel into a long downward spiral, away from God and from seeking His holiness and into worship of Baal, the God of fertility and rain. Ahab knows who God is, but he does not worship him or regard Him with respect. The people follow him into sin as he sets up an Asherah pole in Samaria and has the people come to pay homage.

Skim over I Kings 16: 29-33 again, and write down some of the things you learn about Ahab:

Who was his father and what kind of example did Ahab have to follow?

How does Ahab compare to those that come before him and how long does he reign?

Verse 31 references “Jeroboam son of Nebat.” Skim over I Kings 12 to see who Jeroboam is and what sin it is that he commits that begins the process of moving away from the worship of the One True God in Jerusalem. What is the sinful thought process that gets Jeroboam off track?

What does verse 33 tell us about how God felt about Ahab?

The Country Follows the Leader into Trouble...

The Bible doesn’t say exactly how the people react to Ahab’s poor leadership, but we certainly don’t see any mention of a movement toward revival or toward righteous living; the overall sense is that at the very least they simply go along with what Ahab proposes and at worst, they enthusiastically endorse it. God is disgusted with the sin he sees.

Lest we disassociate too much from this ancient story, there is a modern song that illustrates how easy it is for us to fall victim to the same seduction. “It’s a Slow Fade,” by Casting Crowns, is a song whose lyrics address the enticement of sin. In it, we read:

It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white have turned to gray
Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid
When you give yourself away
People never crumble in a day
It's a slow fade...

One day, while telling the story of Ahab to a group of children, one of them said, “I don’t understand why idol worship was such a big deal. Why did they want to sit around and pray to wooden figures?” Good question. So why is idol worship such a snare to the Israelites throughout the Bible? Clearly, worshipping hand made figures is not the attraction. The children of Israel fly around the flypaper of idol worship because they want to belong. They want to be part of the club, the gang, the rituals. They want to wear the patch, get the tattoo, hold the key to worldly success and status among their neighbors. They are further tempted by the sensual practices associated with idol worship; all the beauty of God’s creation perverted into ugliness, greed and dissipation.

The Children of Israel land in the trash heap of sin, not by jumping off a cliff but by sliding down the slick ramp to temptation and being unwilling to take one step toward God

whose hand remains outstretched, offering refuge. Ahab's subjects chose not to take a stand, and the end result is physical and spiritual disaster.

The Bible speaks to the importance of being willing to hold firm against the forces of sin. In Ephesians 6:13-14, we see the word, "stand" repeated several times. "...you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then..." In our walk with God, sometimes we must simply stand. Note that these verses don't tell us to go into battle, to fight, to enter hand-to-hand combat, but to simply take a stand.

We see these same instructions in Exodus, where Moses gives the people directions on this new way of doing things. He tells them not to be afraid but to take a firm stand, instead, so they can see what God will do for them.

Exodus 14:13,14: "Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.'"

How and when do we "take a stand?" This phrase brings to mind a person standing with arms crossed, feet planted firmly and a no-nonsense attitude. While this may be the case at times, I wonder if "taking a stand" is what we really need to do in our personal lives? Do we take a stand against our own bad habits? Do we take a stand against reading polluting literature? Do we take a stand against wasting our precious quiet time on Facebook? It's easy for us to look outward when we talk of taking a stand, but I know that true holiness begins inside my heart when I look at my own shortcomings.

Am I taking a stand where I need to?

Spend some time thinking about idols that might lead you down a slippery slope away from a closer relationship with God. Some that come to mind are money, possessions, the internet, and even some "good" things like family and church activities. Can you list some here?

How does our own desire to belong tempt us to compromise? Can you think of a time when you wanted to be part of a social club or some type of group whose values and ideals were not inspirational?

Where in our lives do we need to take a stand? What are some changes that we may need to consider?

The idea of taking a stand gets a lot of mileage in our current society and in our churches. And while it is important to take a stand against injustice and prejudice wherever we find it—I am certainly not advocating being a wishy-washy kind of Christian—we also need to consider where we can take a stand “for” instead of “against.” As Christians we first face the temptation to look outside ourselves and feel somehow superior because we aren’t as bad as someone else. We become “against” kind of people: against abortion, against liberals or against conservatives, against racism, against guns or against gun proponents, against pornography, against...you name it. It’s an exhausting list and it’s an exhausting life, being against the issue of the day.

Oddly, though, I don’t see this in Jesus. He was for loving people, for serving, for forgiving, for giving our very lives away to others. He espoused a Gospel of transformation by dying to self and being re-born into a new life. He tells us in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I wonder sometimes if our Lord doesn’t sigh at our earnest negativity and try--again--to show us a better way. I wonder where He is calling me to be a “for” kind of person: for mentoring young women away from early pregnancies, for mentoring young men so that they develop into men that value and treasure the women in their lives, for children who are “red and yellow and black and white...,” for accompanying the lonely elderly, for the sick and dying. As Christians we are called to take a stand for the Lord.

Breathe out Actions and New Life:

What are you “for” in your life? _____

Pray that God will reveal to you areas of your life where you can take a stand to be “for” others.

Chapter 1

Day 2

Here Comes Elijah!

Prayer for Inspiration:

Lord, help me for this period of time to put aside the thoughts of the day and to focus solely on you and what you have to say to me. Empty me, Lord, and then fill me up with more of you. Amen.

Breathe in scripture:

Re-read I Kings 17:1-6

Meditate and look for insight:

Elijah's Introduction

“Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead...” (v.1). Elijah does not have a lot of long credentials beside his name. The Bible introduces him as simply as if someone were to say, “And now let me introduce to you, Joy, from Kingsport, Tennessee,” and without any further qualification, I could stand and deliver my message from the Lord.

I remember reading **David Copperfield** as a teenager. In it there is a character named Uriah Heep who spends a great deal of time proclaiming his own humility, when he truly is the antithesis of humility. Humility may come naturally to some, but it is a Christian characteristic that I long to have more of. Of course, when I do achieve more of it, I won't be able to announce it! Here are some questions about humility for us to consider:

- Do we sometimes look at the letters behind someone's name in order to gauge their authority?
- Do we sometimes look down on people who are less prepared educationally?
- Do we sometimes take pride in our own qualifications when all we are belongs to Him?
- How can we cultivate a spirit of humility in relation to our own preparation?

When Jesus was here on earth, he picked many simple men and women to follow him: in the crowd were fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes and others who were not neces-

sarily members of the upper echelons of the society of the day. In fact, in Acts we see the Jews who were gathered during Pentecost comment, “Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?’” (Acts 2:7-8) “Galilean” was synonymous with “uneducated” or “unrefined,” similar to our saying “hillbilly” or other even less polite terms.

Jesus made it plain that he can use any of us who are willing to offer ourselves up to him. While being in a mode of continuous education is in keeping with God’s desires for us in terms of fulfilling our potential in his service, God reaches out and puts a hand gently on our shoulders and says, with a voice heavy with loving kindness, “You know, I can use you today if you will let me. It is not necessary for you to prepare in some special way before we can get started.” If I will just say, “Yes!” today, He can get to work in my life. I love that saying, “God doesn’t just call the equipped. He equips the called.”

How can we answer the call to speak when God calls us to? Where is God leading me to say a word of encouragement and love and gentle conviction today?

Elijah speaks:

“As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.” (v. 1)

Let’s look at Elijah’s message and think about how it might have been received.

- First, he gives the source credit for the message. He states, right up front, who is the author of the Word he is delivering and states his position before God. He is the servant.
 - Elijah is so in the Spirit that he feels confident delivering his message. How can we become more familiar with God’s Word to know what He would say on the topic at hand?
 - What are some ways of letting others know that we belong to the Lord without using words? And if we use words, how can we phrase them so that others can hear without feeling judged or inferior?
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Elijah’s message:

God is trying to get the attention of all the people of Israel and the leadership of the country. By withholding rain and even dew, God shows his power by affecting everyone right where they feel it most: in their stomachs. For a people who depend on farm crops for their livelihood, not having rain is the worst kind of curse.

- Can you think of a time in your life when God got your attention?
 - Was it a loss of financial security?
 - Was it an illness?
 - Was it a death?
 - How did the crisis affect your relationship with Him?
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In elementary school, the firemen come in to teach the children about fire prevention. They use the catchy phrase, “Stop, drop and roll,” to help kids understand what to do if their clothing ever catches on fire. In this passage, Elijah is basically delivering the “Stop and drop” part of the message to Israel: “God does not like the direction you are going in. Your clothes are on fire. You will get burned!”

The Unwelcome Messenger and Message:

Our dog, Mikey, hates the poor UPS man. Something about the boxy brown truck and the brown clothes, brings out his most belligerent side. Though he has never bitten anyone, I have no doubt that the UPS man does not enjoy bringing our packages when Mikey is outside!

Elijah, the Tishbite, may have gotten some of the same type of reception from the people. So much so that the next verse says, “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan.” (v. 3)

Elijah is instructed to go into hiding by God’s spirit and he obeys. Unspoken here are the likely threats against his life by Ahab, Jezebel, their court, and the court of public opinion.

- How do we react when someone delivers a message that we don’t want to hear?
- Has anyone ever offered you a word of correction? How did you take it?

Sometimes, in my line of work as a nurse, I observe the tendency people have to want to “kill the messenger.” When given bad news about their health, people receive it but may not ever want to see the doctor that delivered it again. I find this to be especially true when patients are asked to quit smoking or to lose weight or to start to exercise. Sometimes, the best advice, given with the best intentions, provokes the hearer to anger and retaliation instead of the needed change. Can you relate to this?

Once, when my husband’s nurse was on maternity leave, I filled in at his family practice office. When I brought the patients back to take their vitals signs and check their medication lists, I tried to have the discussion on smoking cessation with them in order to spare the doctor as much as possible. In my mind, if people resented me, then it was not a problem--I would soon be gone!

Some elementary school teachers use centers or thematic learning. This means that for the period of time that they are studying geometric shapes, for example, the math, reading, art, social studies and even the room set up will be geared toward conveying the central message of the week.

God gets an A+ when it comes to perfection in thematic teaching. He speaks to us through his Word, through our ministers, through our friends, through nature and many times He works on one particular topic where He is busy re-shaping us. Like clay in the potter's hands, he will shape us into something beautiful if we will allow it.

Let's turn this inward a bit more:

- Where in your life do you feel the Holy Spirit fingering a spot that hurts?
-

- Can you remember a time when God used several separate events to speak to your heart?
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- How can I cultivate a spirit that pays attention to what God might be trying to say to me today?
-

Breathe out actions and new life:

Are we responding with a heart of humility and a willingness to change or are we responding with anger and resentment and rebellion toward Him?

Let us pray that God will find a receptive spirit in us, one that is open to change and correction.

Chapter 1

Day 3

Staying Well Fed

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, feed me today with your Word. Satisfy me with the spiritual and physical food that I need today, and help me to share some of both with others. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

Review I Kings 17:1-6

Meditate and look for insight

Elijah Fed by Ravens

I enjoy watching a TV show called “Chopped.” In it, four chefs compete to be the top chef in a show where they are asked to prepare an appetizer, an entree, and a dessert. The unpredictable part of the show is that they are asked to do this with a basket of previously chosen disparate ingredients, some of them, quite frankly, disgusting. They are judged on their ability to transform the contents of the basket into something edible, appetizing and creative. The judges are merciless in offering their criticism and comments. The contestants often end up looking pretty frazzled, but only one of them gets to claim the title of “Chopped Champion” and carry away a check for \$10,000.

I suppose one of the reasons that this show is so popular is that many of us find ourselves doing the same thing frequently: we open the refrigerator (our version of the basket) and stand there trying to figure out how to transform these lowly ingredients into something that is not only edible but also delicious and worthy of our table.

Do you enjoy planning meals and cooking? Do you like to make the table look nice and think about how much family members will enjoy what you have prepared?

What is one of your favorite “go to” recipes? Do you cook something that is a real family tradition?

Even if you don’t cook on a regular basis, you most likely plan where you are going to go out to eat. Imagine for a moment a period of time --the Bible does not specify-- when

you would be totally dependent on birds to bring your food twice a day. Would you doubt that the meals would come? How would you feel about the presentation of the meal? Somehow, the mental picture of having a raven bring me meat and bread from his beak doesn't exactly open up my appetite!

This story illustrates vividly the process of complete dependence upon God for the most basic needs. Now think about your own life. Do you depend on God or have you padded your pantry and your bank account so that you don't feel that you need him? Do we sometimes confuse stockpiled stuff with self-sufficiency? How can we live our lives so that we acknowledge our complete dependence on him?

Pause for a moment and thank God for 10 things that he provides on a daily basis. Write your answers below:

In that lonely place, where Elijah lived in hiding, fearing for his life, his only company was birds. My niece has a small parrot named Captain in her apartment. He is surprisingly good company for a young lady that works all day and comes home in the evening to what would be an otherwise empty apartment. Captain fills up the studio apartment with his attempts to talk and his demanding calls to be up on her shoulder.

I wonder if Elijah grew to look forward to the daily coming of the birds. Not only did they bring food but they also brought companionship. Ravens are known to be intelligent and trainable. Maybe he teaches them a few things, as well. Certainly, the twice daily coming of the birds with food gives structure to his days and helps him mark the time.

Ravens are mentioned several times in the Bible, from Genesis where they are sent out to see if the waters have receded, to Job 38:41 where they are again associated with God's supply, this time for themselves: "Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?" Jesus invites us to trust like the ravens, "Consider the ravens; They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!" (Luke 12:24). Elijah's ravens are associated both with the physical supply of food and with the spiritual supply of good company during a lonely time.

Do you have any animals? Do they keep you company? What is the strangest pet you have ever had?

The Bible is replete with stories of God’s miraculous provision for his people. Starting with manna and quail (bread and meat) in the desert and moving to Jesus’ hands miraculously feeding the 5,000, God’s Word uses the routine physical hunger that we all experience to help us understand the hunger for truth that we all need to experience. Too often we are satisfied with appetizers, or even—heaven forbid!—with pre-digested food that is regurgitated into our mouths from those around us. We sometimes are reluctant to go out and search diligently on a daily basis for the much more that God has for us through the Spirit.

Moving to Solid Food

After Jesus’ 40 days and 40 nights of fasting, the devil tempts him with bread. Jesus quotes part of Moses’ words, “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deut. 8:2,3 & Matt. 4:4)

Scripture admonishes us not to be stuck on “milk” but to long for more.

I Cor. 3:1-4- What does Paul say is the opposite of being spiritual and what are some of the symptoms of being so afflicted?

Hebrews 5:11-14- What does the author say about solid food, who it is for and what results from ingesting it?

Back in the “old days” drivers would pull up to the gas station and simply say to the attendant, “Fill ‘er up!” That expression said it all, and the driver simply kept his or her seat at the wheel while the gas station employee ran around filling up the tank, cleaning the windshield, checking the oil and the tire pressure. My goodness, that was a long time ago, wasn’t it?

As Christians, do we sometimes make the mistake of coming to church on Sundays, taking a seat, wiping off a spot on our mental windshield, and looking at the preacher with the mental admonition, “Better fill ‘er up fast because I’ve got a roast in the crock pot!” Funny, but sadly true to life more often than we care to admit.

Breathe out actions and new life:

What are some concrete steps that we can take to seek out that spiritual food that nourishes us deeply on a daily basis?

What spiritual food has God brought to you today? Go back through the reading and find one thing that speaks to your heart today. Write it here and consider telling one other person about it as you go through the course of the day.

Chapter 1

Day 4

God's Provision Comes in Unexpected Ways

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, thank you for your provision for me and for my loved ones. Help me to be content with what I have and to continue in an attitude of gratitude.

Breathe in scripture

Read I Kings 17: 7-16

Meditate and Look for Insight:

God Asks a Hard Thing

When the brook at Kerith Ravine dries up, the Word of the Lord comes to Elijah again and he is commanded to go to a place called Zarephath of Sidon where God has prepared the way by instructing a widow to take care of the prophet. As in our day, single mothers and their children are the first to feel the pinch in an economic crisis. We are thankful for the opportunity to share with those in special need but Elijah has the opposite happen to him. First he is fed by birds, and now the prophet has to depend on a widow, the poorest of the poor, to take care of him. Again, Elijah is asked to be in a humble and dependent posture before God. God directs Elijah to this unlikely source of shelter: a woman, a widow, and a foreigner. This triumvirate is humbling for Elijah; he is forced to depend on someone that in every human way is inferior to him.

Can you remember a time when you were called to be humbly dependent on God for your physical needs? How did that time influence your spiritual life?

When Elijah arrives at the town gate, he sees a widow gathering sticks. How do you think that he knew she was a widow?

Can you think of other times in the Bible when God uses the lowly and the humble to illustrate his grace?

He asks her first for water and then adds, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.” (v. 11) Now remember, they had both heard their instructions from God, but at this point they are each given an opportunity to obey or not obey.

She answers him by saying she is down to her last handful of flour and just a little oil. Then she adds the important information that she has a child, and we can almost hear the heartbreak in her voice when she says, “I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

How do you think she might have felt about her instructions from the Lord? Are you ever asked by God to do something that is hard, that involves great personal sacrifice? How have you responded in the past? Can you think of an example?

My imagination makes me wonder what kind of mental conversation this widow might have been having with God while she was picking up sticks. Do you think she might have been saying, “God, ask someone else to help this prophet. Can you not see that I am at the end of my rope here?” We don’t know her thoughts, but we can certainly imagine our own in her place!

Elijah Offers Comfort and Encouragement

What are you afraid of? Insects? Clowns? Flying? Illness? Failure? As a child I was afraid of tiny frogs, probably because one day I used an outhouse and after I finished, for some unknown reason, I lifted the seat only to find it lined with tiny frogs. Needless to say, for years after that, I always lifted the seat before sitting down! My fear has morphed into a grudging admiration for the tiny creatures who sing songs after the rain and help to keep our world in balance—but that change took a while.

What about you? How have your fears changed over the years?

In this story, we see Elijah first addressing the issue at hand: fear.

“Elijah said to her, ‘Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and than make

something for yourself and your son. 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.'" (v. 13-14)

Elijah can sense the woman's fear, especially as she states how close she and her child are to death. He offers her a word of comfort, possibly delivered in a soft, encouraging tone that helps this poor woman do what she is asked.

The phrase, "Do not be afraid," or "Fear not," occurs many times in Scripture and we hear it from the lips of Jesus several times. Look up the following passages and make some notes about the circumstances when Jesus speaks these words:

Luke 8:50- Speaking to Jairus, whose daughter was ill...

Matthew 14:27-While walking on the water...

Matthew 28:10-Appearing to the women after the resurrection...

Jesus also addresses our tendency to worry about our basic provisions. What does he say to us about that?

Matthew 6:25-34- In the Sermon on the Mount

Luke 12:22-26- In the Sermon on the Plain

Priorities Set Straight

After acknowledging and addressing the woman's fears, Elijah goes on to give her specific instructions and to challenge her to put her faith into action. He tells her to go make some bread and bring him some first and then make some for herself and her child. Why do you think Elijah does this? Why would he take bread from the mouth of a child to put it in his own? What is the condition of the heart that he and His Master are looking for? How do we respond when God asks us to put him first and then take care of our own needs?

Here are some questions to help us explore our priorities further (I can hear my own toes crunching as scripture steps all over them!)

Do we make time for prayer and study each day?

Do we give a portion of our worldly possessions to him?

What about tithing of our time? Do we give to him first, before we tend to ourselves?

What are some other ways we can live out our faith day to day? Make a few notes about things that the Holy Spirit brings to mind.

The Widow of Zarephath in the New Testament

In Jesus' address to the synagogue in Nazareth, he references the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. Read Luke 4:14-30.

Things start out rather well as Jesus reads the Scriptures to his own town folk. He stands up, reads the Word, then sits down and begins to speak to the crowd about how he is the fulfillment of the Scripture. At first, "all spoke well of him" but things quickly change when he talks about how Elijah went to a Gentile widow. Jesus speaks well of the surrounding peoples and the Nazarenes do not like it. In fact, their anger is so forceful that they try to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff.

Are there times when we hate a group of people so much that we want to throw Jesus and his words out of our lives? Before we condemn the people of Nazareth too much, let us look deeply inside ourselves and think about what we listen to, what we read, what we watch. Does any of it propose hatred or discrimination against people of another country, ethnic group, or religious group? What would Jesus say to us?

Write out below Jesus' words from John 13:34-35:

What kind of conditional statements does Jesus attach to those being loved? Do they have any part in our response at all? _____

When we go out to buy a new car, we get to choose the “optional” equipment: fancy heated seats, special leather, wood trim, turbo whatever. All of the bling makes our car super duper great, but it truly doesn’t change the fact that the basic requirement of a car remain unchanged: it must work when we turn the key and it must get us from point A to point B. In our Christian lives, we can accessorize a lot but the basic command remains the same—love one another. No amount of sidestepping can get us around that one common denominator for all Christians. Hate is not an option.

Promises Flow after Obedience

“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. She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.’ (v 14,15)

The widow at Zarephath receives an opportunity from God. First, he prepares her heart by letting her know ahead of time that she will be asked to help a man of God. Secondly, when Elijah comes she sees exactly what is required of her and makes her decision to say “Yes,” to God. After that, she experiences God’s blessed provision for her, her son and also her family. Her obedience leads to blessings not just for herself but also for those around her.

Our daughter got married two years ago and our son shortly after that, both in lovely church ceremonies where they stood before the Lord and uttered the time-honored promises, “To have and to hold from this day forward...” Misty-eyed, our family and friends witnessed these blessed unions, and now we all bear witness to their pledge to live out these promises in their day to day commitment to each other. Marriage is a very serious promise, but what are some of the less solemn ones you hear in your daily life? “I promise to come,” or a child’s plaintive, “I promise I didn’t make that mess?”

God’s promises never fail. What are some promises from scripture that are particularly meaningful to you? Can you list three here?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Breathe out Actions and New Life

Trusting God’s care and provision is hard at times. We can often be guilty of short circuiting the process by trying to fix things for ourselves. As you prayerfully consider today’s lesson, write out a prayer to God about his promises and the response you desire to have to His direction in your life.

Chapter 1

Day 5

God Brings New Life

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, I know that you want to give me new life; freedom from the burdens of the past and the sins that hold me back. Give me the faith I need to trust you with it all. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

I Kings 17:17-24

Meditate and Look for Insight:

God Is with Us Through Life and Death

“Life is precious. Not because it is unchangeable, like a diamond, but because it is vulnerable, like a little bird. To love life means to love its vulnerability, asking for care, attention, guidance, and support. Life and death are connected by vulnerability. The newborn child and the dying elder both remind us of the preciousness of our lives. Let’s not forget the preciousness and vulnerability of life during the times we are powerful, successful, and popular.” - Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 1997.

I work part time as a hospice nurse. As such, I frequently help others through the immediate time surrounding the death of a loved one. Listening respectfully, being present without being intrusive, and helping validate others’ grief expressions, has taught me much about death and the nature of the transition to the next life.

I find that in the moments surrounding death, there are few true unbelievers. When all else is stripped away, God is all that is left. The choice to worship him or not remains,

even at those critical times, but His Spirit is strong and breaks through the barriers of our senses during the moments of crossing over.

Sometimes I talk with families about how intertwined the natural cycles of birth and death are. When we are blessed with a “natural” death for a loved one, we see beauty that reveals itself slowly, sometimes over years.

Thinking about yourself:

Have you had a loved one die? Was it expected or traumatic? Was it expected and still traumatic? As time passes, are you able to see any truths that you weren’t able to see at the time of death?

What are some questions that you have for God and how do you continue to live life and have faith even with those questions in your heart?

The widow of Zarephath is not dealing with a natural cycle of death. This is her child! As a widow, he is truly all that she has, the most important thing in her life. After surviving her husband’s death and a famine, a terrible illness takes her son. The widow of Zarephath sees her greatest fear come true and cries out in anguish to the man of God, expressing the unfairness, the true injustice of this child’s death, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?” (v.18)

In Daniel 3, we see the story of the three friends who are thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship the golden idol set up by the vain king. The fiery intensity of this story is both literal and figurative as the three plainly state their willingness to burn rather than renege on their faith in God.

“Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’” Daniel 3:16-18

I want to have that kind of faith, don’t you? The faith that says, “If all goes well, God, I worship you. And if all does not go well according to what I can see at this time, then I still worship you.”

I had a friend who was diagnosed with breast cancer and chose to have a bilateral mastectomy to prevent a reoccurrence. She could have said, “Why me?” but instead, when I went to visit, she said, “Why not me?” Her statement, which amounted to simple faith, stuck with me.

When the widow cries out in her pain, she lays it all out before the man of God, who represents the all powerful God before whom her sins stand out starkly. Her desperation, her dark night of the soul, points her to the only one that can help and she asks Elijah to run interference with God.

Have you had a time in your life when you simply could not pray?

Who did you turn to? _____

Do you have a friend that is a prayer warrior for you and for others?

How can we become prayer warriors ourselves? What are some practical steps we can consider? _____

Elijah takes the boy to the upper room and prays with great intensity. He invests himself physically by laying on the boy three times and crying out to God with his specific request. Being a Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) instructor is part of my job. We teach people to do chest compression “hard and fast” to restore a regular heartbeat, especially with children. I don’t know what method Elijah used or he even did anything besides lay on the boy three times, but I think the point is that this was much more than a casual prayer from across the room. He was “hands on” in his prayer.

Our physical attitude in prayer does have an impact on its intensity, doesn’t it? Where do you usually pray? When do you get on your knees? Do you pray differently when you kneel in church? Have you ever been completely prostrate before the Lord? What were the circumstances?

Have you ever been a part of a laying on of hands or an anointing?

James 5:14-15 addresses this: “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” That last phrase sticks close to my heart for it highlights the truly important healing that takes place when we ask the Lord for healing—the healing of the heart. God does not promise physical healing from all our bodily illnesses and we do ourselves and others a disservice when we focus too much on the temporary healing of our bodies. While God does sometimes provide physical healing after prayers, he looks at the big picture of life and knows that we all die and join him one day in eternity. His focus is inevitably on the ultimate healing he wants us all to experience.

He Makes all Things New!

During Sunday School one day, I got to hold a friend's newborn. I bounced and jiggled and then she settled and we made eye contact. She started to smile and then attempted to coo. I was entranced! Coming in under ten pounds that little girl had me under her spell. The newness of her life is a wonder that never ceases to be wonderful.

In Revelation we read that God is there at the beginning and at the end of life.

“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son’” (Rev. 21:5-7).

God is there everywhere in between, too. And he “makes all things new.” God doesn't take every tragedy away and sometimes we don't see the “new” as a good thing. But he is with us from beginning to end. When tragedy comes, it is critical that we know he is with us, regardless of the outcome from the fiery furnaces that we pass through. One of my favorite promises is, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:20.

The Son Is Restored to His Mother

“He gave him to his mother and said, ‘Look, your son is alive!’ Then the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is truth.’” (v.23-24)

Our youngest son goes to college four hours away from home. He drives a little truck back and forth, and let's just say his truck is not fancy so we are always relieved when we get that text, “Here!” Then we can go on about our business, knowing that he is safely ensconced in his college community where he and his friends watch out for one another.

Recently, though, we had a bad experience when he didn't text and didn't respond to our text and his phone was off. Three hours after he should have arrived and close to our bedtime, we became genuinely concerned. We called his roommate, then his resident advisor. We prayed and were moving toward calling security and thinking of what to do after that. It was so out of character for him not to respond, that we couldn't imagine any benign scenarios. Then the phone rang and it was our boy, letting us know he had detoured to see a girl, lost track of time, and was doing fine. What a relief!

Our situation turned out to be minor, but we serve a God who brings new life out of death. In Lamentations 3:22,23 we read, “Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your

faithfulness.” In 2 Cor. 5:17, we read, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, and the new has come!”

God raises the widow’s son from death, and she acknowledges the truth of God’s presence in her statement of faith to Elijah. Her story has a happy ending; the real trial comes when our pleas for healing and resurrection are not answered in the way we ask. We can only wonder what the woman’s reaction would have been in the child had not come back to life. We go back to the faith of the three friends in Daniel and pray that our own faith will solidify into a rock that stands the trail by fire.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

This story is about a physical resurrection, but God’s revelation to us through his Word focuses on the new life he has for us in Christ. We will all die at some point, some of us sooner than others. But the spiritual resurrection that we are invited to experience will live on forever.

Think about your own life:

1. Have you experienced the death of self and the newness of life, raised up in Christ?

2. What aspects of your personality and your will is God working on to help you become more like him in your new life?

Chapter 2

Day 1

Elijah and Obadiah

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, teach me to be faithful even when it’s hard. Help me to listen to your voice of direction today and to follow you in the big things and the little things of life. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

I Kings 18: 1-15

Meditate and seek insight

The Drought— Physical and Spiritual

When we wanted to get our children’s attention, we used a little chair in the downstairs powder room as the time out place. There was nothing to do in that little bathroom except sit there and think. Our hope was that through the boredom of sitting without entertainment, that the child could focus on the misdeed that required correction. Similarly, God is using the drought to get the people’s attention. Before this they have gone on their merry way, worshiping any gods placed before them by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, scarcely taking time from tending their productive land and going about their business to focus on God, His laws and His desires for their lives. With the drought, all of their busyness comes to a screeching halt; no longer are there crops to tend; hunger instead dulls their ability to do activity and the imposed fast sharpens their focus on the life to come and away from the clamor of the day to day.

The famine drags on for three long years and leads to both physical and spiritual hunger. The drought tills the soil of the hearts of the people and prepares them for what comes next. Droughts and famines are mentioned often in scripture. Look up the following passages and note the circumstances that surround the drought and how God uses them.

Genesis 12:10

Genesis 41:56-57

Ruth 1:1

In Scripture, God is often directing our attention from the here and now, from the physical drought and famine to the spiritual. Look at these two passages and see what they say about God's desire for us to seek him and to plant ourselves firmly in the spirit led life. What stands out to you here?

Jeremiah 17:5-10- Differences between those who trust the Lord and those who don't

Amos 8:11- Hunger for God

How does God work in our lives, through times of spiritual dryness, to help us see with the eyes of the Spirit? Can you think of a time in your life when this was particularly relevant to you?

Obadiah Rescues the Prophets

While Elijah experiences the regular relief of food and water through God's miraculous provision, many others are not so blessed. In fact, Obadiah, the manager of the king's household, rescues one hundred prophets and hides them in two separate caves, clearly at great personal risk.

We recently hosted some friends for a long week-end. With a total of nine folks in the house, we had lots of conversation, laughter and food. We love to host people and to cook so it was a special treat to open our home, and we made many special memories, but I was struck by how often we refilled the water purifying bottle that stays parked in the refrigerator. By God's gracious provision we have plenty to eat and to drink. I can't imagine trying what Obadiah did: hiding one hundred men while keeping them supplied with food and water.

Do you enjoy cooking for crowds?

Have you ever hosted someone for a long period of time?

How do you think he managed the logistics of keeping all those men in hiding in caves?

Obadiah is a righteous man who lives out his faith daily. He serves a pagan boss who doesn't even need a reason to kill but nevertheless, Obadiah perseveres in serving God. Working every day for an unbelieving king must have been a tremendous trial.

Have you ever worked for a supervisor who was not a believer? How hard is it to submit to direction that doesn't seem to comply with the Godly way of doing things? How do we live out our faith in ways that show love without being judgmental or negative?

Hearing from God but still having questions

“As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground...” (v.7). Obadiah is following directions from his employer to look for greener pastures; he is minding his own business, when he is met by the Man of God who tells him to go find Ahab and let him know of their forthcoming meeting. Obadiah's protests are both humorous and pitiful as he pleads with Elijah to not disappear again. If I could paraphrase the conversation it might go something like this...

O: Is that really you, Elijah? (rubbing his eyes clear of dust and sinking to the ground)

E: Yes, go tell Ahab I'm here.

O: (Grabbing Elijah's arm). No, you don't! You'd better not send me to that evil king with a message that you are here and then you are not. You have a habit of coming and going wherever the spirit takes you. Let me remind you of what a good guy I am, Mr. Elijah—when Jezebel was up to no good, killing all the prophets, I saved one hundred of them in caves and even hauled food and water to them. Let me tell you, that was some kind of chore! And now, you are basically asking me to put my life on the line by going to deliver a message that you are here. What if you get taken away before we get back? He will kill me!

He will kill me!

E: (Smiling). No worries. No doubts. I'll be here.

In this story we see two men who serve God, and we also see two differing responses to God's call on their lives. Elijah, who habitually walks by faith and knows the path of grace, hears and obeys: “So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.” (v. 2) Obadiah, on the other hand, is busy racking up points in his imaginary column. He is a man who lives by deeds and knows a God of law and order, but hasn't met grace. Obadiah holds his doubts and fears close in this game of life and works hard to justify himself before Elijah—and God—citing his works as evidence of his life of righteousness.

While God does not condemn Obadiah's way, the power radiates from Elijah like heat from a well stoked furnace, making Obadiah's attempts to justify himself sound like so much prattle on the windowpane of life. Obadiah's deeds are good, no doubt about that, but the limits of his faith are evident in the interchange with Elijah.

In Galatians, Paul strongly addresses this tension between walking by grace and walking by deeds. The people of Galatia have fallen victim to Satan's lie that there is salvation through deeds and through perfection in keeping the law. Paul argues forcefully that if that is the case, then Christ died in vain, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Gal. 2:21) In his book, **Traveling Light**, Eugene Peterson expounds on this idea:

"The Christian is not a person who believes everything religious or moral or serious, but a person who makes a choice for a right relationship with God and against self-arranged improvement...Paul repeats the phrase, 'not by works of the law' three times in two verses. He means something quite specific by it. He means the acts that we perform in order to get God's approval. He means religious or moral activity that is designed to save our own skin. It is good behavior or religious behavior that is performed because someone else is looking, or because God is looking. It is life by performance, by show, by achievement. And, of course, it imprisons us..." (p.73,74)

It appears that Obadiah has fallen victim to a life where he is imprisoned by fear. His deeds are good, and acknowledged as such earlier in the passage, but the fear that consumes him is revealed as he speaks to Elijah and attempts to justify himself as worthy by his deeds.

I know that I, too, fall prey to this mental game of being good enough and pretending that God must also play fair because somehow I am deserving. I would guess that most of us struggle with the battle of grace vs. deeds through our Christian lives and it is the rare person who manages to live an Elijah life—completely absorbed in and confident of his faith.

Living an Obadiah Life—>Partially submitted+hesitant to obey+ deed filled= Fearful + Defensive

Living an Elijah Life—>Fully submitted+obedient to God+faith filled= Freedom + Deeds

Let's think about our own lives: What are some deeds that we might list if Elijah comes to us today? How do these deeds stack up before a God of love and righteousness?

Isaiah lets us know what God thinks of our stack, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..." (Isaiah 64:6). While we are not to stop doing our good deeds—that is certainly not the point—we are to do them as a

response to God's love and not as a way to earn his favor. It is a fine line to walk as a Christian, but one that makes all the difference in how we live and enjoy life in the Spirit.

Obadiah's fear also leads him to question Elijah and God's instructions. In the Bible there are numerous stories of people who question God. How do Gideon and Jonah respond to God and what do you think you would do if you were in their situation?

"Gideon replied, 'If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me.'" (Judges 6:17).

"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish." (Jonah 1:3)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

How can we become people who live out our faith even when the cost is steep?

How can we become people who walk by faith and not by sight, grace filled and not bound up by the law?

How can we become people who recognize and obey God's voice and follow him readily?

Chapter 2

Day 2

Mount Carmel Showdown

Prayer for inspiration

Lord, help me to trust you completely, even when it doesn't make sense. Help me know your power in my life. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

I Kings 18:16-39

Meditate and seek inspiration

Smack Down!

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) produces a show called “Smackdown,” featuring stylized wrestling, designed to entertain but not necessarily to produce genuine fights. While the wrestlers are all buff, they focus on looking like they are seriously injured without actually suffering injury. There is a great deal of talent and real athleticism in making the show look tougher than it is. When we pick up the story of Elijah, he is up on Mount Carmel, a cliff near the Mediterranean Sea, ready for a show down with Ahab and the prophets of Baal. This confrontation is not pretend but a true reality show, put on by God. The atmosphere tingles with electricity as we see Ahab step into the ring with accusing words, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” As with most perpetrators, Ahab seeks to launch the guilt that rests solidly on his head over to another. Ahab is defiant, swaggering almost, as he delivers the first verbal punch.

Elijah pushes the accusation right back onto Ahab's side, delivering his first blow, “I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.” (v.18) Elijah then throws down the gauntlet and issues an invitation to Ahab and the prophets of Baal to stand up and face God.

Preparation

The scene becomes even more chaotic as Elijah tells Ahab to gather up “The people... And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table.” (v.19) Picture in your mind the thousands that

gathered for the show. Here is a wanted fugitive, Elijah, who is on the “Top 10 Most Wanted” lists of Israel having a “for real” smack down with the King of the land. The people most likely came out in force so see what they thought would be grisly entertainment, ending with Elijah’s public execution. Thousands of people from the general populace, hundreds of prophets, and their assorted retinue, food vendors, agitators, gossip mongers and the plain curious come together.

The Bible doesn’t go into detail about the amount of time elapsed while everyone gathered. How long do you think it might have been?

What do you think Elijah did while he waited?

How do we prepare when we have an important spiritual challenge coming up? And what does the Bible tell us about this?

I Peter 1:12-15 - Being holy because he is holy.

I Cor. 9:25-27- Running a good race

Confrontation

As the restive crowd mills about, we can almost see Elijah climbing up to the highest spot and silencing the crowd with his initial words, words that state clearly the decision before the people, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” (v. 21) There is no escaping the fact that each individual in the crowd has a decision to make. They go from being bystanders, curious onlookers, to being intimately involved in what is about to happen. Elijah’s words are addressed to the people, not to the King, and they begin to realize this is not some kind of show but a life and death question that they are asked to answer. They respond with silence, “But the people said nothing,” and yet their silence speaks.

Elijah then makes a curious statement. He says, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left...” (v.22). Why do you think he says this in view of Obadiah’s recent statement about saving the one hundred prophets in the cave? And what impact does it have on the disparity between the two sides in this battle?

It is almost as if Elijah is saying, “In that corner you have Joe Heavyweight with all his entourage and trainers, and in this corner, it’s just me, apparently a Lightweight.” He may even smile as he outlines the challenge and urges the prophets of Baal to get started with their efforts to urge their god to respond. Morning turns to noon without a response and Elijah taunts the prophets saying, “Maybe he is sleeping.” The men whip themselves up into a frenzy, cutting themselves with swords and spears until the blood flows, and they become “frantic.” As evening approaches, the Bible says, “But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.” (v.29) The repetition of the “no” three times, highlights the futility of worshipping any god besides the one true God.

Lest we think that such pagan rituals are a thing of the past, my brother witnessed the Vegetarian Festival in Thailand several years ago. He and his family went there, after the tsunami to assist in relief efforts. They were appalled to learn that as part of an effort to obtain good luck, some participants practice self mutilation, cutting and piercing themselves in a sickening variety of ways as they parade through towns in costumes to the beat of drums. There are still many people in the world today, who do not know the freedom of worshipping the One True God and who are bound up in superstition and fear.

How can we be God’s instruments to fearlessly carry the message of the Good News of Christ to the world?

What are some ways that we can become bound up at times by fear and superstition? How do we break free?

Response

The day has slipped away and it is now twilight, time for the evening sacrifice. The prophets of Baal are spent, exhausted after a day of calling out to an ineffectual god and hearing the taunts of Elijah. At this point, Elijah draws the people away from that scene of blood and despair and almost gently calls the people over, “Come here to me.’ They came to him...” (v. 30) His invitation is echoed by Jesus in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.”

Elijah repairs the altar and symbolically reminds the people where they have come from by placing stones representing each of the twelve tribes of Israel on the altar. One by one, he calls out the names of the tribes and brings each person there into alignment with God’s people, the people for whom God has performed countless miracles of deliverance. Elijah’s appeal here is to remind and refresh their dull spiritual memories. He digs a trench around the altar where the pieces of the sacrificial bull lay and then he tells the people to pour water all over the altar, three times so that the water runs out into the trench and even fills it up.

Why do you think he has the people pour water three times?

As we think about our own lives, how can we better remember God's faithfulness as we go through hard times?

What are some rituals or symbols that help you get through times of spiritual drought?

At this dramatic moment, Elijah says a prayer that still inspires us as we read it today: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." (v.37)

According to verse 37, what is God's purpose in all of this?

God goes to great lengths to remind us of his love and his care for us, doesn't he? Can you think of a time in your life when you felt God "turning your heart back again?"

As the sunlight grows dim, "the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice." It doesn't just burn it up, it consumes it — the bull, the wood, the stones and even the soil are all gone. For those that stand nearby in the cool of the evening, they must feel the glow of radiant heat from God's righteousness as it manifests itself in fire. God is thorough in wanting the people to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that He is responsible for what happened. There can be no other explanation. As the truth of God's power and might convicts those present, they fall, the knock out blow leaving them prostrate before the Lord's power.

Breathe out actions and new life

God's challenge to the people at Mount Carmel remains active today:

1. Determine where we are seduced by idols in our lives today
2. See and remember his mighty power and his grace at work around us and acknowledge that he is the source.
3. Decide to follow and worship only the Lord, letting all else fall to the wayside.
4. Fall prostrate and place our lives on the altar for him to use.

How is God touching your heart to respond to him through this lesson?

Chapter 2

Day 3

Blood and Water

Prayer for Inspiration

God of mercy and God of might, help me to trust in your goodness even when I don't understand your ways. Strengthen my faith when it falters. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

I Kings 18:40-46

Meditate and seek insight

Punishment to the Prophets

I can remember getting in trouble with my dad once when I was twelve. Having been a fairly obedient child, there are not a whole lot of these instances to remember so this one stands out in my mind. It was summer in Brazil where we lived and my parents served as missionaries. My brothers and I attended a one room school and we rode our bikes to and from school for lunch. On this particular day, it was hot as the blue blazes, so I told my brother, "Tell Daddy to come and get me. It's too hot to ride my bike home." My brother looked at me askance as if doubting my good judgement, but I remember being quite sure of myself and sat waiting in the shade for Daddy to come and fetch his princess. Oh, he came all right! And brought a lecture and a few choice licks for my heat-sensitive behind. Dad's perspective and the phrase, "Because I said so," carried a whole new meaning after that!

In many Bible stories, I am reminded that God sees the world from a different view point. As we read in Isaiah 55:8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." When there are parts of the Bible that don't make sense, I remember a few things that help me work through it—maybe you have some things that you can share that help you, too.

1. His ways are higher than mine.
2. He knows the rest of the story.
3. He is a loving God who desires to bring all the world unto himself.
4. He is also a God who cannot co-exist with sin. He offers opportunity for redemption, but he leaves it up to us to make the ultimate choice.

What can you share that helps you when scripture is hard to understand?

Elijah steps away from the incinerated altar, the holy ground purified by God's fire and his power, and he tells the people to not allow any of the prophets to get away. Then he takes them down to the Kishon Valley and slaughters them there, following God's directions. He most likely killed hundreds of men and the valley must have run red with the blood of the prophets of Baal and Asherah.

How do you react to God's judgement against the prophets?

These men spend their lives leading others astray; teaching the worship of Baal and Asherah which involves despicable practices of prostitution of all types and even child sacrifice. As a God of love and mercy, God surely provided these criminals with opportunities to repent and reform— as he does with each of us— but in the end they decide not to worship God and they suffer the consequences. God is wooing the people, “turning their hearts back again.” Even one surviving prophet has the power to negate the accomplishment of Mount Carmel, to dilute God's clarion call to his people, inviting them to come home to experience the close walk with him that he desires for all .

Take a few moments to think about those who consistently practice evil in our day, those who methodically and repeatedly inflict injury or pain on the hopeless and helpless. Who are some that come to mind?

We know that God is in charge of judgement and of ultimately punishing evil. How then do we “judge not” and still name evil and fight against it? What is the difference between discernment or using good judgement and being judgemental?

When can our desire to follow the command not to judge lead us to apathy?

On the other hand, what does Jesus tell us to guard against in judging others in Matthew 7:1-5?

Sadly, I know that in my own life I am much more likely to err on the side of being judgemental than in being discerning. For me, it is easier to point fingers than it is to love others. Let's take a few moments to pray for the hearts of those who practice evil; let's pray for our own hearts that we will not be led into temptation but be delivered from evil, in-

cluding the twin evils of apathy toward wrong and of picking out specks in others' eyes while we walk around with logs on our own shoulders.

A prayer that can be helpful in guiding our thoughts for others and for the evil that threatens from the inside and from the outside, is the familiar Lord's Prayer. Pray that prayer and insert your name and then pray it for those you love and for those you are wanting to lift before the throne of glory.

Knowing what you know about God's character as expressed through the entire Bible and especially through Christ, how do you think he feels about the slaughter of the prophets of Baal?

In Joshua 5:13-15, we see an interesting story that reveals a glimpse of God's perspective on our warring ways, "Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' 'Neither,' he replied, 'but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.'" This story possibly opens the door for more questions than answers, revealing a God that tolerates his children marching off to take care of matters but who truly longs for us to love one another with the love that he imparts to us.

Praying Expectantly

Some time elapses, because in the next verse it is again day time, and we see Elijah tell Ahab to go eat and drink "for there is the sound of a heavy rain." (v. 41) Elijah is already announcing, by faith, what is to come. Before the sight or smell of rain, Elijah is hearing the longed for sound of rain and not just any rain, but "heavy" rain. You may have heard the story of the church in the Midwest where the pastor announced one morning, "Brothers and sisters, we have been going through a terrible drought. Our crops are wilting and there is no rain in the forecast. I want us to have a special prayer service tonight to pray that God will send us some rain!" So that evening, the faithful gathered together and began to fervently pray. With the service already in progress, they heard the wooden door swing open and glanced back to see the oldest member of the congregation, a man on up in his 90's, making his way toward his usual spot up front. The other members realized, with shame in their hearts, that he was the only one who had brought an umbrella!

How many times are we like the church members who pray but don't prepare for the answer? How many times do we pray without faith or expectation? I know that too many times I lift up prayers that look like the Swiss cheese of doubt, feeble and weak, trusting that somehow, in his infinite grace, God can cleanse the prayer and hear the intent of love it carries with it. What does the Bible have to say about expectant prayer?

I Peter 4:7- Clear minded and self-controlled...

James 5:16b- The prayer of a righteous man...

What are some practical tools that can help us to keep praying even when the doubts loom large?

Showered in Blessing

Elijah tells Ahab to go eat and drink, and Ahab, always firmly grounded in fulfilling his sensual desires, complies. Elijah, meanwhile, climbs back up to the top of Mount Carmel where he can get a good look toward the horizon over the Mediterranean Sea, gets into a posture of prayer and begins to do battle on his knees. His servant is somewhere nearby, waiting. Elijah looks up from prayer and tells the man to go “look toward the sea.” The man returns and tells him “There is nothing there.” This is repeated seven times. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Elijah persevered in prayer. We have no record of the period of time that elapsed between the time he got down on the knees and the time that God began to reveal the answer but we would have to guess several hours.

By the time Elijah tells the man to go back the seventh time, we can almost see the servant dragging his sandals in the dust and rolling his eyes, maybe even muttering under his breath. But then...What is that off in the distance? It doesn't look like much but at least it is something. So he goes back to where Elijah remains bowed low before God and reports with just a glimmer of hope in his voice, “A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea.” (v. 44). Elijah must have smiled and rejoiced as he gets up, brushes the dust away and tucks his cloak into his belt, preparing for a victory lap, fists pumping the air, all the way to Jezreel, ahead of Ahab. With the wind whipping his hair and the sweet smell of heavy rain filling his nostrils, Elijah experienced the beauty of the water, running down his face, chest and arms, washing away the blood of the previous night, leaving him cleansed and completely exhausted, ready for a long rest.

When Jesus died on the cross, John 19:34 tells us, “Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.” Jesus death, his blood shed on the cross is our ultimate purification. In Isaiah 53, we read, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.”

Jesus' life and sacrifice were foretold in the Old Testament. Read Zechariah 12:10-14. What does he write about Jesus and the people's reaction to his death?

As we read a verse further in Zechariah 13:1 we see, “On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” How do we see water coming forth here and what is its purpose?

Breathe out actions and new life

Let’s examine our own hearts and lives and think about where there is some sin that God might want us to put to death and get rid of, once and for all. How can we have the strength we need to carry out the sentence and be freed?

As God washes Elijah with showers of blessing, he helps Elijah to run with what appears to be supernatural power, “he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.” (v. 46) Can you think of a time when God has given you almost supernatural physical power to keep going during a difficult time? How can we listen to our bodies so that we know when to rest and when to keep pushing forward? And how can we remember to ask God for that extra measure of physical energy when the going gets tough?

God washed Israel clean through blood and water. Through Jesus’ sacrifice, the shedding of his blood on the cross, he has made each of us clean from our sins. The gift is ours to receive. And as we each receive him daily through his Words, through community, through art, through his creation, let us rejoice and give thanks. As we go through this day, let us be watching for Jesus!

Chapter 2
Day 4

Doom, Despair, Depression

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, help me when I am down. Lift me up to walk with you. Help me to be uplifting to others who may be discouraged. Give me strength for the journey of this day. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

I Kings 19: 1-9

Meditate and seek insight

Doom

I am married to a great guy and one of the wonderful things about our marriage is being able to share our professional interests. My husband is a family doc and is a wealth of information when I have nursing questions for him. At the end of the day, we can share stories and ask each other questions. Of course we are careful to maintain the boundaries of confidentiality, but it is nice to understand each other's work so completely and it really helps me to be patient when he is late for dinner. When we ask each other, "How was your day?" we know that the other one really understands.

Ahab and Jezebel are two peas in a pod except that their pod is rotten to the core! Ahab gets back to Jezreel from his days at Mount Carmel and tells Jezebel all the details of what happened, especially focusing on Elijah's role in the killing of Jezebel's proteges, the prophets of Asherah who ate at her table. We don't know what Ahab said, but he clearly did not tell a story of a God of power and might who revealed himself there on the mountain, a God who required their worship and their full repentance. Instead, he fueled the fires of hatred in his wife, a person who was already alight with the flames of sin.

Jezebel responds in her fury by sending Elijah the ominous message, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." (v.2)

We can almost imagine Elijah, still panting from his run, dripping wet from the cleansing rain, receiving the message from the evil queen. As he hears the words, his shoulders drop, the exultation of a few hours ago completely gone. Now to us, it may seem that Elijah should not be afraid, right? Clearly, he has the Almighty God on his side; he can

call fire down on a sacrifice; he can pray and it rains. Why would he be afraid of this Jezebel woman? How can her simple threat knock the wind right out of his sails?

Elijah goes from running a victory lap with God to running away in defeat, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life." (v.3) He continues on his arduous physical journey, traveling 100 miles south to Beersheba. There he leaves his servant and continues on another day's journey into the desert before finding a broom tree, sitting down and having a heart to heart talk with God. He lays it all on the line, telling God, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors." (v.4).

Lets look more carefully at what is going on with Elijah:

1. Physical exhaustion and hunger
2. Spiritual discouragement- Jezebel **still** lives
3. Emotional defeat- "I am no better than my ancestors."

"I'm Plumb Give Out!"

Elijah is at the end of his physical abilities. He has pushed hard and long and now he sits under a broom tree and prays for death. He has climbed mountains, descended into a valley, spent the night slaughtering men, climbed back up a mountain, stayed on his knees in prayer for a long time and then run with supernatural power all the way to Jezreel, a distance estimated to be about twenty miles. When he hears Jezebel's murderous threats, he simply succumbs to the bone-deep weariness that overtakes him.

Our times of fatigue can be the times when we are most susceptible to despair and depression. What are some things that you do that help you to maintain your physical energy?

What are some ways that you rest your body and your mind that you might be able to share with others?

Richard Rohr, in his book, **Everything Belongs**, challenges us to think about how we seek rest and refreshment, "Much recreation does not re-create us, but is only diversionary. I think that's why Americans need so much recreation and entertainment. If it doesn't really entertain and refresh, we will need more very soon. But for open persons, who know how to receive and let events teach them, a little bit goes a long way. If they see one beautiful flower they have to write a poem about it." (p.54)

Rohr brings up the idea that true replenishment of the spirit comes from rest but also from the deep relaxation of creativity. How do you create in a way that feeds your spirit? Before replying, "I'm not creative," put a mental hand up to stop that thought and look

just a little deeper...Do you enjoy cooking? Computer programming? Tinkering with cars? Needlework? Flower arranging? Painting? Gardening? Writing?

Make a list of some of the ways you create that give you a real boost:

Read Psalm 19 and list below some of the things the Psalmist says are “reviving” or “rewarding?” Do you see a path to renewal and refreshment included in this scripture?

Running on Empty

Have you ever run out of gas at an inopportune moment? I remember one particularly harrowing time. We were newlyweds, taking our first vacation together and we traveled by car from Virginia up to Cape Cod, Vermont and New Hampshire. It was a lovely time but on our return, we didn't plan our gas stops very well. It was late at night and we were stranded on an eight lane stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike. Mercifully, a police officer finally came along and rescued us out of our predicament, but that was clearly not the best part of the trip!

In spite of the spiritual mountain top he has just experienced, Elijah is in a vulnerable place in his spirit. In East Tennessee, we have an expression, “He is plumb give out.” Elijah gives and gives and then comes up dry. He simply wants to give up. It is possible that when God told Elijah to end his time of exile, to go find Ahab, to confront the prophets of Baal, and to pray for rain, that Elijah thought the worst was over. Maybe he thought, “Yes, Lord, you are going to get them now! Let's show them who you really are. They need to know your power and might and cower before you. You will be glorified and be the true King of Israel now. This is going to be great!” But then Jezebel happens. She isn't out of the picture yet. In fact, she is threatening his life—after he has been so faithful! Her threat takes the picture he has carefully painted in his mind of how things would go and flips it on its head. Maybe it just doesn't seem quite fair that this true troublemaker of Israel still lives and rules.

What does scripture have to tell us about how God will renew our spiritual energies when we are running low?

Isaiah 40:29-31- Hope in the Lord...

Philippians 4:13 & 19- I can do everything...

Rising Above the Family

“Pretty is as pretty does,” my dad used to say or, “If she jumps off a cliff are you going to jump off a cliff too?” or “Children are meant to be seen and not heard.” Maybe you can think of a few aphorisms that your parents or family of origin used when you were a child.

Write a couple of your favorite (or not so favorite) ones here:

I can remember during the more arduous days of raising our three children that sometimes, in the heat of the moment, phrases would come out of my mouth that sounded exactly like the ones I heard as a child. This was not always a bad thing—my parents were great examples in Godly parenting—but it was sometimes surprising because as we grow and stretch, we often feel that we have left our childhood behind and stand on our own two feet, not realizing that the soil where our roots suck up nourishment are directly tied to the tap root of our own rearing. Some of us struggle mightily to overcome our pasts. For Elijah this appears to be the case.

As Elijah sits under a tree, in the desert, depressed and dejected, wishing for death, his complaint to God is, “I am no better than my ancestors.” It seems that in spite of all his success as a prophet, a leader, a man who obeys God explicitly, Elijah’s deepest desire is to become more than his ancestors, to leave the ways of the past behind. In his zeal for God, he longs to be more than his family of origin, more even than Noah, Abraham, Moses, all of the spiritual fathers about whom he has heard so much. When the words of Jezebel strike fear in his heart causing him to run away, he sees that he is still vulnerable, a man who is still a man, with failures and weaknesses. But he wants to be so much more than that!

In her book, **A Million Little Ways**, Emily P. Freeman tells the story of how she shared her fears about writing with a counselor. He comforted her saying, “There is no new truth, dear. All truth belongs to God. Sometimes you simply need to hear someone else say it. That’s what I hope I’m doing for you. And that’s what your voice will be for them.” Her words helped to release me to write this Bible study. For who am I to write about Elijah and Elisha? I know my own heart, my failings, my weaknesses, the sin that lurks in the dusty corners; I know that the only way that God can use me is because He is great; not because I am anything at all. I long to move forward, toward the much more that God has for me, but the steps that I take are truly baby steps. But Freeman reminds me that God is able to use even me for his will and purposes if I will yield to him.

Think about your own life and where God might be calling you to do great things like Elijah did. Are you able to say “Yes, Lord” and let him worry about the past and the future? Write a prayer below that conveys your thoughts to him:

God’s Tender Loving Care

In the South, we do food. And we do it well. When someone is sick or having a loss in the family, we bring food and lots of it—comfort food: fried chicken, mac and cheese, green beans, biscuits, cake, pie, brownies...you get the idea. It’s not healthy, but it sure is loving! What is your favorite comfort food?

Apparently we get our directions on taking food to those who are suffering right from scripture: “All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.” (v.5,6).

Don’t you just love this scripture? The hand of God is so kind and gentle here. He doesn’t send down fires of judgement on his sad and weak servant; he doesn’t scold, point fingers, correct or admonish. No, he sends an angel who touches him and speaks words filled with kindness and love. He sends an angel who makes a fire, warm and inviting, and bakes a cake of bread on the coals, offering that up to Elijah with a jar of water. We can feel the heat, smell the bread, taste the cool, clear water and almost sense Elijah’s needs being satisfied as he gratefully partakes and then rests again.

God reveals himself to us in this passage. Here is a God who carries his children under his wings, who protects and loves. Let’s look at a couple of other passages where God expresses himself in almost maternal terms:

Exodus 19:3-6- Carried on eagles’ wings...

Psalms 91:4 & 11,12- Refuge under his wings...Angels to guard you...

Luke 13:34- As a hen gathers her chicks...

The angel comes back a second time and reminds Elijah to eat again, stating the plain facts: “the journey is too much for you.” (v.7) Jesus tells us, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28).

In thinking about our own lives, when have we experienced God’s care through his “angels?” Maybe you have had a real, live angel, or maybe you have had one of his messengers, his followers, come and minister to you in a time of need.

Breathe out actions and new life

What kinds of things get me down? Sometimes knowing our triggers can help us be proactive in preventing depression.

How can we watch for God’s angels and welcome them? Sometimes God sends us help but we say, “No, thank you.”

How can we be an angel to someone else in their time of need? Where is God calling us to go today with our fire of warmth, our warm cakes of physical encouragement and our water of spiritual refreshment?

Getting Back to the Basics

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Lord, Help me to be able to transformed by my encounters with you. Let me be changed into a person that looks more like Jesus every day. Amen.

Breathe in scripture

I Kings 19:8-14

Meditate and Seek Insight

A Place of Comfort

My older brother loved to build tree houses. From a very young age, he could swing a hammer and work a saw. He could look at a trees' limbs, visualize a rudimentary structure, and that tree house was as good as done. He found scraps of wood and put in floors, sides, trap doors, ropes, all kinds of wonderful kid imagination builders. It was a safe place to go with a snack, a perch above the troubles of home school, chores, and the people traffic that frequented our missionary home.

Do you remember having a safe place to go as a child? Did you like to build forts in trees or under tables? Can you remember having a special chair or other retreat where you went when you needed alone time? And what about now? What is your place to retreat to?

Elijah re-groups physically and with energy from the nourishment the angel provides, he leaves that area and travels south until he reaches Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai and called, "the mountain of God." Horeb is in the Sinai Peninsula and is thought to be some 200 miles south of Beersheba where the angel ministered to him. According to scripture, it takes him forty days and nights to get there, and when he arrives he goes to a cave.

Why do you think he goes to the mountain of God at this point in his life?

Do you think it is possible that he has been to this place before?

Do you think there is any connection with Elijah saying, "I am no better than my ancestors" (v.4) and his desire to go back to where Moses received the Ten Commandments?

In Exodus 24:15-18, we read: "When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights."

It takes Elijah about twice as long as it normally should have to get to the mountain. It is interesting to note that it takes him as long to get there as Moses spends at the top talking with God! Elijah may have still been so exhausted and discouraged that he finds it hard to put one foot in front of the other to get where he knows he needs to go.

Can you identify with this? Have you ever been depressed? Even when we are mildly depressed, we find it hard to organize our thoughts and to get ourselves where we know we need to go in order to get better. Just making the phone call to get the doctor's appointment can be a hurdle to overcome.

Elijah is going to the place where he feels that he is most likely to see God, to meet him face to face. He has heard the stories of Moses, and for sure knows this verse by heart, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." (Exodus 33:11). In his despair, Elijah clings to the hope of speaking with God as a friend, knowing that this is the one true remedy. Of course the irony that we see from a distance is that God was with him way back there on Mount Carmel. He didn't have to relocate to find God. There is a saying, "If you can't find God, he hasn't moved, you have." Read these scriptures and note what it says about where God is and about some of his characteristics.

Psalm 11- The Lord doesn't move or change...

Isaiah 55:6,7- God's thoughts are higher than ours...

Psalm 24- The earth is the Lord's and everything in it...

How can I help you?

Good listeners know to start a conversation with an open question. Good sales people know that a friendly greeting gets the encounter off to a promising start. Our good God knows to let his servant Elijah vent. And vent he does—paraphrasing...

God: So, Elijah, what brings you all the way out here?

Elijah: God, I have just had it. I have done everything that I know to do but those people of yours, they have broken the laws, they have messed up your churches, they have killed your preachers and now there is just me and they want to kill me too!

God: Elijah, let me show you a little something about who I am. Get out from this cave, stand outside and you will experience me passing by.

Oddly, even after God's pretty clear instructions, Elijah doesn't seem to move out of the cave. He looks for God first in the roaring wind, then in the shaking of the very foundations of the earth and in the fire. But God is not in the wind or in the earthquake or in the fire—all powerful natural symbols that we frequently associate with God's action in the world. Instead, God comes to Elijah in a "gentle whisper," unexpected and tender. We can almost see God's presence pass by this broken man and whisper first in one ear—YH...and then on the other side—WH...At this point, Elijah covers his face in reverence and goes out to the mouth of the cave. God reveals himself, but it is not what Elijah expected.

My older brother can hold his breath a long time. By the way, this is the same brother that can also handle a hammer and a saw—he can do anything. But when we were first learning to swim underwater, he was the one who had that phenomenal lung capacity so that he could make it all the way across the pool in one breath. I would come up gasping half way across. Breathing is a critical function of life and God incorporated an aspect of breathing in his very name. The name God gave himself, Yahweh, is considered to be unpronounceable, first because of the juxtaposition of consonant sounds and secondly because of reverence. When Moses asked God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13) God gives Moses this name YHWH which when said sounds roughly like an inspiration and expiration—breathing in and breathing out, God. God describes himself to us as the first breath we take as we enter this life and the last sound we make as we join him in eternity. Whether or not we acknowledge him while we live, we say his name hundreds of times each day, YH...WH...YH...WH. In and out...

How many times do we ask God to give us a sign, to reveal himself to us, and then we don't recognize his answer? Can you think of a time when God answered you in a way that was different from what you were looking for?

What are you doing here? Take 2.

God asks him a second time what he is doing there. And Elijah answers again, remarkably using the exact same words as before God reveals himself. The exact same words. Verbatim. Elijah doesn't seem changed at all by experiencing God.

It's so easy to get down on Elijah at this point, isn't it? I can shake my mental finger at him and say, "Why, Elijah, what is the matter with you? You actually heard God and you are still whining? Don't you realize you have unlimited power at your disposal?" But then, of course, it hits me, and I am convicted from the bottom of my sneakers to the top of my "Life is Good" hat—I also have unlimited power at my disposal; I, too, hear whispers from God through the Bible, through others and through prayer. And yet, sometimes I am unfazed, unimpressed, unchanged by my encounter. I get up from my seat at noon on Sunday, straighten out my skirt, wonder how the crock pot is faring and work my way through the crowd to another week of more of me and less of Him. I am ashamed to admit it, but I can be honest because I know I am forgiven, and I know that most likely, I am not alone! Thank God, he is as patient with me as he was with Elijah.

Breathe out actions and new life

Think about the last time you had an encounter with God and make a few notes about how you felt and what happened:

Think about your own spiritual journey. In the space below, make a line that shows your highs and lows in the faith—mark your age when you began your relationship with God, any "mountain top" experiences, any times of spiritual discouragement.

How can we be so alive in the moment, so fully present to our lives and to God that when he reveals himself, we are transformed. Jot down some things that help you:

Chapter 3

Day 1

Re-direct

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, God, I know that you are powerful and mighty. I know that you can do what needs to be done in this world without my humble help. But I am so grateful that you allow me to be used in your Kingdom. Help me today to receive your instructions and to follow them fully. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

Read I Kings 19:15-18

Meditate and Seek Insight

Following Directions

I am not very good at following directions. For some reason, when faced with clear steps outlining the correct way to put together the grill/bicycle/vacuum cleaner/computer, I want to think that I can do it on my own so I set aside the directions only to come back to them once I realize that the easiest way forward is to go down the path set by the manufacturers. My dear husband, on the other hand, starts with the directions, reads them thoroughly, gathers up the necessary equipment and then sets up the item so that it ends up looking just like the picture on the box. There is a good reason why I generally avoid the purchase of items labeled, "Some assembly required" or automatically put those on his "Honey Do" list.

Are you a direction follower or a do it yourself first person?

While my shortcomings in assembling household items has few repercussions beyond some frustration and the potential for marital strife, not following God's specific directions can have lifelong and truly life-threatening ramifications. As Elijah spends time with God at Mount Horeb, we see him struggle to understand God's revelation and consequently miss an opportunity to have an even more clear vision of God. But God, in his infinite power and knowledge doesn't condemn Elijah, but instead invites him to obey some directions that help Elijah with the problems he is so focused on and that he repeats to God: your people have strayed and I'm the only one left.

God tells him to go do the following:

1. Anoint Hazael (king of the pagan country of Aram)
2. Anoint Jehu over Israel (northern kingdom)
3. Anoint Elisha as his successor

At the end of the list of things to do, God points out, “Yet I reserve seven thousand in all of Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.” (v.18)

It is interesting that Elijah seems so focused on being alone, especially after Obadiah pointed out that he had personally saved one hundred prophets of God (I Kings 18:4). Why do you think Elijah forgets this?

Do you ever feel alone in your troubles? What is it about being in community that helps us get through the tough times?

Jesus himself sets the example for us in cultivating good friendships. Luke 5:1-11 & 6:12-16. According to Luke, Jesus is busy working and preaching (and being rejected) before he calls his disciples. What is one of the first things that they do together? Why do you think Jesus picked this particular activity?

What is the reaction of Peter, James, and John to this miraculous catch?

In Luke 6:12-16, Jesus formally calls the twelve. Why twelve? And how do you translate this into your Christian life? And what does he do before he calls them?

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. List of some the benefits of friendship from this passage.

Are you a member of a faith community? Are you a member of a small group that helps you stay on track?

What are some of the frustrations of living life as part of a community or a large family? When is it tempting to go solo?

In the animated movie, **101 Dalmatians**, the introductory credits show dog/owner couples that resemble one another. It's funny but oddly true to life! While I hope I don't resemble my black and white splotchy mixed breed too much, we somehow seem to gravitate toward canines or felines that express us. And while we may not have disciples, we often do have "followers." Our children are said to follow in our footsteps, in marriage we can even begin to look and act more like each other as we live together for many years, and in this day and age of electronic media, we have Facebook friends, Instagram, Tweet and Linked In groups. God has made us social beings, with needs that are meant to be met in community. Elijah seems to be suffering from the extended time he spent in isolation. He needs a close friend to walk with him, listen to his teaching, and carry on the ministry when he is gone.

God tells Elijah there are 7000 remaining prophets. Is this number literal or symbolic? While impossible to know for sure, it most likely represents a round, large number. In the Book of Romans 11:2-6, the author reiterates God's ultimate preservation of a remnant of faithful, "So too, at this present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace."

As a Christian, do you sometimes feel that you are alone in trying to follow the teachings of Christ? What does Jesus say about that in Matthew 5:11-12?

In giving the directions to pick a successor and to anoint political leaders, God is giving Elijah specific jobs, goals that can be met. He is also encouraging Elijah with the knowledge that the work will go on even after he is gone (The political kings are ultimately being anointed by his successor). The vision of the future and God's plans, is just the medicine for a depressed Elijah; he finds the courage and strength to leave the Mountain of God and head back to where he came from, to continue this journey with God.

Finding a Friend

When I was four years old, we went to Brazil aboard an ocean liner, a two week voyage that took us from New Orleans to Rio de Janeiro. With several missionary families on board, making their inaugural trip over, it was a good time to build relationships, and I distinctly remember meeting my friend, Lisa. I asked her her name and the simple question, "Do you want to be my friend?" We became best friends through childhood and even now, though miles separate us, we are the kind of girlfriends that pick up where we left off when we get together.

Can you think of a friend that you have had for many years? What about a new friend? What are some of the qualities in these friends that make you want to stay in touch?

Elijah goes down from the mountain and travels many miles back to the area around Damascus where he finds Elisha, whose name means “the Lord saves,” plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen. Apparently without preamble, Elijah throws his cloak, the symbol of ministry, over Elisha and walks on. Collecting himself and realizing the great honor laid upon his shoulders, Elisha takes a moment before running after Elijah and asking permission to make a formal departure from his family and his current way of life. Elijah’s answer sounds abrupt and maybe a tad defensive, “Go back. What have I done to you?” While it could be a gruff answer, it could also be that it is delivered with a smile of recognition for the importance attached to this younger man’s family and relationships.

What follows appears to be a send off and a celebration. Elijah’s fame is spread far and wide over the land of Israel. To the young faithful such as Elisha, the stories of this prophet of God would have been bed time tales with God as the hero. Elisha, no doubt, grew up knowing of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, which took place less than one hundred years before his birth. When the call comes, Elisha is ready to leave behind his former way of life to follow Elijah as a servant. His commitment is so complete that he takes his yoke of oxen, burns them and offers the people the meat.

Elisha’s first act as a prophet is this: “He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate.” (v.21) He makes a fire, kills the oxen and then feeds his family and the others gathered. By very literally burning his bridges, Elisha tells Elijah and his people that he is “all in.” He devotes his entire life to following Elijah as a servant and to become more full of the power of God. He already wears the cloak, but now he must grow into it. By feeding those he loves before he leaves, he sets the tone for a ministry that focuses on showing the people God’s salvation and plan for their lives.

It’s possible that Elisha’s family is pleased with his opportunity. Or not. Have you had an experience in life where you or your family were offered a wonderful promotion or scholarship? What were some of the things you had to do in order to accept? Was it a challenging time?

Breathe out actions and new life

Read Luke 5:10. What does Jesus promise Peter?

In Matthew 12:46-50, Jesus appears to deny his biological family. Why do you think he says this and what does it teach us about our priorities today?

In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21:1-5, God tells us that he is making “everything new!” (v.5) What are some other comforting words in this passage that help us as we try to live for Him today?

God at Work in Others

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, help me to trust you to be at work, even when I can't understand. Help me to know that you have others also working to do your will in situations where I feel ineffective. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

Read I Kings 20:1-43

Meditate and Seek Insight

Elijah and Elisha Sidelined

I remember the day I dropped our youngest son off at Kindergarten. He was still four at the time and we were very close, having spent those four years doing most everything together. He was my good buddy. The first day of school the two oldest ran on ahead to their classrooms, and I held Tim's small hand in mine as we made our way to Mrs. Cooper's room. I was wearing a long "broom" skirt, so named because of the linear creases in it and the fact that it was wide and flowing, just big enough for a four year old to hide behind. When we got to the class, I had to pull him forward and pry his little fingers off my skirt. I wore my bravest mommy smile until I got back to the car and then some sad slid down my cheeks because I knew something he didn't know: I had just been sidelined—it was time to begin to let him go.

In Chapter 20, we read about Ben-Hadad of Aram attacking Ahab in Samaria. Elijah and Elisha do not take part in this conflict, but they are most likely close by doing some of the background work, training the other prophets who are more visible. Since God told Elijah that he reserves 7000 who are the faithful, it is as if God is continuing to reveal himself to Elijah and others through the work of some of these lesser known and unnamed prophets, allowing Elijah to truly understand that he is not alone and that God can and does have a bigger plan.

Can you think of a time in your life when you may have felt side-lined?

Was it hurtful or a relief? Are you able to look back on that time now in a different way?

Snapshot of history

So that we can understand where we are, it is important to take a moment to look at the background. If you are already starting to yawn, be assured that this will be mercifully brief but hopefully pertinent to future study.

David → Solomon → Rehoboam → Kingdom Divides into Israel (N) & Judah (S)

Ahab is King in Israel (N) and his capitol is Samaria.

Ben-hadad— Aramean from Aram (near modern day Syria). The language they spoke became language of commerce and Aramaic is the language Jesus spoke.

Aram → Assyria → Babylon → Persia —this is the succession of conquests. Israel (N) actually falls to Assyria but Judah (S) doesn't fall until Babylon.

With that short history lesson behind us, we may be able to understand a bit more of what is happening in this chapter. Ben-hadad and his thirty two friends, also referred to as kings, are out to make their annual conquests, to kill and pillage and bring home some spoils of war. Ahab and his enemy start out attempting to reach a peace by negotiating terms. They end up trading insults. Ben-hadad, with his thousands of troops, seriously outnumbers Ahab and lays siege to the city. Aram is famous for their brutality in war, and Ahab shows his reluctance to deal with Ben-hadad by sending messages back and forth. The enemy king, for his part, is condescending in his responses, spending all his time drinking with his friends, so sure is he of a victorious outcome. His cockiness in telling Ahab he is coming to select his best wives and children, finally ends any hope of a negotiated truce and Ben-hadad orders the attack.

At this tense juncture, God sends a prophet to deliver a message of hope and promise: "This is what the Lord says: 'Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord.'" (v.13). Ahab has no options. Zero. Nada. God gives him an open door and Ahab has the good sense to walk through it.

God specializes in the impossible. As long as we are feeling competent and able to take care of things, we often neglect to give God the credit or to ask for his help.

What do the following scriptures have to say about God's plans and our role in them?

Philippians 4:19

II Cor. 12:8-10

Ephesians 3:20

The prophet goes on to give Ahab specific instructions on what to do and how to go about fighting against this mighty force. Ahab follows the directions and sends out the 232 young officers who promptly kill their opponents, leading to a major retreat among the Arameans, including the drunk king who narrowly escapes with his life, fleeing on horseback.

We can almost hear the collective sigh of relief and the great rejoicing of the kingdom as the Arameans scurry home, tails tight between their armor covered legs. Lost in the victory is any mention of thanksgiving to God, the author of the deliverance. Lost also, is any attention to planning for fortifications to discourage this type of attack in subsequent years. The prophet speaks, but his words of warning fall on deaf ears, "Afterward, the prophet came to the king of Israel and said, 'Strengthen your position and see what must be done, because next spring the king of Aram will attack you again.'" (v.22)

What is the difference between having faith in God's ability to provide and in making plans for the future? How do we balance this out as Christians?

Where is God calling us to plan more? Where is God calling us to trust more? Read the following scriptures and note what they have to say about God's plans and our trust:

Psalm 20:4-7

Proverbs 15:22

Romans 15:13

The Second Battle

The scene for this second encounter between Ben-Hadad and Ahab is the plains somewhere north of Samaria. Ahab's pitiful forces are gathered opposite Ben-Hadad's legions and the discrepancy in numbers is so great that the Bible says, "The Israelites camped opposite them like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside." (v.27) It is reminiscent of the scene from the movie "Lord of the Rings" where the orcs fill the valleys all the way to the horizon, marching in step, inexorably getting closer to obliterating those few faithful gathered in the castle. Ahab again hears the prophet deliver a message from God, remarkable in that God remains focused on saving his people but also on getting through to Ahab, giving this man chance after chance to turn and repent and acknowledge his true Deliverer. The prophet says, "I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord." (v.28)

And deliver He does. In one day, the Israelites inflict one hundred thousand casualties on the soldiers of Aram. Is this an accurate number? We do well to remember that even in our techno savvy day and age we find it hard to know the true numbers of dead in drone strikes or bombings. We estimate and various sides report their numbers and the truth remains unknown. The number could be close, but it could also be a way of saying "a ga-million people died." What the Bible is trying to communicate, is God's power to defeat the enemy, whose vast numbers are far superior to the meager forces Ahab musters. We are reminded by this comparison, to turn our attention back to God, the one who can make a difference in our most desperate circumstances. Where we cannot see a way out, God can make a way through.

Can you remember a time in your life when the odds were stacked against you? What was the outcome?

The Psalms are replete with verses about God being our great deliverer. "Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay." (70:5) Even when we feel small and insignificant, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

One of the critical things for us to remember about being a Christian, is that times of trouble will come. Jesus himself suffered greatly while on this earth. And our deliverance from our troubles may not always be prompt by our timeline or easy or dramatic. (Notice that the number of casualties for the Israelites is not mentioned.) The key to our victorious Christian life is knowing that God has already won the ultimate battle, that he has the victory in hand. We claim it and live it, but our troubles do not miraculously evaporate. There are no promises in Bible that say, "Believe and your life will be easy." Much to the contrary. We are promised instead, persecution, trials, bodily death. While it is easier to look for and pray for the smooth life, God many times uses our battles to draw us closer to himself, to everlasting peace.

Ahab Retreats Even in Victory

The Israelites won the battle but they did not win the war. The battle against Aram was a success but the war for their souls was lost. In victory, Ahab once again forgets to thank God; when reports come that Ben-hadad is still alive, he foolishly calls him “my brother,” (v.32) and worse, disobeys God by making a treaty with Aram that allows its leader to live to fight another day. Ahab continues to show a remarkable degree of self-centeredness, arrogance and moral weakness. God’s directive to kill Ben-hadad is hard for us to understand, but we know that God’s overall concern is to eliminate idol worship and all the despicable practices associated with it. Ahab shows a spirit of compromise with Aram, being more interested in friendship and in the absence of conflict than in obeying God.

The consequences of disobedience are severe and far-reaching, as Ahab soon discovers.

Obedience at All Costs

In the military, the first lesson new recruits learn is obedience—obedience to the smallest order in its entirety. Drill sergeants do not give any quarter to soldiers who “mostly” do their push-ups or who clean the toilets “pretty well.” It’s almost funny to think about those examples, but in the military obedience is no laughing matter. It is life and death. And so it is with our God. From the beginning of our walk with him, he trains us in obedience. In verses 35 & 36, we read about a prophet who does not obey his instructor prophet and does not strike him when asked. It feels like we may not have the full story here, because the man’s sentence (being eaten by a lion) seems out of proportion to the error. But we know God, and we know that he is full of mercy and compassion and that he is a long suffering God, a God who offers second chances. This may be one of those times when we have to trust that we do not know “the rest of the story” as radio personality Paul Harvey used to say.

The second time the prophet asks, the other prophet strikes him —it doesn't say where—but he is injured and then goes to wait for Ahab by the side of the road. He tells Ahab a story and Ahab pronounces his own sentence in a scene which evokes memories of David and Nathan after David slays Uriah so he can take Bathsheeba for his wife. While David was contrite and repentant, Ahab goes away to brood in his palace, “sullen and angry.” (v.43)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Learning to obey is a process of training. It can be difficult and unfair. What are some specific ways that we can obey God? Write down practical steps you plan to take:

2 Timothy 3:16-17, says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thor-

oughly equipped for every good work.” What does this verse tell us about Bible study and learning to obey?

Envy Entangles

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Lord, Help me to live a life that is satisfied with the blessings that are mine. Help me to name those blessings, one by one, and help me not to look at my neighbor's possessions, family, youth or talents with jealousy. Give me a spirit of contentment that comes from you. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

Read I Kings 21:1-28

Meditate and Seek Insight

A Good Looking Vineyard

A well-funded study highlights the finding that dogs appear to be jealous of one another. The study sparked stories on various cable news networks and left most of us sitting on our couches, scratching our heads and thinking, "Well, duh! Tell me something I don't know." A story about an animal that is not jealous, who naturally shares, who gives selflessly is possibly more surprising; the dog tale only confirms what we know to be true about ourselves and about most beings that occupy our planet: we are a selfish lot.

Our last encounter with Ahab reveals a king who is pouting and discontent. That impression carries through to this next chapter where we see Ahab looking over a fence at his neighbor Naboth's mighty fine vineyard. He wants that vineyard. He needs that vineyard. Why, it's close to his own property. It has just the right amount of sunshine for an awesome vegetable garden. Yes, he simply must have it. So he asks Naboth about it.

The answer is complete shock at the mere suggestion. This is the family farm. It has been in the family for generations, with Naboth as the caretaker, working hard to keep it beautiful so that he can pass it on to his children and to their children. His horror is likely even more complete when he realizes that Ahab's plan is to mow down his beautiful vines and plant a vegetable garden. Scripture tells us how God distributed the land and God's commands about how it is to pass through generations of the family. "No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from his forefathers." (Numbers 36:7) Naboth's loyalty to his family and to God is all tied up together in this land that he tends to with loving care. His response to the

king implies, “Over my dead body.” Sadly, that is just what Jezebel arranges as she intervenes on behalf of her petulant hubby.

After talking with Naboth, Ahab goes home, goes to bed, won’t eat and ruminates on how badly he wants —no, needs—that piece of land. Not being able to possess it, elevates the desire exponentially so that he very nearly makes himself sick over it.

Covetousness is a destructive force in our lives, isn’t it? We are all susceptible to it; we have all experienced the powerful pull of purloined pleasures, those desires that take on a life of their own and begin to dominate our spirits.

What does the Bible have to say about contentment?

I Timothy 6:6-10- Godliness with contentment...

Hebrews 13:5- Love of money...

Philippians 4:11-12- Learning to be content...

What helps us to keep inappropriate desires at bay? How do we re-frame our lives so that we maintain perspective and purpose when our wants become our needs?

At this point, we may be thinking quietly, “Dear God, thank you that I don’t covet my neighbors’ possessions, money, family or other stuff. I think this is one area of my life where I am pretty good.” When this little thought subtly enters my subconscious, I feel the crossing guard of the Spirit waving his little red stop sign saying, “Hold it, hold it. Let’s dig a little deeper on this before you step out into the traffic of life with that self-satisfied smile and get plastered by the vehicle of pride and sin.”

While the sin of coveting stuff may not be our particular downfall, what about the more pernicious sin of coveting someone else’s physical attributes: hair, nails, lovely skin, roundness, lack of roundness, and the list goes on...Or their personality—friendliness, poise, wit, humor, etc....When the sound recordings that run through our minds play the lines of the song, “You’re No Good, You’re No Good, Baby You’re No Good,” over and

over, we can begin to hate our very selves, the wonderful creation of God, and we can doubt his wisdom in making us the way we are. I Corinthians 6:19-20 says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

According to Psalm 139, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” God has planted in each of us his beauty and his love. He wants us to seek true contentment in our selves because He lives in us. As we accept more of him in our lives, he transforms us into people who are full of his love and therefore, able to fully love others.

That is not to say that we accept our tendency to sin as a good part of our natural selves by saying, “Oh, I’m just an angry sort of person. I have red hair so it’s ok if I lash out.” Or, “I am a Type A personality. I just can’t help it if I’m impatient.” That’s where our crossing guard steps back into action, again calling our attention to wrong headed thinking that will lead us to destruction. God loves us as we are. He made us to be perfect. He does not, however, love the sin that lives in us. Only by the Blood of the Lamb, covering over us, can we truly be the full creation he designs us to be.

Let’s spend a few minutes in prayer now, asking God to help us love ourselves so that we can love others. Let’s ask him to teach us the true lessons of contentment in our lives so that we do not yield to the temptations of covetousness. Write some of your thoughts on this below:

Jezebel’s Evil Plan Blooms

Jezebel hears that Ahab is not eating and is staying in bed. She goes to his room to see what is the matter. We can almost see the scene unfold:

[Jezebel sashays into Ahab’s bed chamber, gold bangles clinking, headdress glinting in the sunlight, gauzy veil and flowing robes blow gently in the breeze that moves through the room.]

Jezebel [taking Ahab’s head into her lap] : What’s the matter with my Honey Cakes Moochy Munchkin?

Ahab: He won’t let me have it.

Jezebel: Have what, dearest heart?

Ahab: The vineyard. I can see it from my window. It's the perfect place to grow those delicious little yellow squashes that I so love in the spring. He let me have it. [lip borders on connecting with his toes]

Jezebel [caressing Ahab's long curls] : Now don't you worry your pretty little head one more minute about this whole thing. Your Jezzy will take care of you. You know that don't you, my Delicious Date Cake Darling? [scene fades as she reaches down to kiss Ahab].

Jezebel wastes no time in coming up with a dastardly plan to eliminate their neighbor, Naboth. Hiring "scoundrels" to testify against him, she uses the court of public opinion to quickly accuse, pronounce sentence and execute the innocent Naboth. Her slander is so vicious, so gratuitously hurtful that it seems impossible that friends and neighbors actually carried out such a harsh sentence. Jezebel's plan is all the more evil since she contrived to use "a day of fasting," which is supposed to be associated with spiritual cleansing, to convict Naboth.

The court of public opinion is often wrong, isn't it? How can we refrain from being one of Naboth's accusers in the crowd? How can we keep from forming opinions on matters about which we know very little? My husband is particularly good at pointing out the opposing view on news stories, current events and heated topics at church or in the community. Using his profound intellect, he is able to poke holes in most stories and ask questions that help me think before acting. Although he isn't always successful at keeping me from throwing stones, he does often get me to stop to look at the rock in my hand and consider whether to throw it or drop it.

Jesus also took on a crowd of angry, inflamed villagers. In John 8:3-11, the teachers of the law and Pharisees bring a woman (no man around!) caught in adultery. Their plan is to condemn and stone her—or Jesus. Instead, he asks them to contemplate their own rocks for a moment and with that, the shame sinks in, and "Those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left."

What can we do so that we are careful about throwing rocks?

How can we use our intellect to help us think through inflammatory stories, to ask questions and to be discerning about what we read, watch and listen to?

Ahab Grabs the Garden

As soon as Naboth is dead, the news reaches Jezebel, who passes it on to her husband, conveniently leaving out her part in the contemptible act. Ahab gladly accepts what she tells him, without troubling himself to find out just how she managed to make this all come to pass. His guilty conscience was easily subdued by the desire to get his golden shovel, his cart, his slaves, and begin work, chopping down those old grape vines to make way for the new and improved Ahab's Fresh Vegetable Garden.

He doesn't get very far into his project before his nemesis, Elijah the Tishbite, steps over the threshold. Their greeting is far from cordial as Ahab says, "So you have found me, my enemy!" (v.20). Elijah pronounces the words God has given him to say, leaving no room for Ahab to wiggle out of his guilt over the murder of Naboth. The sentence of death and the indignity of the dogs licking up his blood, terrifies Ahab, who suddenly realizes that the Almighty God is aware of the necrotic sin that is gradually consuming his heart; his death is happening from the inside out. For once, he is truly sorry. He repents and "put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly." (v.27).

God often uses the words of Bible or of a minister of the Gospel to convict us of our sin. What do the following verses tell us about the Holy Spirit convicting us of sin?

John 16:7,8-

In his great mercy, God looks down on Ahab and remarks to Elijah that Ahab is truly sorry, "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day..." (v.29)

God is a God of second, third and fourth chances. He is patient and loving and kind. Throughout Ahab's reign, God reveals himself with the hope of getting Ahab's attention, and having Ahab turn fully to him. Honestly, Ahab doesn't strike me as particularly worthy of all this wooing that God does. My human nature wants to say, "Why waste the time on this guy? He's such a loser! C'mon, God, let's look at someone who is a little less rotten." But as we look at these Ahab stories through the lens of love that God uses on all of us, we can find true encouragement—God loves all of us, every one. From the Elijahs and Elishas of the world —and there aren't too many of those!—to the Ahabs (available in surplus everywhere). God's message is clear: no matter how rotten you have been, no matter how rotten you are, I am still offering you my unending love. It's yours for the taking!

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Let's make some lists:

1. Write down three things you are deeply thankful for:

- _____
- _____

- _____

2. Write down three things that you love about yourself and that you are thankful God placed inside of you:

- _____

- _____

- _____

3. Write down three things about your character that you want God to help you with:

- _____

- _____

- _____

Recognizing Truth

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Heavenly Father, Help us to remember that you are the author of truth; in you there is no darkness at all. Show us, by the light of your love, what real truth is. Help us not be deceived by what we wish to hear. Amen

Breathe in Scripture

Read I Kings 22:1-53

Meditate and Seek Insight

Spotting the Fake

When my brothers and I were little, Mom and Dad read Bible stories to us at bedtime. Besides **Little Visits with God** which depicted a family like ours on the front cover, Mom sometimes read from a book in Portuguese called **Menino Pecado**. The main character in the book, whose title translates to “Boy Sin” was truly awful. He stole, he lied and he used bad language. Each chapter described in great detail the consequences of his behavior until, mercifully, he met Jesus and his life forever changed. I remember being impressed by how bad it was to tell a lie—I didn’t want to end up in trouble like Menino Pecado!

Lies, lies and more lies is the sad story this chapter tells us about Ahab and his prophets. The trouble starts when King Jehoshaphat, who reigns in the southern kingdom of Judah, comes up to Samaria for a visit with Ahab, with whom he apparently enjoys a cordial relationship. During their discussions, Ahab points out to Jehoshaphat and his advisors that the area of Ramoth-Gilead is rightfully Israel’s and they should go over and claim it. Ahab is thinking about his defeat of Ben-Hadad three years prior and the treaty that they agreed to at that time. Jehoshaphat, while agreeing in principle, lays out what is the guiding principle of his decision making, “First seek the counsel of the Lord.” (v.5)

What does the Bible tell us about seeking God’s guidance on decision making?

Isaiah 55:6, 10-11- Seek the Lord...

Matthew 6:33- Seek first...

James 1:5- If any of you lacks wisdom...

It is possible that these two kings were familiar with some of Solomon's writings including Proverbs 4:18,19, "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble." In his darkened mind, Ahab calls forth his prophets, some four hundred of them, and asks the question at hand. The sycophants, accustomed to saying whatever is most likely to keep their heads solidly together with their necks, speak in one voice, saying, "Go" and then they claim to speak for the Lord saying, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." (v.6) It is not clear what kind of prophets these men are, only that they are not good ones! They may be more courtiers than prophets in the full sense of the word.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-5, the Bible addresses the dangers of surrounding ourselves with people who say only what we want to hear, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

Abraham Lincoln kept near him advisers whose opinions differed from his own and this may be one of the reasons that he has gone down in American History as one of our greatest Presidents. He talked with and listened to others' thoughts before deciding on a course of action. William Seward, his Secretary of State, had been his opponent for the Republican nomination. Seward's son, Assistant Secretary of State Frederick W. Seward, later wrote: "This was characteristic of Lincoln. Presidents and kings are not apt to see flaws in their own arguments. But fortunately for the Union, it had a President at this time who combined a logical intellect with an unselfish heart."

Jehoshaphat, long trained in righteousness by his faithful father, Asa, quickly ascertains that these men are simply saying whatever Ahab wants to hear and he calls for a true "prophet of the Lord." Along the same lines, when federal agents are trained to spot counterfeit money, they are told to "touch, tilt, look at, look through." By noting the characteristics of real money, they learn to pick out the false currency from a stack of notes. Here King Jehoshaphat shows the same type of discernment, born of his upbringing and his walk with the Lord.

In thinking about our own lives, is asking the Lord's guidance on our decision making the first step we take? I know that sometimes I plunge forward, diving deep right into

trouble before I surface, sputtering, and remember to gasp out a prayer for divine counsel. What steps can we take that help us to consistently ask God before we move?

How can we become better trained at discerning when advice is in line with Christ's teachings and when it is simply someone trying to tell us what they think we want to hear?

The Truth can Hurt

When Jehoshaphat calls for a prophet of the Lord, Ahab reluctantly summons the Godly Micaiah, while petulantly complaining, "But I hate him because he never prophecies anything good about me, but always bad." (v.8). Jehoshaphat reprimands Ahab and tells him that he should not say that. Ahab reveals that he is not so interested in truth as in agreement with what he wants. He likes his four hundred prophets because they specialize in saying what pleases the king. Jehoshaphat hushes him because he knows that while hearing God's Word is not always pleasant at the time, it is the way to true life and freedom.

I would like to be able to say that I have a perfectly centered moral compass. But sadly, that is just not true. At times my wants become my needs and my responses flash with emotion instead of gleaming with the burnished glaze of well worn thought. Fortunately for me and for those who know me, I am matched with a husband who is as steady as the day is long. His presence in the midst of emotional drama can be the damp cloth that soothes the burning coals of anger. Sadly, his perspective is not always welcome—at least at first—for the truth can be an unwelcome guest at the dinner party of pride and self-pity.

Jesus says he is Truth in one of his "I Am" statements in John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He also said, "The one who sent me is with me.; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him...If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:29-32).

Looking at the scriptures in the paragraph above, fill in the blanks:

I am the _____

I am the _____

I am the _____

Who is with Jesus? _____

When is Jesus left to fend for himself? _____

Who is Jesus living to please? _____
How can we be true disciples of Jesus? _____
If we are his disciples we hold to what? _____
The ultimate results is... _____

How do we seek to have a spirit that welcomes truth, even when it's not the most pleasant thing to hear? And how can we be truth-bearers without being unbearable people? What are some ways that we can be kind and sensitive while still being truthful people?

Macaiah is not interested in position or popularity with men, only with God. Although the messenger who comes to fetch him tells him, "Let your word agree," this honest prophet makes a true statement of faith when he says, "As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me." (v.14) He does deliver some sarcasm as he stands before the king and Ahab calls him on it, claiming to want "nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord." (v.16). From that point on, Macaiah describes prophetically what will happen when Ahab is killed in battle and his men end up scattering, each to their own home. Although Ahab hears, he does not believe or heed the warning.

What do you think Jehoshaphat is thinking? Why does he go ahead with war plans even after hearing the various prophecies?

We may gain some insight from verses 41-50 which give us more information about this Judean king and his reign in Jerusalem. "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," (v.43) and "Jehoshaphat was also at peace with the king of Israel." (v.44) While he hears the prophecies about Ahab's death, Jehoshaphat probably notices that his own death is not mentioned. Between Micaiah's words and the other prophets, he may have felt God's spirit telling him to go ahead. Jehoshaphat is not fearful, in fact when Ahab comes up with the hare-brained idea that Jehoshaphat should go into battle wearing his royal robes while he himself would be "in disguise," Jehoshaphat goes ahead, seemingly confident in God's care and in God's ultimate plan.

In making his decision, he listens first to the various advisors, he stops to consider, he weighs the evidence, he listens to the nudges of the Spirit and then he takes action.

As a Parish Nurse, I often have people asking for advice on what to do about a particular care situation—should they go home, to assisted living or to a nursing home? I try to provide them with all the information that can help them make the best possible decision, but sometimes it's also important to know that the answers are not always 100% clear. At times we have to implement a plan that is not fully guaranteed to succeed. And so it was with King Jehoshaphat. He did the best he could with the information that he had at hand.

On a scale of 1 to 10 would you rate yourself as more impulsive in decision making or more of a “think it through and get it right?” Is it hard for you to go with a plan that is not guaranteed to be a success?

Saved by the Accent

I have a friend from Brazil who has a lovely accent. I heard her introduce herself to a group of women one time, and she charmingly said, “I know you can not tell that I am not born here, because my English is so good and I have no accent, but I was born in Brazil!” She said it with a smile and a sense of humor and everyone laughed with her.

Jehoshaphat rides along in his chariot, royal robes blowing in the wind, cutting quite a distinctive figure in the crowd of soldiers. “So they turned to attack him, but when Jehoshaphat cried out, the chariot commanders saw that he was not the king of Israel and stopped pursuing him.” (v.33). I wonder what he yelled out? How did they know he was a Southerner? Did he have some sweet tea in his royal cup holder? Or maybe he had some sort of war whoop or his version of the Rebel Yell? We don’t know but the fact is that his pursuers turned away and he was unharmed.

Ahab, on the other hand, was hit by a “random” arrow (v.34) and begins to bleed to death, sitting in the floor of his chariot. He dies slowly, along with the setting sun and when he takes his last breath, his soldiers scatter “Every man to his town; everyone to his land,” (v.36) just as Micaiah had foreseen. When Ahab’s blood fills the bottom of the chariot and the soldiers take it to clean it out, the dogs lick up the evil king’s blood, just as Elijah said they would—a fitting ending to the story of a man described by Elijah, “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols.” (21:26)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

What are some ways that we can become people who tell the “whole truth and nothing but the truth” at all times? Let’s turn our hearts toward God and ask if there is any untruth that lives inside our hearts that needs to be cleansed.

How can we become people who trust the Lord so much that we are not paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake?

Sick to Death

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Sometimes I can get so far away from what you want for me. Sometimes I go looking in all the wrong places for direction. Please help me to keep the eyes of my spirit centered on you. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

Read I Kings 22:51-53 and II Kings 1:1-18

Meditate and Seek Insight

The Sickness of Sin

In nursing school, one of the first things we learn is “aseptic technique.” We learn simple things like hand washing, donning and removing gloves, opening sterile packages, and cleansing skin appropriately. Because bacteria and viruses are invisible, we have to understand their dangers and learn to prevent their transfer from person to person so that we don’t become agents of infection. In our Christian walk, we also want to be in training so that we don’t pass on wrong behaviors and ideas to those that follow us. Each of us has an opportunity to spread God’s love to others; we are also aware that our own bad attitudes and practices can be infectious.

As I Kings ends and II Kings begins, we see Ahab’s son, Ahaziah, come to the throne already tainted. Following in his father’s footsteps, Ahaziah continues to walk steadily down the path that leads to eventual darkness and death. “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he walked in the ways of his father and mother...He served and worshipped Baal and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father had done.” (v.52,53) Ahab's sin so infected his family, his household and his country that the contagion threatens to overwhelm the country. In medical terms, when a localized infection spreads through the blood and affects multiple organs, the person is said to be “septic,” a condition that can lead to septic shock and multiple system organ failure, progressions that left unchecked will certainly lead to death. God is reaching down with a hand of mercy and love to the children of Israel, who are contaminated by idol worship; he is using his prophets to offer an opportunity for cleansing and renewed life. Ahaziah, a man who has grown up watching his father and learning his ways, seems immune to God’s touch and ultimately decides not to accept the cure offered.

Let's look at a couple of scriptures that talk about characteristics we want to eliminate and those we want to spread:

Eliminate:

I Peter 2:1- Rid yourselves of all...

Ephesians 4:31- Get rid of...

Incubate and spread:

Ephesians 5:1,2- Imitate God...

Philippians 4:8- Whatever is true...

Ahab leaves behind an evil legacy, a series of bad examples and practices. Ahaziah picks up where Ahab left off. Although he only reigns two years, Ahaziah does not take any steps toward God even though God sends Elijah to him and gives him the opportunity. Regardless of our own upbringing, we all have our own choices to make. Ahaziah chose to be evil; he could have chosen differently. Each morning, when we get out of bed, we have a new beginning, a new opportunity to seek to follow the Lord. Sometimes it's easy for me to excuse my own bad behavior: "Oh, I was just in a bad mood," or "That makes me so mad!" or "I get grumpy when I'm hungry."

What about you? Do you struggle with a past that is more of a burden than a blessing? Do you struggle with moodiness or illness that makes your temper short?

We have such wonderful comfort in scripture. The Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" I'm so thankful for the "new me" that Christ is busy working on. I'm thankful that he loves me just as I am, but he loves me too much to leave me this way!

Imported Advice

When Ahaziah falls through a lattice window and injures himself, he sends some advisors off to the land of the Philistines, to Ekron, to ask their god, Baal-zebub, whether or not he will get well. Elijah intercepts these messengers after hearing from an angel and

sends them back with a message, “Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub?” (v.3) Somehow, Ahaziah has the “Imported is better” mentality. Have you ever experienced this? In our acquisitive society we see it mostly on clothing labels, certain foods, and even showroom floors—if it’s from far away, then it must be better. To be fair, sometimes imported brands are better, but in Ahaziah’s case, the homegrown spiritual advice is just what his broken body and spirit need.

It could be that Ahaziah, like his father before him, had agreeable prophets surrounding him; maybe he asked them and wasn’t pleased with the sincerity of their answers. Instead of seeking a prophet of the Lord, and pursuing the spiritual healing that he so desperately needs, he goes out of town for a second opinion.

Do we sometimes go looking for a second and third opinion if we don’t hear what we want to hear? Can you think of a time when you sought an opinion from sources outside your regular sphere of friends? Why? How did it work out?

Elijah sends the truth to him via the couriers without identifying himself but the king knows who he is, based on the description given. No doubt, growing up, he had heard his father rail against this prophet who spoke unwelcome words of piercing truth. Ahaziah, like his father, is not open to receiving the message from the Lord.

The Bible doesn’t tell us this, but we know God could easily have healed Ahaziah through his prophet. But the king doesn’t even ask. He hears the sentence of death and instead of crying out to God for mercy, he begins an ill-fated campaign to kill Elijah, falling prey to the superstitious thinking that by killing the prophet he will also eliminate the message that Elijah brings.

Superstitions...

What are some common superstitions? “Don’t step on a crack or you’ll break your mother’s back,” and “Don’t walk under a ladder or it’s seven years of bad luck,” or how about, “Don’t eat a banana after drinking hot coffee or you will die,”—that one came from a young lady that worked in our house when I was a girl. Josefa had other interesting superstitious fears including multiple hot/cold superstitions such as the horror she had of sitting on a bus seat that was still warm after someone had gotten up. I can remember one particular time when I was about six or seven; Josefa and I had gone to town together and were returning on a crowded bus at rush hour. Sweaty people were pushing on us from every side. Suddenly a seat opened up in front of us. I waited for her to sit so I could sit on her lap. I remember being pretty confused about why we had to keep standing there, on a crowded bus, hovering over a seat while it “cooled.” She also liked to read the horoscopes daily and counted on certain days being more auspicious than others.

Can you think of superstitions that you have harbored over the years? Are superstitions good or bad? Where do these types of thoughts originate?

Elijah serves in a time when thoughts, conversations, and behaviors are controlled by superstitions. In the absence of the One True God, man's inventiveness leads to a plethora of gods, one for each household and occasion.

Mission Impossible

What follows next is a dramatic story of fire falling out of heaven to consume the armies of men who come, attempting to take Elijah prisoner. Envisioning this scene in my mind is strange, almost cartoonish—Elijah is up on “the top of a hill” and the captain with his fifty soldiers comes to the base of the hill and hollers up at him to “Come on down!” Elijah responds, no, I'm not coming down and furthermore, I'm sending fire to consume all of you; then “Poof!” the fire blasts everybody. Not once, but twice this scene repeats itself, word for word.

After the first two squadrons are thus eliminated, I doubt Ahaziah was able to get many volunteers for the next mission impossible. The third captain gets wise and comes in a humble posture, using humble words, to beg Elijah for mercy. Again, the angel of the Lord speaks to Elijah and tells him, “Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.” (v.15) In spite of all the power God gives Elijah through the spirit, the human part of Elijah still needs the reassurance that it will be ok. It's comforting to know, that even though this great man of God, exercises power and rains down fire from heaven, he continues to struggle with normal fears.

Elijah goes to Ahaziah and delivers exactly the same message that he heard from the angel and repeats it to the messengers. The message is interesting because it identifies the source, asks the question, and pronounces the sentence.

1. “Is there not a God?” This question gives Ahaziah an opportunity to reconsider his position.
2. “That you would go to Baal?” Idol worship is strictly forbidden among the Israelites. Ahaziah knows this but closes his ears and his heart to truth.
3. “You will certainly die!” The consequence of sin is death. The king has pronounced his own sentence.

Even today, God seeks us out to ask the same questions:

1. Do you believe that I am God?
2. Why do you persist in going your own way and worshipping your _____(fill in the blank for the idols that fill our lives today)?

3. Pronouncing the sentence: _____ Here is the happy part of the story—we get to decide! Do we choose life in Christ today?

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

I can remember talking with my parents via ham radio when I was in college. Back in the dark ages, before the internet, international phone calls were prohibitively expensive and we were missionaries, rich in blessings, poor in the kind of money that paid for phone calls. So we talked on the ham, and the ham radio is interesting. First of all, lots of other folks around the world and next door to my folks were listening. Also, we had to say, “Over,” every time we finished talking to signal the person on the other end that it was their turn. This made for an awkward conversation, needless to say. But I was so homesick that I often cried through the transmissions which sometimes took place at 5 a.m. (I can remember fuzzy headed girls looking out their doors down the hall to see who was weeping on the phone at that unladylike hour.) I don’t know what we talked about, probably the usual college student concerns, but I do remember my parents always closing with, “Remember, we pray for you every day.”

In college I spent some spiritual time sitting on the fence. I looked to one side and then the other. My parents’ voices lifted in prayer pulled me toward God. In the end, I got off that fence, put my hand in God’s hand, and began a new journey.

Ahaziah’s story has a sad ending. He succumbs to his sin sickness, unable to accept the hand of healing extended to him. But our stories are not his. We get to choose the cleansing that the Lord offers us and the life that comes with that healing.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” Ephesians 2:4

Picture this: You are a child, straddling a fence. On one side is an abyss. On the other is a loving father, with a smile on his face and arms open wide. You stand up. Are you ready? Get set! Go!

Walkabouts and Whirlwinds

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord Jesus, Help me as I go through this day to have faith that you are both in the journey and in the journey's end. Help me to be the kind of friend and family member that walks steadfastly with others as they go through trials. Amen

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 2:1-18

Meditate and Seek Insight

Walking and Talking

We have a group of friends that we enjoy hiking with. Recently, we went to a beautiful place in Southwest Virginia called "The Channels." While it takes some determination to get to, the hike, the vistas and the spectacular nature of the formations, makes the whole adventure one to add to any hiker's bucket list. During the four miles of fairly gradual ascent, we had the opportunity to visit with one another and to solve all the world's problems. By stepping away and going on a walkabout into the woods and nature, I find that life regains its perspective, troubles seem more bearable and joys more distinct.

Are you a hiker/walker? What is your favorite trail? If you are not a hiker, how do you enjoy the outdoors?

As we launch into Chapter 2, we find Elijah and Elisha walking together from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho and finally to the other side of the Jordan. While this is quite a trek for a day's walk, we must consider that these men were accustomed to long walks and that the four places are fairly close to one another, located near the border between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The exact location of Gilgal and Bethel is not archeologically known, but Jericho is a current day city near the Jordan River.

Somehow, Elijah and Elisha both know that this is their last day together. As they go about their pilgrimage, we see the older man repeatedly encouraging his successor to

“Stay here,” at each stop along the way. But Elisha, faithful follower and friend, answers with a steadfast, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” (v. 2,4,6)

Why do you think Elijah asks Elisha to stay? And why do you think this interchange is repeated three times?

In Scripture, when passages are repeated, it draws attention to the words, doesn't it? It makes us take a second look and see what we need to learn.

First of all, there are four places. Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan River all have scriptural significance as places where God spoke and revealed himself and his power. Look at these stories and think about the possible significance of each place in relationship to Elijah and Elisha and their final tour

1. Gilgal- Joshua 5:1-12- What two events take place here?

2. Bethel- Genesis 28:19- What does Jacob dream about here?

3. Jericho- Joshua 6- What happens to the walls of this town that opens up the Promised Land to the Israelites?

4. Jordan River- Joshua 3:15,16- What happens to the water of the Jordan when the priests' feet touch the water's edge?

While we can see the significance of the four places by looking back in the history of the children of Israel, we can only guess that God had definite reasons for sending the two prophets on this journey on their last day together. These sites each represented “high places” spiritually for the Israelites. The men most likely talked all day as they walked and, much as we did with our friends on our hike, solved all the world's problems—only with much more wisdom, I am sure! Elijah and Elisha both know this is it. The condensed time frame gives a measure of urgency to their hike.

If you knew that today was your last day on this earth, who would you like to talk with and what are some things that you would be sure to say?

As they walk and talk, Elijah offers Elisha three different chances to turn back instead of continuing down the path of being his successor and shouldering all the burdens that will fall on his shoulders. Elisha walks on with Elijah and confirms his commitment to carrying on with the work by revealing the deepest desire of his heart. When Elijah asks, “Tell, me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” (v.9) Elisha doesn’t ask for an easy life, for a smooth path, or for a companion, instead he asks for a double portion of the Spirit. Elijah’s heart must skip a beat as he stops in his tracks and looks deep into the younger man’s eyes: “You have asked a difficult thing,” (v.10) for he alone knows the road that lies ahead, a road fraught with persecution, loneliness, and even depression but also limitless power.

Friends?

God gives some people the gift of being good friends to have when you are celebrating or when you are sick. I have a friend that showed up the day before our daughter’s wedding with an enormous amount of delicious breakfast/brunch type food that we could share with our guests. In all of the excitement of the day, it was such a God-send to have a gracious plenty to set out and show hospitality to our friends and family.

Church families and loving friends are wonderful to have, aren’t they? In contrast, we see these “company of prophets” both in Bethel and in Jericho that seem to be grossly insensitive. Though they realize this is a special day, they seem to want to rub in the loss and pain involved. We see Elisha withdrawing—almost wincing—as he answers them both times, “Yes, I know, but do not speak of it.” (v. 3,5) He clearly knows that this is the last day he has with this man of God, and he doesn’t want to spend the day dwelling on the loss, instead enjoying the present.

Sometimes in hospice work, people ask me about telling their loved one point blank what is happening. While I never advocate lying, I also don’t believe there is any great comfort in cold, hard facts. Also, people tend to know in their heart of hearts; they don’t need to hear it out loud; it only exacerbates the pain of leaving their loved ones. And so it is with these two friends. The mentor is moving on. The student must now become the teacher, the follower the leader, and the son must now take the place of father to the lost children of Israel who live in an age of apostasy.

Chariot of Fire

Elijah takes off his cloak and with one last act of divine power on this earth, he divides the water of the Jordan so that he and Elisha can walk on through.

Can you think of two other instances when the waters parted in scripture?

Notice that once they reach the Jordan, Elijah is finished asking Elisha if he is staying and coming along. Now he knows, beyond doubt, that Elisha is all in, ready to receive and move forward. "As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared..." The Bible tells us that God buried Moses, Enoch "was no more," but Elijah is the only one that gets this fancy transport. Maybe God in his wisdom and humor is making up for all the times Elijah had to run or walk. Elisha rejoices as he sees his beloved mentor go, and yells out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (v.12) The fact that he uses the plural here opens the possibility that his vision extended beyond one chariot of fire, and that he caught a glimpse of what lies beyond. What a vision! Think about feeling the heat of the fire, seeing those powerful horses, feeling the wind whirling around...then a sudden silence as the cloak floats to earth and lands in a heap beside Elisha's feet. He bends down to pick up the cloak, and it is still warm from the fire as he wraps it around his own shoulders and heads back toward the Jordan where the company of prophets awaits his return.

Have you ever seen a vision or had a vivid dream that seemed prophetic? A friend recently told me about a powerful experience she had while dreaming. She saw a woman walking toward her and couldn't see the woman's face, but as the plump, dark haired lady passed by, my friend felt the sensation of power going from her to this woman and she reached out and said to her, "I am supposed to pray for you." As she prayed, she felt the strong power of the Holy Spirit moving through her arms and then her legs so that she shook and fell. When she awoke, she told her husband all about the dream and wondered who the woman was. For the next few days, she kept looking at faces, in hopes of spotting the woman from her dreams. Five days later, she met a co-worker, and the co-worker's greeting was, "There is my angel." My friend laughed and smiled, thinking that it was a joke, but the woman said, "No really. Five nights ago I was in the hospital and was very sick. You came to me and prayed for me, and I was healed. The next morning I got up and left the hospital."

God promises to send us visions and dreams. In Joel 2:28-32, he says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions...And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Finding a Fit

Elisha walks back to the Jordan, wearing Elijah's cloak, a garment heavy with significance. The weight of being God's chosen messenger rests squarely on his shoulders. It is a responsibility that he has trained for, willingly assumed, and yet its fit is untested, so much so that as he nears the water, the cloak falls off. He strikes the water with it and says basically, "Ok, God. This is it! Are you with me like you were with Elijah?" God parts the water; the company of prophets from Jericho witnesses the power coming from Elisha and accepts his authority by bowing before him.

Elisha is prepared for his new role, but even so, it is not an easy fit. Sometimes God calls us to take on roles that are difficult for us, and that may not seem like the most natural fit, especially at first. I can remember longing to be a mother, suffering through two years of infertility, and then being nervous during the long months of pregnancy before joyfully welcoming our first-born son. Imagine my dismay and surprise when this little bundle of joy didn't seem nearly as happy to be in the world as we were to have him! He cried endlessly, well, ok, maybe just for a year, but it did seem like forever at the time. I can remember sitting and crying with him after trying everything I knew to help him get comfortable. You can be sure that I felt plenty inadequate as a mom, not at all prepared to assume the role I so longed to have.

God is a big and mighty God. He rejoices when he sees us answer the call to serve, telling him that we cannot do it on our own and that we will need his divine assistance. In Ephesians 2:10, we read, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Look at Ephesians 4:11-13 and fill in the blanks:

It was he who gave some to be _____, some to be _____, some to be _____, and some to be _____ and _____, to prepare God's people for _____, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

These scriptures are full of miracles, visions, dreams, angels, and God's power. My friend clearly had a divine dream just the other day. What about it our lives? How can we be alert so that we spot the angels that come to us and so that we are able to hear the messengers' voices?

Where is God calling us to put on a new cloak?

How can we be an encourager to someone in leadership who might be a little uncomfortable in their cloak?

A New Leader

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Help me to be a good disciple. Help me today to listen to you and to be patient with others as they work out their particular journey of faith. Thank you for all the people that walk along with me today. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 2:15-25

Meditate and Seek Insight

Transitions

When I went to orientation to learn to be a Parish Nurse, one of the points they taught us was, “Don’t just do something, stand there.” Counterintuitive though it sounds, standing there, absorbing the culture of the congregation, learning people’s names and jobs, fellowshiping and making friends, can be just the way we learn to adjust to a new role. Pausing to be patient in prayer and planning before launching forward can also pay off long term dividends in productive ministry.

As Elisha crosses back over the Jordan to meet the company of prophets waiting there, his new cloak is in his hand, and his clothing is in tatters because previously, “he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.” (v.12) This spontaneous expression of grief also symbolizes his parting with the old life and launching into something new. He knows that he has inherited the “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit and that he is the official successor in the battle against Baal. Just as Joshua followed Moses in leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, so Elisha follows Elijah to finish the job his father in the faith began, the job of eradicating the worship of idols.

John Baillie wrote, “I am sure that the bit of the road that most requires to be illuminated is the point where it forks.” Elisha certainly stands at a crossroads in his life. During this time of transition, he is looking to God for guidance and help.

Think about a time in your life when you started a new job or took on a new role. What was most helpful to you? How can we be helpful to others who are going through times of transition?

With Elisha we are looking at transitioning into a new ministry, but all types of transitions, whether considered to be good or bad, are stressful. Spend a few moments praying and letting the Spirit speak to your heart about people in and around you that may be experiencing transitions: a new job or the loss of a job, marriage or divorce, becoming new parents or empty nesters, having physical ailments that are burdensome, going through the death of a loved one...the list is long.

One of the ways that we can survive and thrive during times of transition is to keep our focus on the Lord and our audience of One. What do the following scriptures have to say about being centered on God's will for us in our various roles?

I Thes. 2:4-6- Not pleasing men...

II Timothy 2:15- Do your best...

Colossians 3:23- Working for the Lord...

In Matthew 14, Jesus invites Peter to walk on water to him, but as Peter steps out of the comfort zone of his boat, Jesus doesn't calm the waves that are buffeting the boat, instead he simply requires that Peter keep his attention focused on the Master. When Peter falters, it is because he "saw the wind." (v.30) And so it is with us. Jesus invites us to great adventures with him, lives filled with doing the truly impossible—all accomplished with our eyes securely locked on his. My friend, Beth Greer, wrote an encouraging post on Facebook, "Lets be courageous today. Waters may be rough. Go ahead, step out of the boat. Keep your eyes on Jesus and it's okay to stare."

Patience is a Virtue

"Lord, I need patience and I need it now!" I would dare say that every last one of us can identify with this little prayer. We joke sometimes saying we shouldn't ask for patience or God might hear our prayer and send us more opportunities to practice it! For Elisha the opportunity to practice patience presents itself immediately after he assumes his new role. His initial encounter with the prophets is rather odd. They want to go looking for Elijah. Elisha tries to tell them not to, but they insist so he lets them go ahead. They spend three days wandering around in the desert, presumably looking for a body, and finally report their lack of success to Elisha, who probably raises his eyebrows, shrugs his shoulders and responds, "Didn't I tell you not to go?" (v.18) What the prophets wanted to do was a waste of time, but Elisha allows them to do what they propose. He

seems to mentally say, “I’ve got to pick my battles here. These guys really want to send out this search party. So what’s the harm? It’s a waste of time, but let them go.” Elisha’s first call of duty is patience: patience with these guys that don’t quite get it; patience with a plan that he knows is destined to fail; patience with spending three days waiting for them to get back.

Our God is patient and long suffering. I have no doubt that with some of my great ideas, his reaction is like Elisha’s—it’s a waste of your time, but if it will make you feel better, then go ahead. We’ve all had the experience of getting good advice but choosing not to follow it or giving a loved one the benefit of our experience only to watch them struggle through the same problem.

In Exodus, the children of Israel sorely tax God’s patience by building a golden calf and worshipping it while Moses is up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments. God wants to destroy the people but Moses pleads on their behalf asking God to be patient and forgive them. Scripture tell us, “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, ‘The Lord.’ And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.’” (Exodus 34:6,7) God breathes his own name, Yah-weh, and describes himself to his servant Moses.

What does the Bible say about patience in Galatians 5:22?

Being patient can be especially challenging in situations like Elisha’s where he understood so much more than the company of prophets did. Have you ever tried to tutor someone in a subject that you were particularly good at and they just couldn’t get it at all? I remember struggling with physiology in college. I had a hard time with some of the concepts, even after the diligent explanations by my friends. At some point, I would just smile like I understood and make some sort of clucking sound, “Oh, that’s it. I get it.” But I didn’t. Not at all. Sometimes in our relationships, the chasm of lack of understanding is so deep that it’s hard to take the first step across the great divide. What do we do when that happens? Elisha showed patience. He probably prayed while they were gone and waited for them to come around. We can do the same.

Picking Our Battles

As parents we learn quickly about the twin principles of “Picking your Battles” and “Knowing When to Take a Stand (or not).” When our daughter was little, she had definite opinions about what she wanted to wear to preschool. Sometimes her outfits were wildly inappropriate, bare legs when it was cold or bizarre color combos, but, hey, as long as it was safe, I figured it was a waste of our time to argue about it. (I got over the odd looks from the preschool teacher and just smiled on by.)

Elisha's new position as leader and as the official representative of the Lord, requires that he show both patience and an ability to let the unimportant things go. He realizes that this futile search for Elijah or Elijah's body will go nowhere fast but he decides that this fight is not worth fighting and that he will simply wait it out.

Setting priorities regarding which battles we need to fight as Christians is a daily challenge. In an age where we are besieged by images that assault us and bites that offend, we face daily—sometimes hourly—decisions about how to react and what to respond to.

Throughout Jesus' time on earth, he controls events instead of being controlled by them. He allows the Pharisees and teachers of the law to question him when he has a point to make. Several times they come demanding signs or answers, and he addresses them in his own way, often with parables and then disappears from their presence.

Look at these portions of scripture and make notes about how Jesus picked his battles:

Matthew 12:14-21- Withdrew...

Matthew 16:1-4- Left them...

Matthew 19:1-3,15- Left the area...

Yes, Jesus did have plenty of confrontations with the opposition. But he didn't engage them every time they approached him, and he often side-stepped the intent of their interrogations by providing answers that completely surpassed the scope of the question. And so it can be with us as we walk this journey of faith: sometimes we have to confront and debunk, but many times we are called to practice patience and to simply allow the non-critical controversies to slide. An obscure German Christian theologian, Rubertus Meldenius, sums it up with his saying, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

What are some practical steps that we can take this week to cultivate more patience?

Think back to a time when you took a stand. With the passage of time, does it still seem as important? Can you think of a time when you wish that you had remained silent and let others learn through their own experience?

Chapter 4
Day 3

Blessings and Curses

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear heavenly Father, Help me to be a person that blesses others. As I move through my day today, let me speak words that draw others to you; words that are pure and kind and that build up instead of tearing down. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 2:19-25

Meditate and Seek Insight

The Elephant in the Room

Children are so honest, aren't they? And they are especially honest when it comes to others' appearances, not having yet developed the social grace called "white lies." I can remember meeting a friend's four year old for the first time and priding myself on making a connection with the little one, I bent over to get a little closer so we could talk. Her expression took on a slightly puzzled look, and I thought to myself how wonderful it was that she was so intent on my words, when suddenly she blurted out, "You have something green in your teeth!" Children don't hesitate to identify the elephant in the room, to point out the obvious and to ask the hard questions like, "Why?" In this section of scripture, we arrive at one of those places. We are looking at two different stories: the blessing and purifying of the water of Jericho and the cursing and killing of the forty two youths. If we acknowledge the difficulties at hand and identify the elephant—namely that we are disturbed that Elisha would have forty youths mauled—then maybe we can work together to find meaning. Looking at these two stories together allows us to compare and contrast them; it allows us to look for overall themes of blessings and curses. The blessings will follow those who worship God and keep his covenant. The curses also rain down when we live lives of disobedience and waywardness.

First, let's examine God's overall communication in scripture:

1. He is working through fallible people.
2. He is working through language that changes and evolves, and sometimes details can be lost or misunderstood in translation.
3. He alone can see the big picture; we must work to pull out applications that draw us nearer to him without allowing the parts we cannot understand to become permanent obstacles in our faith walk.
4. God never changes. This is the truth we cling to: the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament in Jesus Christ. He is a God of love and compassion, a God whose mercies never fail. He is also a God who cannot and will not sit side by side with unconfessed sin. He gives us time, sometimes a long lifetime and sometimes a short one, to make a decision about our own repentance.

Now that we have at least discussed that there is an elephant in the room, let's move forward to look specifically at the story of the healing of the water of Jericho before we move onto the bears.

Blessing of the Water

Elisha comes into the city of Jericho, situated on the plains near the Jordan River, and the men of the town approach him about a serious problem they are experiencing: the water supply is contaminated—so much so that, “The water is bad and the land is unproductive.” (v. 19) The people are experiencing the results of the curses that God spoke in Deuteronomy 28:15-45, where he describes in detail the negative consequences of choosing not to worship him.

List below some of the curses God says the people will bring on themselves if they “do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees.”

This is in complete contrast to the blessings God lists in the preceding verses (28:1-14). What will happen to the children of Israel if they “fully obey and carefully follow?”

Salt and water. The Bible contains many references to their symbolic meaning. See what you can find out from the references below:

Salt-

Leviticus 2:13-_____

Matthew 5:13-_____

Water-

Isaiah 58:11-_____

I Peter 3:21-_____

As Elisha pours out a bowl of salt on the spring, he pronounces a word of hope and restoration, “This is what the Lord says: ‘I have healed this water...’” (v.21) As the people of the town stand around that life giving spring and watch the new prophet of God declare words that quench the thirst of their parched souls, they dip their hands down for a drink and taste the now healed water. Their eyes go from dead in despair to alive with expectation and new dreams.

When my dad was a missionary in Brazil, one of his jobs was to be Disaster Relief Coordinator for the area. During that time, the northeast part of Brazil was suffering from a terrible drought. One area in particular, the “sertao,” an arid plateau, was so thirsty that the people and animals were dying. Dad went out to investigate and found houses in disrepair, children with swollen bellies, and parents who looked out from doorways without even a glimmer of a smile. Together with local Christians and with some funds from Disaster Relief, Dad began to hire the men of the area to dig wells. Where the river had long since dried up, he knew there would be water if they went a little deeper. Sure enough, after a few days, they hit blessed water and began to build a network of pipes to bring the water to the people. A few months later, he went back to the same village and found it brimming with life: houses whitewashed, children running about and playing, neighbors out visiting and taking care of livestock. The water transformed and restored life.

As Christians, we represent the hope in the world. God takes the lives that we offer up to him and uses us to offer healing and purification to the world around us. Repeatedly, God points out that “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6) The overall theme of scripture, laid out one story at a time, is our need for God; we are all sadly unable to stay on the path of righteousness on our own power. As the men of Jericho come to Elisha, they are looking for a fix to a physical problem: bad water. Elisha addresses the problem at hand, but the greater message is sprinkled through this now pristine water, and that is that with God’s help we can become pure again. The cleansing he offers the denizens of Jericho, he offers us in Christ and through his blood.

This passage also invites us to elevate our focus beyond the physical to the spiritual. While obedience to God and his ways always results in a life replete with blessing, it does not always follow that material blessings are included. Some modern day evange-

lists and inspirational speakers enjoy a great following because they promise material rewards for those who faithfully give to their ministries. I would not want to be eating at that table of lies! God is not a God to be bargained with and manipulated. He IS. He fulfills his promises of blessings to those that follow him because his vision is eternal; he sees beyond our current circumstances and gives us what we really need: more of him.

Cursing the Youths

When we got married, my husband, Wesley, decided to learn to speak Portuguese so that he would not be left out of conversations at family gatherings and so that we could communicate even better. When he bought his book, I had little faith that he would actually persevere, but I clearly did not know the depth of his commitment! Every day, he would sit by me in the evening, conjugating verbs, asking me questions and perfecting his pronunciation. When we went to Brazil to visit, I was amazed by his fluency. He continues to pursue his passion for Portuguese on a daily basis as we read the scripture selection from the daily devotional **The Upper Room**, side by side with the English. Sometimes, though, we compare translations and are both confused by how divergent the meanings appear to be. Looking at scripture in two languages gives us renewed appreciation for how much can actually be lost in translation.

In John 1, the apostle John helps us to understand Jesus' divinity by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (v.1) By describing Jesus as the Word, John reveals a dimension of Christ that goes beyond his other attributes. As we delve into scripture and the Word of God, we find more significance and revelation in the words used to communicate God's ultimate plan.

Words matter. And they really matter here in this story about Elisha and the youths. Mostly because these words are hard, muddled and leave us with many more questions than answers. "Can you run that by us again, God?" is a phrase that comes to mind when we get to verse 25. As we get into this story we find Elisha is walking again, this time going through Bethel, the capital of the northern kingdom's idol worship, on his way to Mount Carmel and then Samaria. Some young men come out of the town, jeer at him, taunting him for being bald. He then pronounces a curse on them and forty two of them are mauled by bears. The traditional interpretation of this difficult scripture points us to the fact that God is holy and dishonoring his appointed representative is on par with dishonoring him and thus has tragic consequences. While there is truth and value to this aspect of the story, let us look a little deeper and consider the questions below:

Does the scripture say the curse and the mauling are a good thing?

Can you think of some examples of stories included in the Bible that are not intended to be interpreted as "good?" _____

Do you think it's possible that we are missing some information and that they are some details missing that would help us better understand this difficult story?

Do you think it is possible that Elisha jumped to conclusions and pronounced a curse in the name of the Lord? Do you think he might have been insecure in his new role so that he found it hard to take the criticism with a dose of humor?

I find that the more insecure I am, the more defensive I become. I hear suggestions as accusations and comments as criticism. I can become so wrapped up in my cloak of ego that I can't see the Master's smile and his words of affirmation and encouragement. Jesus shows us the way to a life of service in love when he washes the disciples feet. Right before the biggest ordeal of his life, when of all times he might have felt insecure, the Bible tells us, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist." (John 13:3,4) Jesus is able to do the most menial of tasks because he knows who he is and whose he is. He never loses site of the love of the Father and of the ultimate plan. He tells us, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Reflecting on our lives, how can we be a force for purity and for flavor in the world? Think of two specific ways God is calling you to be an agent for good, speaking blessings instead of curses?

Where are there areas of insecurity that trouble you? Write down below two specific things that you know Jesus loves in you:

Where might the Lord be calling you to wrap that towel around your waist and wash someone's feet?

Lukewarm

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Help me to be fully committed to you. Help me to walk in the world with my feet firmly planted by your side, allowing you to guide me today as I reach out to others. Make me an instrument of your peace and an ambassador of your love to those around me. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 3:1-12

Meditate and Seek Insight

A Cup of Good “Jo”?

I love a cup of good coffee in the morning (and later sometimes, too!). While not too particular about brands, I prefer the South American grinds—the powdery espresso style beans yield stout coffee that is brimming with flavor. With a steaming mug on the screened in porch my quiet time seems richer and prayers easier to say. But make it hot, not lukewarm. If I get caught up doing something and have to abandon my cup, it’s never quite the same. Somehow lukewarm coffee doesn’t have the same distinct flavor or enjoyment. It makes me want to spit it out. In the Book of Revelation, God speaks to the church at Laodicea and says, “So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (3:16) And so it is with God’s appraisal of Joram, a man who cannot make up his mind and is distasteful to God.

As we look at Chapter 3, we see Joram, son of Ahab, occupying the throne of the northern kingdom after his brother, Ahaziah, dies. “Jo” is decidedly not decided. He rules for twelve years and removes one idol worship site but allows the golden calves at both Dan and Bethel to remain. He is indicted because he “clung to the sins of Jeroboam.” (v. 3) Maybe we should digress a moment to look at this fellow Jeroboam and consider what he did. Of humble origins, Jeroboam initially pleased God and King Solomon by doing his job well. But once he is anointed king, he becomes both proud and controlling. He decides that he is in charge and that having his people trek all the way down to Jerusalem to worship will not do anything for his standing among his subjects. His solution is to set up idol worship centers in the northernmost reaches of Israel and also at the border with Judah. He is responsible as a leader for pulling the children of Israel away from the pure worship of God. Jeroboam’s sin carries on through the generations

and lands solidly in the lap of Joram who has choices to make. Instead of listening to the Lord, he clings to sin and does not turn away from evil. (v.3)

Like static on a silk dress in December, sin has a way of lingering and catching up to us. Just when we think we've eliminated it, we catch a sidelong glance of ourselves in the mirror and horrified, notice that it's back again. "Clinging to sin..." What does that look like in my life? Is it the book that is hard to put down—even though I know it's not good for me? Or is it the story that I should keep to myself, but out it comes in a blaze of self-aggrandizing embellishment? None of us enjoys conviction or confession but scripture reminds us that identifying sin and repenting are the first essential steps in eradication.

What step does I John 1:9 tell us is essential in clearing out the clutter of sin from our hearts?

What does it promise that God will do?

Confession is key. Forgiveness is sure. But what about the path forward? How do we skip that third glass of wine or resist the lingering look at someone else's spouse? Maybe those are not the sins that plague you, but all of us struggle: with food, with anger, with sex, with apathy, with self-centeredness. But there is good news! Christ has already won the victory for us; through his death he has provided the forgiveness that we so seek and need. He has also given us the tools and led by example, showing us how to live lives of love and discipleship. Look at the scriptures that follow and name some of the tools Jesus taught us:

1. Jesus shows balance in his life. What are the three activities that occupy his time of ministry? Matthew 4:23-

2. Jesus lives a life of prayer- Matthew 6:9-13 and 26:36- What does he teach us to do when we are unsure as to how to proceed?

3. Jesus teaches us how to set priorities- Matthew 6:21

4. Jesus is involved in hands on ministry- Matthew 8:3

Facing a Crisis and Not Making a Plan

Joram faces a threat from Moab to the east. Long a vassal state of Israel, Moab decides to challenge the new king, hoping to escape paying the heavy tribute in sheep and wool exacted by the northern kingdom. Neglecting to seek God's will or to plan thoroughly, Joram mobilizes his troops and puts in a call to his neighbor to the south, Jehoshaphat. Already schooled in the occupational hazards of working with the Ahab clan, Jehoshaphat, ever loyal or maybe not terribly smart, agrees to join the fight. He recruits the King of Edom to his south (that king is also referred to as a governor or a deputy in other sections of scripture). As the three kings set out, Joram, who has clearly left his GPS at home, looks to Jehoshaphat for direction. They decide to get to Moab via the southern route, around the tip of the Dead Sea. In a region known for its lack of potable water, the kings, their men and their animals journey on "a roundabout march of seven days," (v.9) apparently unprepared for the absence of water.

My brother-in-law, Mike, tells the story of how he and a friend went to Cumberland Island State Park, off the tip of Georgia and nearly died of thirst. They went looking for a treasure left there by my husband—I believe a bottle of Coca Cola or some such valuable—and they were following a detailed treasure map. Unprepared for the distance and for the complete lack of water on the route, they made it to the treasure, but then realized they were too thirsty to make the journey back. Fortunately, a jeep load of tourists came by and provided a happy ending to their hunt. The story was added to the family lore of stories told and retold around supper tables and at family reunions.

While Mike's story of dehydration and desperation ends well, the three kings are in a real bind. Joram quickly blames God for their predicament, "What!" exclaimed the king of Israel. 'Has the Lord called us three kings together only to hand us over to Moab?'" (v. 10) How many times do we go our own way and then when things are not coming together as they should, we look toward heaven, shaking a fist, and saying, "Why me, God?" Or we make big plans for events, for our families, for our money and other resources and then run around in tears picking up the pieces that have blown away in a sudden storm of trouble?

As we discussed in the earlier section, Jesus taught us to live a life of discipleship or discipline, not to restrict us, but to set us free. As we dedicate ourselves to asking him for help on a daily basis, in our prayers and through our study, we begin to experience the blessings of his direction in our lives. No, that doesn't mean everything is going to be "perfect" by human standards—sorry to disappoint—but it does mean that everything will be in accordance with his will. And I do think that in a case like this one, it would have resulted in different timing or even in an aborted mission.

Can you think of a time in your life when you failed to seek God's input on a plan? How did it turn out?

Are we sometimes guilty of shifting the blame for our actions to God when we truly are suffering the consequences of not seeking him first?

Can you think of a time when you prayed and asked for divine direction and the results were different than you expected?

Looking for Help

When the children were infants I was up immediately if they cried, sneezed or even snored during their sleep. I would just pop out of bed, on full alert, if I felt like they needed me. That attentive motherhood wore off, especially with our oldest, who by the age of three was still not sleeping well at night. He knew by then that waking up mommy in the middle of the night to fetch water or some other made up scheme did not always make for the best bonding, shall we say. At any rate, he found a solution: instead of touching me, which could be construed as waking me up, he would put his face right up next to mine at three a.m. and breathe loudly—a la Darth Vader. The effect was often startling to us both! He learned from experience that there were better ways to get the help he was looking for.

Jehoshaphat knows when and how to ask God for assistance and again comes through with solid advice, as he did for Joram's father, Ahab. He even uses the same words that he did in I Kings 22:7, "Is there no prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of the Lord through him?" (v.11) Joram is intent on blaming God; Jehoshaphat is quick to turn to God for help in his time of need practicing what the old hymn says, "Take it to the Lord in prayer." For the true disciple, the default reaction is to trust. For the person who is not fully committed, blame and doubt rule. In Maui, Hawaii, there is a sign on a big wave beach, popular with surfers, "When in doubt, don't paddle out." For those who are not expert surfers, the big waves are dangerous; the novices' uncertainty while they sit at the crest of a wave looking down the two story high wall of water, can put them and others at risk. And so it is with Joram. His uncertainty about God and God's ability to provide for him, leads him out into this desert without proper planning and without the spiritual tools to face the battle at hand.

One of Joram's officers answers the question at hand and identifies Elisha as the servant to Elijah and the person that can help them now. Note that his answer includes a reference to water which is the one thing that is on everyone's mind, "He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah." (v.11)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Think about being "on fire" for God. How can we stay fully committed to following the Lord every day?

What difficulties are you facing today? Spend some time praying and writing out a prayer for those that are on your heart; ask God to help you as you move out to face the challenges that this season of life holds for you.

Stalemate

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Lord of all creation, help us as we sometimes wander about in confusion. Give us, this day, clarity of mind and purpose and we move forward. Shine the light of your love on our path. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 3:12-27

Meditate and Seek Insight

Go To Person

Do you have a “go to” person for direction and advice? Most of us would probably say that it depends on what kind of advice we are looking for. Fill in the blanks below with names of some of your “go to” friends:

1. Help with cooking- _____
2. Medical advice- _____
3. Pet help- _____
4. Outdoor activities- _____
5. Gardening- _____
6. Outfits/clothing- _____
7. Family troubles- _____
8. Prayer- _____

We pick up our story with the three feckless kings standing around in a hot, dry valley at the edge of Moab. They are surrounded by their tired and thirsty troops who look to them for competent leadership. After hearing that Elisha is nearby and able to provide a word of guidance from the Lord, Jehoshaphat provides direction and clarity when he says, “The word of the Lord is with him.” (v.12) Elisha clearly earned and deserved this title. Those around him knew that he could be counted on to deliver a prophetic word from God.

What about us? Can we be the kind of people that are described as speaking words from the Lord? We are probably all shaking our heads in unison saying, “Not me. No way, no how. Not happening.” But wait! What does the Bible say on this topic? Look at

the scriptures below and consider again whether or not the word of the Lord is with you, helping to plant in you his word.

Luke 12:11- Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves...

Matthew 10:18- Spirit speaking...

Romans 8:9 & 26- Spirit intercedes for us...

Colossians 3:15,16- Word of Christ dwells...

Elishas we are not, but we can all be people who speak for the Lord and have God's spirit in us, abiding in us and helping us hold forth words of truth and encouragement to each other.

The Blame Game Part Two

We live in a society that loves to play the blame game—we blame fast food restaurants for our overweight; we blame television for making us watch; we blame video games on our phones for forcing us to waste time. More seriously, we blame the poor for their poverty; the uneducated for having a lack of initiative; and the trouble spots around the world on other religions or creeds.

Joram understands the blame game and plays it well. When he, Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom go down to Elisha, they are greeted with words of derision from the prophet, telling Joram to go to his parents' prophets for advice, since he is not in the habit of consulting God about plans. Joram replies by blaming God for getting them into their predicament. Elisha has no patience with this sort of thinking and almost dismisses the three save for the respect that he has for the king of Judah.

Musical Interlude

I recently watched an old movie, circa 1960. It was a four hour, epic story, complete with a long section of "musical interlude" which allowed us to get up for more snacks. But music can do much more than fill up a space. It can also help set the mood and provide inspiration. I cannot play any musical instrument, but I am surrounded by talented musicians. Our two boys have inherited their dad's guitar playing talent and our daughter has a lovely singing voice. It is great fun to get together and be in the audience appreciating their musical talents. Apparently, Elisha also appreciates music. While praying and asking God to reveal his plans, Elisha likes to have harp music in the background. "The hand of the Lord came upon Elisha." (v.16) While the music played, he told the kings that they would see water fill the valley and they would have success in their battle

against Moab. He goes on to give them specific instructions about how to fight and win, saying that, by the way, “this is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord.” (v.18) Piece of cake, right? When someone who is an expert in their field promises— oh, yes, this math problem is so easy. You can do it. Let me show you... Somehow you just know you are in for trouble. But when Elisha, a man of great faith and unfettered access to God, says it is an easy thing, it delivers the desired encouragement to the three kings, and they go on to have their men begin to dig the necessary trenches to hold the coming water. The kings have faith that the answer is coming, but they have to go and dig trenches through the night, putting legs—and arms—to their faith.

Our God is a God of power and might. He can do the impossible and he asks us to believe that and claim it. How do the following verses give us strength?

Phil. 4:13- I can do everything...

Ephesians 3:20,21- He can do more...

The trenches had to be there to hold what probably amounted to a flash flood coming from a distant mountain range. If they had not prepared the valley, the water would have rushed right on by. Digging trenches is not glamorous, and it might even seem silly in a dry valley. Do you think the soldiers question the orders or mutter as they dig through the long, hot, thirsty night?

When are we asked to work while we wait for answers to our prayers? Can you think of a time when you knew God was working a situation out, but you were called to continue to carry on your daily routine?

A Vision of Blood

A friend and I recently went on an afternoon excursion to deliver a meal to a church work team in a small town a couple of hours from ours. During the course of the trip we talked about how beautiful our corner of the world is. East Tennessee has some of the most breathtaking scenery around, and we decided that we are willing to stack it up against anything Europe has to offer. Granted, we don't have any really old buildings—besides the falling down barns that dot the hilly countryside—or blue ocean, but we have some awesome lakes, forests and hollers. If you don't know what a holler is, you will have to come and visit and find out! Anyway, at the end of our afternoon drive, the sun was setting and its light turned the mountains pink. Pink. We both admired the transformation and decided that cell phone cameras just wouldn't be able to pick up the breath taking color.

As the sun rises over Moab, the army gets up to see their trenches filled with blessed water. The horses and other animals drink their fill and the men cool calloused hands and dusty feet, sitting on the edge of pools of water. As they look out over the water, they see answered prayers and blessing. No doubt they praise God for how he kept his word and for how he saved them from their own folly. Renewed and energized, they lift their eyes to the hills around where the Moabites sit, awaiting the inevitable confrontation. But from the distant hills, things look very different. The Moabite leaders cannot see from the perspective of the Israelites. They do not see blessing; they see blood—a valley full of blood. Misinterpreting the glare of the sun on the water, the Moabites think that the three kings have turned on each other and killed one another, filling the valley with blood. As the sun creeps over the horizon they prepare to march down and collect plunder.

Perspective matters, doesn't it? What looks like life to one side, looks like death to the other. And so it is with us. Sometimes we get entrenched in our own views, so much so that we cannot see from another's perspective. What seems clear as day to us, also seems clear to the other. As thoughtful Christians, we are commanded to stand firm where it matters, but also to realize that we are not God and that God has ultimate say so when it comes to judgment.

Look at these scriptures and make a few notes about instructions we are to follow:

Titus 3: 9-11- Avoid foolish controversies...

Romans 2:1-3- You who pass judgement...

To the Bitter End

The two armies meet in the valley, and a great fight ensues with the Moabites taking heavy losses and fleeing to their fortified city of Kir Hareseth. The Israelites proceed to foul the land, cutting down trees, stopping up springs and throwing rocks. The whole process sounds wasteful if the point of the conflict is to be able to gather tribute from this subservient nation—sort of like cutting off your nose to spite your face— but again, we are looking at it from a distance, from our cultural perspective and from an unemotional point of view. In the heat of the battle, the army of Isreal did what they could to discourage the Moabites from ever rising up again to question their neighbors' supremacy. But then, just as the victory is at hand, the Moabite king does something truly desperate, in an attempt to turn the tide of the war: he burns his son, his heir, on the

wall of the city as a sacrifice to his blood thirsty, devil God, Chemosh. When the Israelites see this, they turn around and leave Moab. The wording varies from version to version on verse 27, but essentially, the king's sacrifice provokes the Moabites to a renewed surge of anger against the Israelites. It also has a two fold effect on the Israelites: the believers in their midst are horrified by this affront to God who detests such practices; the idolaters among them are superstitious and doubt their own god's ability to stand up to Moab's Chemosh after this human sacrifice, the ultimate appeal for help. Once again, we see that perspective matters and that our faith—or lack of faith—colors our interpretation of events.

As Christians, when we see beheadings, terrorists bombings, and men who blow themselves up in an effort to get to heaven, we are sickened and sad that there are so many truly lost souls in the world, people who are desperately searching for the One True God but who have missed him by a mile. While we must work to contain the evil that ripples out from these ideologies, we also must continue to act in love and compassion, finding ways to reach out to one another. As human beings transformed by love, we have nothing to offer the world except grace. How does that translate into current day battle strategies? I certainly don't know. But I do know this: God is at work. He has won the ultimate victory. He will prevail. We are called to fight on but also to use our main weapon: love.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

As we consider how God is calling each of us to become more like him in our everyday lives, consider the following questions:

1. How can I refrain from playing the blame game and assume more personal responsibility for changes I need to make?
2. How can I work while I wait for God to work?
3. What can I do to be able to see things from others' perspectives? Is there something I can read/watch/listen to that will help instruct me on various points of view so that I can be more respectful of others'?
4. Think of one specific way that you can make peace on earth this week.

Dripping in Oil

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, I know that you will supply my every need. Help me to have faith in your provision. Help me also as I continually assess my needs vs. my wants and stay my heart on what you have for me—which is always the best. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 4:1-7

Meditate and Seek Insight

Oil is Money

Do you enjoy those Italian restaurants where they bring olive oil and bread to the table? Usually, as soon as we sit down, the waitperson shows up with little bowls and drops some seasoning in each one. Then she pours olive oil over the seasoning and leaves a basket of warm bread on the table. It's always a surprise when she comes back to take the order. I want to say, "I've got mine right here!" Olive oil is a wonderful part of a well-balanced Mediterranean diet or any diet for that matter. While olive oil is important to us as a cooking condiment, in Elisha's day it was as good as currency and had multiple uses, everything from food, to fuel, to ceremonial anointing.

Before we get into the story for today, let's look at some of the Biblical references to olive oil:

1. Anointing and ordaining Aaron and his sons as priests- Exodus 29:7-9
2. The importance of tithing grain, wine and oil- Deut. 14:22-23
3. The familiar 23rd Psalm- blessing us with anointing of oil.
4. As a moisturizer and a blessing from the soil- Psalm 104:14-15
5. Representing great blessings- Psalm 133
6. Soothing to wounds- Isaiah 1:6
7. Fuel for lamps- Matt. 25:3
8. Cleansing and healing wounds- Luke 10:34

Are any of these references particularly interesting to you? Does one stand out over the others?

As we begin to look at Chapter 4, we see a desperate widow approaching Elisha for help. First, she lays the groundwork by reminding Elisha who her husband was and how much he revered the Lord. Clearly she hopes that this will make her request more likely to be heard and answered by this man of God. Having been a member of the “company of prophets” her husband was one of an extensive group of followers of God—maybe similar to one of our modern day large churches with several ministers and lay people working together to provide leadership and teaching.

Elisha stops to listen and the woman tells him of her plight, “...his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.” (v.1). Being enslaved to pay off debts is common practice in Elisha’s day and is also referred to by Jesus and Paul. The fact that it is condoned by Mosaic law doesn’t mean that the practice isn’t subject to great abuse. This mother has legitimate cause to fear for her sons, both referred to as “boys.” In modern Jewish society, boys are Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen which means they transition into manhood. While we can’t know for sure the age of the boys referred to, it is safe to say that they are much too young to be used as slaves to pay off a debt.

Elisha is concerned and wants to help. First, he asks her how he can help, maybe to get her to progress from desperation to a discussion of detail, encouraging her to move from panic to planning. Once he has her thinking, he follows up with a specific question, “Tell me, what do you have in your house?” (v. 2) Her initial reaction is to answer that she has nothing in the house. Almost as a post script she adds, “except a little oil,” possibly with a puzzled, questioning tone.

A couple of things to note:

1. Not helping is not an option.
2. Elisha wants to make use of the resources that the woman has at hand.

The Bible speaks repeatedly of caring for the widows and orphans. In Exodus 22:22,23, we read, “Do not take advantage of the widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.” The next verse spells out the dire consequences for the perpetrator of evil against the defenseless, “My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” In Isaiah, we are instructed, “Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (1:17). In the New Testament, both James and Timothy address the issue of helping the widows and orphans.

In I Timothy 5:4-8, what are some of the guiding principles listed?

In James 1:27, what does James say about true religion?

Make a list of widows and/or orphans that you know and have a relationship with:

What agencies currently address their needs? What Christian agencies do you and your church support that help this group? How is God nudging you to become more involved?

While we are blessed to have government social security to address some of the more basic material needs of our widows and orphans, how can we reach out with spiritual and emotional support? How about to those widows and orphans who are part of the family of God in other countries?

God calls us to be especially mindful of the plight of the widows and orphans not just as good deed doers but to remind us, on a deeper level that are are all orphans. In his mercy and love, he adopted each of us and made us his children. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.” Ephesians 1:4,5

God Works Through What We Have at Hand

When Elisha asks the woman what she has, she offers up a tentative, “Oil?” Elisha starts with her response and gives her specific instructions on going to all the neighbors, collecting as many containers as she can, “Don’t ask for just a few,” he tells her (v. 3). He then directs her to go home with her boys, close the door and start pouring. She does just what he says and she pours and pours and pours until she asks for another jar and her son tells her, “There’s not a jar left.” The house was most likely full to the brim of containers of oil—what a slippery, joyful mess they had on their hands! We can almost feel the burden progressively lighten as her sons run back and forth through the house getting empty containers and then straining to put the full jars out of the way. Talk about whistling while you work! As each container fills they can see their debt decreasing and their freedom increasing. The mother goes back to the man of God to report on what happened. Although the Bible doesn’t report her tears of gratitude, they must have been steaming down her cheeks, hastily wiped away by oily hands, running over with blessings. Elisha surely can’t contain a smile—what an amazing God he serves—before he tells her to go sell the oil and pay her debts and live on the remaining money.

God looks to use what we have at hand—our gifts and talents; our possessions and our plans. Beginning in childhood and continuing on through adulthood, we are vessels of life. God puts experiences, education, and resources into our containers. One by one, these are pulled out as the time is right, and put into his service. Some of the experiences we have would not meet the qualification of “good” but God can turn the most unexpected item into a force for good, if we allow him to. I have a friend who says her favorite verse is, Joel 2:25-26, “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten... and you will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has worked wonders for you.” If we offer up to him our poor decisions and our missteps in life, God can take even those things and somehow turn them around for our benefit or for someone else’s.

So let’s take a few minutes to look around in our vessels of life. Write down some of your life experiences below:

Favorite subject in school- _____
Hobbies- _____
Special areas of interest- _____
Strengths- _____
Work history- _____

Now that you have jotted down a few notes, look back and see how God has put some of those interests, educational experiences, and strengths to work. How about the parts that are left? Isn’t it exciting to think of all that is yet to come? In I Corinthians 2:9, we read, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Preserving Her Dignity

Elisha gives us some helpful hints in how to help others. Instead of handing her some money, or rescuing her by talking to her creditor, he does one better: he allows her to participate in her own deliverance, to help herself by working and by involving her sons in the work. Letting these boys be a part of the experience, gives Elisha the opportunity to plant seeds of faith in their young hearts. Who knows? They may go on to follow in their father’s footsteps and become prophets, as well.

Helping others well is truly a challenge that calls us to focus our hearts on God and his ways. I am blessed to serve on my church’s mission committee, a group that is charged with distributing the money allocated to the missions of the church. It is a big responsibility, and we take it seriously. We begin each meeting with prayer and diligently apply the principles of Christian discipleship to our giving. Although these may not be spelled out in a policy manual, per se, there are a couple of principles that guide our approach:

1. It’s all about relationships.
2. It’s better to give in ways that help people to help themselves.

Stated another way, we want to be involved in the places and with the people where we are sending our money. And we are more interested in helping with long term solutions. Having said that, we often do send money for immediate needs that are best answered with prompt funds: disaster situations, for example. It is the constant struggle of the thoughtful Christian to figure out the best way to help those in need. Jesus told us, "The poor you will always have with you," (Matt. 26:11) not as an excuse for apathy but as an ongoing challenge to continually seek ways to address the need through the guidance of the Spirit. With this miracle of the Widow's Oil, Elisha illustrates the importance of relationship building and of involving the recipient in the solution to the problem at hand.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

- Think about the names of the widows and orphans that you wrote down earlier. What can you do for one of them this week?
- Be watching for God to use one of the experiences that he has placed in your vessel of life. Be sure and praise him when you notice!
- Let's think about our current giving to the needy. How involved are we in relationship building? In what ways can we do more?

Hospitality and Hope

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Today I offer to you all that I am and have: my home, my heart, my very self. Use me to help proclaim the gospel of Christ and to bring hope to the hopeless whether through my words or my deeds. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 4:8-17

Meditate and Seek Insight

The Upper Room

The first thing we notice as we read about the Shunammite Woman is that, like the previous story of the Widow's Oil, there are lots of similarities between the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. It might help clarify if we fill out a chart that compares and contrasts:

	Saves Son	Oil	Shown Hospitality	Revives Son
Elijah	Saves widow's son from starvation	Widow's oil and flour don't run out until rains come	Widow bakes last cake for Elijah; continues to feed him through famine. Stays in upper room.	Widow's son dies and Elijah carries him to the upper room, prays, and lays on him three times.
Elisha	Saves widow's two sons from slavery	Widow's oil flows until all jars are filled	Shunnamite woman hosts Elisha to meals and then gives him an upper room in her home	Promises the childless Shunnamite woman a son who subsequently dies. She goes to get him; he sends his staff first, then prays and lays on the boy 3 times.

Elisha travels back and forth through Shunem, which is just to the north of Jezreel and between Samaria (his likely hometown) and Mount Carmel. He often passes by the home of a well-to-do couple who first invite him to dinner and eventually set up a special room for him, equipped with all the essentials: a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. The Shunnamite woman's invitation and hospitality lead to a long term relationship of respect and friendship, and the woman opens her home and herself to a special blessing by welcoming this "holy man of God." While she could have been satisfied with casually greeting Elisha as he passed by the door of the house, she invites him to make himself at home in his own space.

In our own lives, are we content to wave at God as we see him pass by the door of our hearts? Or have we gone so far as to invite him in for an occasional meal, sharing communion and listening to his teaching through the Word? Are we ready to fully commit and to invite him to take up residence, holding nothing back from him?

Spend a few moments in prayer, asking God for his help as you open your heart and life even more to him. Write down below, some of the thoughts and fears that can hold us back from offering God true hospitality on a permanent basis:

My mother is a great housekeeper. She routinely moves furniture around so that she can clean under it and behind it. Sadly, I have not inherited this penchant for extreme clean, in fact, we laugh and say, "If you can't see the dirt, it's not there!" In the scheme of life, I chose to let the dust bunnies lie. But I hope that in the home of my heart, I am always alert and working to destroy the dust of sin, the blast away the grime of bad habits and to bulldoze out the loads of contempt and judgement. I pray that as the Lord lives in my heart, that he feels comfortable and at home. In Revelation 3:20 we read, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

The Simplicity of Warm Hospitality

Entertaining is a true gift. I admire some of my friends that do it so well with fancy place settings, scrumptious food and warm conversation. But I also have a good friend who has an open door policy when I call her and say, "I'm in the neighborhood. Can I stop by for a cup of coffee?" Being a Brazilian, she always sets out a plate of cookies and pretty paper napkins to go with the great coffee. We sit and talk, laugh, and sometimes pray. It's not complicated, but it's very rewarding.

Do you enjoy entertaining? Maybe that's not your cup of tea (or coffee!), but the Bible addresses the blessings of offering hospitality in several passages. Finish the following verses to see some of the benefits of hospitality:

1. Hebrews 13:2- “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for ...”

2. Romans 12:13- “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice...”

3. I Peter 4:8,9- “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer _____ to one another without _____”

Make a list of creative ways that you can offer hospitality to others even if you do not have a place to entertain in your home:

While Jesus was on this earth, he showed us the beauty of breaking bread together. His first miracle was turning water into wine, and we note several occasions where he attends large meals or provides large meals to others. His last supper with his special friends includes directions that we follow his example, making Holy Communion a sacrament designed to help us both share a meal and enjoy fellowship with him. In one of his devotionals, Henri Nouwen says, “The beauty of the Eucharist is precisely that it is the place where a vulnerable God invites vulnerable people to come together in a peaceful meal. When we break bread and give it to each other, fear vanishes and God becomes very close.”

Can you think of a time when communion was especially meaningful to you?

The Shunnamite woman, offers simple hospitality: a meal, fellowship, and a room with the basics. She is not setting out to make an impression but to be in a position to receive any blessing that God might send her way through Elisha...And what a blessing!

“You Will Hold a Son”

Elisha apparently is a frequent visitor to the Shunnamite’s home. One day he “went up to his room and lay down there.” (v.11) As he is resting in his room, he takes special note the comfort of his surroundings and the blessing it is to have his own special place. He calls his servant Gehazi. (Making his inaugural appearance in this portion of scripture, Gehazi will also appear in several other stories.) Elisha tells Gehazi to get their hostess, and she comes to his room. For some reason, Elisha speaks to her through his servant. Not addressing her directly may be a gesture of respect or it may be some sort of unexplained custom. At any rate, the prophet asks the woman what he and Gehazi can do for her and suggests some options: he can put in a good word for her with the king or the head of the army. The woman politely deflects this idea, telling them that she has no need of this type of assistance and then she steps away, maybe just beyond ear

shot. Elisha looks at his servant and seems to say, “What now?” and Gehazi in a stage whisper says, “Well, have you noticed that she and her old husband don’t have any kids?” Bingo! The perfect thing to do for her. At this point, Elisha has Gehazi call her back and she stands in the door. He tells her, “About this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms.” The Shunnamite hears her fondest dream spoken aloud. Her arms have been so long empty and aching for a child, that even daring to allow herself to hope that it is true is too great a risk, and she essentially says, “Don’t even mess with me on this one.” But God hears Elisha’s request and what he promises comes to pass. The woman and her husband have a son, a child to carry on the family name, to receive the inheritance from the father, to insure his mother’s old age; a child of promise that holds in his tiny fist the gift of hope.

It’s the Hope of Life

I hope it doesn’t rain; I hope I don’t spill spaghetti on my white blouse; I hope he passes his test; I hope he gets better; I hope I will be forgiven. Same word, lots of different meanings! Hope is the elusive emotion that won’t allow itself to be pinned down. It fills the balloon of life and floats, held by a string of desire, tightly wound around our fist of determination and strong will. We won’t let go, for as long as there is hope, there is life. Scripture has a lot to say about hope. Let’s look at some of the scriptures and share our reactions:

1. Job 13:15- “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” When do we give up on God?

2. Jeremiah 29:11- “For I know the plans I have for you...” What does Jeremiah couple hope with in this verse?

3. Hebrews 6:19- “We have this hope as an...” To what does this verse equate hope in our souls and what characteristics describe this hope?

4. Col. 1:27- “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” What is our ultimate hope?

When patients enter hospice, one of the topics we discuss is the fact that only God knows how many days we have on this earth. Being in hospice means that all human measures are exhausted and it is time to focus on comfort and dignity. But God, in his power and might, is not bound by our human medicine. He can and does heal. If we trust in him, we will all experience ultimate healing, maybe not of the physical type that we so long for at times, but the complete healing of being with him. I remember praying

fervently for my sister-in-law's healing. When she received her diagnosis of cancer, we knew that it was a bad initial prognosis. The fact that God granted her ten more years on this earth was a blessing and an answered prayer. Was she healed? Yes, she was given more time and also ultimate healing. While we miss her very much on this earth, we know that she stands beside her beloved Jee-sus (she had a way of saying his name that was so special!) and intercedes on behalf of her precious children and loved ones every day.

On the Road to Emmaus

The Shunnamite woman and her husband extend hospitality. In return, Elisha gives them a message of hope and a promise of new life. In Luke 24:13-35, we read the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples on the road to Emmaus. The three walk along together and then the two men offer hospitality to their companion, inviting him to a meal with them. They recognize Jesus as he breaks the bread and gives it to them. In this act of fellowship and communion, their eyes are open to a new revelation of Christ. And so with the act of hospitality, the Shunnamite woman and her husband open up their lives to new opportunities for blessings from the Lord.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Below is a poem/song that our son wrote several years ago. As you meditate on the words, consider how God is calling you to open your life to the offer hospitality to Christ and to receive the hope that he has for us.

Follow Me

Follow me beyond the sea
Only I can lead I will help you see
I know the light, I am the light
If you can believe, see what will be
Your hollow dreams and worn out seams
Giving way to beams from a sun unseen
In the east a star, in the dark a light
In your fear a rod, and the hope of life

My friend and I walking down a road
Trying to sort out attempting to compose
A method to the madness an end to the pain
As the road slopes down then slowly up again
When a man of wisdom far beyond our own
Comes to walk beside us we are not alone
Please give us the key and reveal your face
Yet He slowly moves on whispering grace
He says...(Refrain)

Were our hearts not on fire did we not know?
A flaming hot ember melting flesh, doubt and bone
As He broke the bread like He's broken my doubt
He's broken my life show me what You've found
A plan that's not done yet, a breath that still breathes
A heart that still pumps love on fire from its knees
It's power He has yet it's mercy He's shown
One small life that I give Him I've found it's not my own
He told me...(Refrain)

—Sam Eastridge

Chapter 5
Day 3

Nightmare

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Father, Thank you for the gift of life. Please help me to be a person that brings life to others today with my words and with my deeds. For it is through your power I am asking and able, Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 4:18-37

Meditate and Seek Insight

Like a Bad Dream

It is appropriate that I am writing this in the month of October for it is the month where we see decorations and costumes that evoke ghosts and goblins. While I lean more toward the gourd, pumpkin and mum look on my front porch, I see Halloween as I walk around my neighborhood. Somehow, as a society we have decided that by naming our greatest fear, namely death, we can tame it. As we make fun out of ghosts and goblins and witches, we hope they will have less power over us and that we won't be overcome. While popular, Halloween costumes, horror movies and scary stories tend to interfere with my ability to follow the directions in Psalm 4, "I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone, O Lord, make we dwell in safety."

What about you? Do you like the adrenaline rush of being afraid? What part of the celebration of fall do you like the most?

This passage of scripture reads like a living nightmare. It is a parent's greatest fear, and as we read we can feel the air slowly escaping from our lungs, leaving us breathless and bereft. In the course of a day, the Shunnamite woman experiences great loss, a test of faith and a rebirth. The day most likely begins like any other: ruffling the curly hair of her beloved boy, a package of love wrapped in warm, soft olive skin, little legs sturdy but still pudgy with the layers of baby fat that cling around the joints before he marches from babyhood to boyhood. she sends him out with his dad to the fields for the day. He begins to complain of severe pain in his head and his dad sends him home to his mom

where he sits on her lap while his breathing becomes more ragged, and he finally takes his last breath.

During this time of complete impotence in the face of impending death, we can only imagine the thoughts that swirl through this mother's mind. As a woman of faith, she has heard and repeated the stories of Elijah raising the widow's son; she is also most likely steeped in the older stories of Abraham's act of faith in taking young Isaac to Mount Moriah and laying him on the altar. In Hebrews we read, "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." (11:19)

As she feels his lifeless form in her arms, the mother makes an important decision—she will go to the man of God and seek his help in asking God for a miracle. She carries the boy's limp body up to the prophet's room and lays him on the bed. Closing the door behind her, she goes out to her husband to ask for transportation and a servant to accompany her. Apparently, going to see Elisha is not completely unheard of, but usually happens on special days. Although the husband questions her plans, he makes arrangements for her and she sets out, headed for Mount Carmel, where she knows she will find the man of God. As with the Widow of Zarephath, the Shunnamite woman is in dire straights. She cannot even pray and goes in search of the one man she knows speaks true words of life. She is focused; she knows where to look for help; she can not be distracted from her mission.

I like to look at "Family Circus" in the daily comic strips. Sometimes, they have a frame that shows one of the children taking a circuitous detour as he accomplishes a chore. Instead of going directly from point A to point B, he meanders and stops at all sorts of distractions along the way. In my life, so often I know where I need to go with my troubles. But instead of heading to the throne of glory right away, I might take a route that leads me first to a self help book, or to entertainment that takes my attention for a period of time, or to a variety of well-meaning friends. Then I wonder why the situation is not improving—all of this while my Heavenly Father waits patiently for me to bring my need to him in prayer.

What helps you stay focused on bringing your needs to the Lord in prayer? Does it help you to pray with others? Does it help to have a certain place or time to pray?

In I Thes. 5:17,18, we read, "Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances." How do you interpret the phrase, "pray continually" in your walk with the Lord?

James 5:13-16, outlines the believers' prescription for all types of trials. What are the instructions given to remedy the various needs? Fill in the blanks:

“Is any one of you in trouble? He should _____. Is anyone happy? Let him _____. Is any one of you sick? He should call _____ and anoint him with oil in the _____. And the _____ will make the sick person well: the Lord will raise him up.”

The passage goes on to impress on us the importance of healing that goes beyond the physical by stating, “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” The passage ends with a reference to our old friend, Elijah, reminding us of how Elijah prayed that it would not rain and prayed again for the rain to return.

The Shunnamite woman clearly has a heart full of faith that God will hear Elisha’s prayer and that he will be able to bring her son back to life. She knows that Elisha is a righteous man and that his prayer will be “powerful and effective.” Righteous. Powerful. Effective. The words are strong. The meanings are clear. But how do they fit on my frame? As I struggle into my sweater before heading out into the newly crisp, fall air, does the righteous covering fit me well? The Bible uses the analogy of getting dressed to illustrate the process of becoming like Christ. In Galatians 3:27 we read, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

In Romans 13:12-14, we read about facing the day with Christ. What are some behaviors and attitudes that we are called to put aside? To take on?

If you are an outdoorsy sort of person, you know the benefits of dressing in layers to better face the elements. The Bible also gives us instructions on how to put on Godly characteristics. Read Col. 3:12-14 about the virtues of God’s chosen people and answer these questions:

1. What are the basic characteristics we seek to put on as we emulate Christ?

2. What is the “overcoat” that we wear as Christians?

The Gift of Presence

I have a friend whose husband suffered a severe and sudden illness. Through the miracle of God's work in modern medicine and technology and the hands of a capable physician, her husband was healed. With tears streaming down her cheeks, this Godly woman celebrated God's hand of mercy and also the wonderful love and compassion shown to her and to her husband throughout the crisis. She testified about all the various people that came and sat in waiting rooms with her, praying, holding her hand, caring for her children. The hands on, physical outreach of the Body of Christ made a huge difference to her in her time of need.

You have probably heard the story of a little boy who was frightened one night during a big thunderstorm. Terrified, he called out from his room, "Daddy, I'm scared!" His dad, settled in for the night, hollered back to him from his bed, "Don't worry, my child. God will take care of you," to which the little boy replied, "I know he will take care of me, but right now I need someone with skin on!" Even as we chuckle, we know the truth of the little boy's plea—so often we need someone with skin on to provide the hand to hold, the arm around the shoulder or the warm hug. In II Corinthians 1:3-4, we read, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." I love the principle of God comforting us so that we, in turn, can pass on our experience to help others in their time of need.

Can you think of a time when you have experienced God's comfort through his people?

Can you think of a time when you have been "God with skin on" for someone else?

As the Shunnamite woman journeys to Elisha, she is intent on bringing the prophet back with her to breathe new life into her little boy. As she approaches Mount Carmel, Elisha recognizes her from a distance and tells his servant to run to her and see what she needs. She holds her feelings in check until she gets to the man of God, at which point she is "in bitter distress," holding onto his feet, face to the ground, pent up tears falling on his dusty sandals. Recognizing the visceral pain he witnesses, Elisha stops Gehazi from pulling the woman away from this rare and inappropriate physical touch. After the woman cries out, revealing the raw wound to her soul, Elisha sends Gehazi on to the boy, carrying his staff, a physical representation of his presence. But the woman will not be dissuaded from her original purpose: she must have Elisha return with her. He is God's representative, and she knows that in this difficult case, God with skin on is the only thing that will do.

As she feared, the staff had no effect. When Elisha finally arrives in the room, the boy is definitely dead, lying on the couch. Elisha goes in, shuts the door, and he and his ser-

vant begin to pray fervently. Somehow, the power of prayer is magnified “when two or more are gathered together in my name.” (Matt. 18:20) As the two men pray, God’s power enters Elisha, and he lays on the boy. The boy’s cold body becomes warm, he sneezes seven times, and opens his eyes!

To Live Again

“Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, ‘Call the Shunammite.’ And he did. When she came, he said, ‘Take your son.’ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.” (4:36,37)

Sometimes joy is too deep for words. All we can do is offer silent thanksgiving and carry on. As the mother offers her gratitude, no doubt her shoulders shake again with tears, this time shed in gratitude to a God who is truly “El Roi,” the God who sees (Gen.16:13).

The theme of God’s ability to bring life out of death, is repeated in Scripture. Looking this up, it is surprising that there is not one definite number of people raised from the dead. To simplify, look over the chart below which outlines those raised and who raised them up:

Raised from the Dead	Who Raised Them	Reference
Son of widow of Zarephath	Elijah	I Kings 17:17-24
Son of Shunammite woman	Elisha	II Kings 4
Man whose body touched Elisha’s bones	Elisha, after death	II Kings 13:21
Widow’s son of Nain	Jesus	Luke 7:13-15
Jairus’ daughter	Jesus	Matthew 9:25
Lazarus	Jesus	John 11:43-44
Many saints	At Jesus’ death	Matthew 27:52-53
Jesus himself	God the Father	John 20:1-10
Tabitha	Peter	Acts 9:36-42
Eutychus	Paul	Acts 20:9-12

Considering the Bible as a whole, these are small portions of scripture. But their impact is powerful. Among them are four children, a youth (Eutychus), a good friend, and a woman who spent her time doing good things for others—not to mention the world changing resurrection of Jesus! Jesus himself gave us the command to raise others from the dead. In his instructions to the disciples, he said, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely

give.” (Matt. 10:8) This order from Christ almost sounds absurd in my life, given my mustard seed size faith. But holding the Bible as a unit, we see that while healing and resurrection of the physical body are dramatic, God is always more focused on the healing of our spirits since he knows that no matter when or how the physical rebirth takes place it is but a stop-gap measure; eventually we all die for good and move on to eternity. God longs to see us living for eternity by accepting his offer of life, true, abiding life, “because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom.8:2) Ghosts and goblins hold no terror for us!

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

1. Think of someone who needs physical healing. Spend a few moments in special prayer for them. Ask God if he wants to use you to bring new life to this person.
2. Think of someone who needs spiritual healing. Maybe they are all broken inside. Maybe they are in mourning. Maybe they live in the grip of fear or addiction. Ask God if he wants to use you to bring new life to this person.
3. Think of yourself and your own need for God’s touch of healing love. Pray that his spirit will fill you up and bring you new life so that you can, in turn, share it.

“And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.”

— Martin Luther, c.1500

Fast Food

Prayer for Inspiration

“However long the drought, new life comes to us
as the spring rains that water the earth.
From the altars of the past, O Lord, help us
always to take the fire and not the ashes.
In the name of the one who showed us the way
from the cross to an empty tomb
and changed sunset to sunrise. Amen”
—John Winn

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 4:38-44

Meditate and Seek Insight

Really Bad Stew

Our son and his lovely wife live a couple of hours from our town. One week-end when the weather was exceptionally nice, we drove up for a day visit and enjoyed an outdoor sporting event and a great meal together. When we returned to their house, we were reluctant to go inside and miss out on the sunset, so we began to amble around the large back yard of their rental home. We noticed an apple tree, laden with fruit. Our son commented that he didn't think they were any good but we decided to pick a few and give them a try anyway. Lo and behold! The apples, though misshapen, were delicious. Suddenly, the four of us felt like we had discovered a gold mine and began to harvest all we could before the predicted frost that night. We enjoyed weeks of apple salads, apple pie and just plain old eating apples—a blessing we easily could have missed!

Elisha and his men also find what appears to be a treasure trove of food, but they aren't nearly as fortunate as we were with the apples. We pick up the story of Elisha in Gilgal, an area suffering from a famine. He and the company of prophets are having some type of conference and Elisha is apparently in charge of the meal. He tells his servant to put on a pot of stew for the men. As the servants begin to cook, one of them goes out into the fields (maybe Gehazi) to look for herbs to season up what is most likely a thin stew. In the servant's search, he comes upon some gourds and fills up the folds of his cloak with as many as he can carry. Cutting those up, the stew bubbles in the pot and is served to all the men. But as soon as they taste it, they sense that all is not well with

supper and exclaim to Elisha, “O man of God, there is death in the pot!” Now, I have had some not so stellar meals, shall we say, but no one has ever accused me of trying to kill them with my food. Well, maybe when the kids were little, we did hear some versions of, “I will die if I have to eat all those green beans!”

The gourds look good but they are actually poisonous. How many times in our journey of life are we seduced by people that look good, sound good, even act good but turn out to not be what they seem. During his ministry here on earth, Jesus was surrounded by the Pharisees and Saducees, men who were teachers of the law but who were much more concerned with keeping up appearances and judging others than with true goodness and love. They deserved the appellation “whitewashed tombs” that Jesus gave them in his anger over their hypocrisy. (Matt 23:27)

How do you discern what is truly good? Do some of the following factor in?

- Checking out the person’s words and deeds against scripture
- Experience
- Prayer
- Talking with others whose spiritual life you know and trust
- Listening to the Holy Spirit’s still, small voice about when to ask questions

Are any of these more important to you than others?

Maya Angelou, the renown poet, once said, “When someone shows you who they really are believe them; the first time.” With this phrase, she addresses the prospect of giving the benefit of the doubt to the point where we don’t protect our morals, and we don’t see the obvious signs of deceit. As Jesus told the twelve before sending them out on their mission trip, “Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matt 10:16)

How do you forgive “seven times seventy” but still be able to sniff out signs of spiritual decay and avoid ensnarement?

God Makes a Way

Even though the pot of stew is contaminated, Elisha purifies it with the addition of some flour. This miracle of making the stew edible, reminds us of the time he purified the water source, probably in Jericho. To Elisha, purification of the water with a handful of salt and of the stew with a handful of flour, are easy matters. With God’s power, he is able to transform a pot of death into true sustenance for the band of prophets.

When God’s hand is stirring the pot of our lives, he can take what appears to be a very bad thing and make it into something good—if we allow him to. A friend of mine recently told me a story about her daughter’s marriage that effectively illustrates the point. Due to the groom’s military schedule, the wedding was scheduled for a week-end in January. All preparations were made for a large, church wedding with a lovely reception at the local country club. Nature had other plans. The day of the wedding, a massive snow storm blew in, effectively closing down the southern town that lacked enough snow equipment to handle the storm. The wedding went on. The guests, most of the two hundred and fifty, made it somehow. The youth choir made it to sing. The bride wore snow boots under her lace. The ceremony was lovely. But the reception venue was simply an impossibility. Some of the guests realized what was happening and ran down to the corner market where they bought out all the veggies, chips, cheese and crackers they could find. Friends soon filled the church kitchen, chopping celery and carrots while others filled cut glass punch bowls with chips. They put on quite an impromptu spread and everyone had a wonderful time of fellowship and celebration.

Days later, my friend admitted that she felt “kind of blue” because despite her careful attention to detail, things had not gone as planned. She felt the gentle whisper of the Spirit saying, “Don’t cling so tightly to what you want that you can’t receive the something better that I gave you.” With that she was able to cry tears of true joy and release the dream so that she could take hold of the beautiful memory.

Can you think of a time in your life when God transformed a truly awful mess into something good?

God sometimes puts the flour in the pot of poison while we are watching and we see the miracle take place. Other times, we have to trust him to reveal, in eternity, how he works it all out. Our challenge is to truly trust him.

Fill in the blanks below in this verse from I Cor. 2:9 to see what scripture has to say:

“No eye has _____
no ear has _____
no mind has _____
what God has _____
for those who _____.”

Stretching the Budget—God’s Way

Do you have a budget, track expenses and keep one of those computer programs that prints it all up for you? Or do you close your eyes and hope it all falls in place at the end of the month? I hope that most of us lean more toward the former than the latter, but I’d say we’ve all had times at both ends of the financial spectrum. One thing, however, is pretty clear: God doesn’t do math the way we do. He says things like, “leave the ninety

nine and go after the one,” and “the last shall be first and the first shall be last,” and “if you die, then you will truly live.” God can take the little we offer to him and multiply it into something powerful and completely beyond what we could ask or imagine.

In this next story, we see an illustration of God’s power to take a little and make a lot when Elisha receives what is probably someone’s tithe: “twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain.” (v.42) I don’t think the loaves were our modern full sized butter top loaves, because when he tells his servant—probably Gehazi—to set the bread before the one hundred men, the servant balks and questions the instructions. Elisha reassures the servant and tells him to serve it up, because there will be plenty with some left over. I have to wonder about this servant, especially based on stories that are to come...What is his true motivation? Maybe he is thinking more of himself and wondering if there is enough to fill his stomach if all these other hungry men have their fill.

How many times do we hold back instead of sharing? It is instructive that besides “da-da” and “ma-ma” the next thing that usually comes out of our sweet, precious chubby baby’s mouth is, “Mine!” And then we spend the next eighteen years trying to teach the grabby little hands to release and share and be nice and care about others. Ah, the sad, bare naked truth about our hearts without any nice glossy icing to cover our human nature.

Elisha’s servant appears to have a sad case of being selfish. Instead of asking, “How can we make this go around?” he essentially says, “What! No way this is going to feed one hundred men!” The prophet instructs him on God’s economy which Jesus expounded on in Luke 6:38, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

God is generous with us and able to take our gifts to him and multiply them—physically and spiritually. Below is a list of some of the times when we see God provide food, actual physical sustenance, as a way to draw people to himself:

Manna and quail- Exodus 16
Feeding of the 5000- Matthew 14:14-21
Feeding of the 4000- Matthew 15:32-39
Water to Wine- John 2:1-11
Huge catch of fish- Luke 5:4-11

What are some ways that you enjoy sharing your material blessings? Do you have a favorite ministry that you support?

Is there a particular Bible verse that comes to mind when you think about giving?

I think that if I could really assimilate this truth about generosity into my heart and life, I would be a richer person. Like standing on the edge of the surf, squishing my toes into shifting sands, I could enjoy the sensation of release and refreshment, as the sand comes and goes, a cycle repeated with each wave's advance. I would not be so concerned with hanging on but more with the enjoyment of the moment, being fully present to the gifts of the here and now, instead of living far beyond. I am blessed to work with many persons who suffer from various degrees of dementia. While it is certainly sad at times, there are gifts the memory-impaired offer us routinely. And one of those gifts, is to enjoy today, now. Yesterday and certainly tomorrow are gone. All we have is the touch of the present. So dig those toes in and be fully present today!

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

- When has God taken a gift you offered and multiplied it?
-

- When has God taken a talent that you laid at his feet and made it into something much bigger?
-

- How has God challenged you to be more generous with your gifts of time and talent and possessions?
-

- What are some activities or possessions that cause you to stumble in your desire to be fully present today? Ask God to help you as you seek to live today to his glory.
-

Heed the Warning, Reap the Rewards

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for your loving care. Thank you that you are always alert and ready to listen and help. Thank you that we can trust you even when we don't understand your ways. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 8:1-6

Meditate and Seek Insight

Heed the Warning

As we near the end of this week's study, we are skipping over to II Kings 8 so that we can conclude with a second story about the Shunammite Woman. It is difficult to tell where these events fit chronologically, but based on some of the events of Naaman's story, which we will examine in the next chapter, it seems to be an appropriate closing for this section.

My husband has a storm warning app on his smart phone. It advises him at all hours of the day —and night— of dangers that might possibly be lurking in the weather. The difficulty is that the program is constantly over-predicting problems: wind storms that never materialize, deluges that present as gentle showers, heat waves that don't make us break a sweat. After a while, the beep beep alert, leads us to a yawning complacency rather than diligent preparation. We simply cannot trust the app to consistently tell us the truth about the trouble. The Shunammite woman and her family have no such problems trusting Elisha. When he warns her to "Go away with your family and stay for a while wherever you can," she doesn't question or resist. She packs her bags, leaves her home and her land and lives near the coast in the land of the Philistines for seven years while a famine ravages her homeland. The famine is an apparent curse resulting from the rampant idol worship which is taking place. In the Old Testament, we often see natural events described as the consequence of sin.

Similarly to Deuteronomy 28 that we examined in Chapter 4, Leviticus 26 lists some of the rewards for obedience, for keeping the covenant. Skim over that chapter and take a few notes below about the promised blessings:

Now read on through verses 14-46 and note some of the horrible consequences of disobedience to a jealous God:

The language itself is harsh and terrifying, isn't it? God wants us to love him, to serve him, but to also understand that not doing so results in repercussions that go on and on.

When we installed our electric fence, the man that came to put it in patiently showed us how to walk our dog around the white flags, keeping a specific distance from the barrier. We did this day after day until the man told us it was time to allow our dog to receive a "correction" which is an euphemism for "terrible shock." Oh my. Our poor baby, Holly Belle, got too close and "Zap!" She winced and cried and looked at us as if to say, "How could you do that to me? What is the matter with you guys?" Of course, we felt terrible (and actually still feel terrible writing about it...), but we knew that the greater harm would be for her to go out in the street and get hit by a car. Better to have a small shock than to be dead forever. And I think that is how God sees us and the consequences he allows in our lives—better to suffer a small shock than to be lost forever and suffer an eternal separation from his love.

From Genesis on, God is on a mission to prepare this small Hebrew nation to be the bearer of light to the world. He is training, instructing, and reprimanding, basically taking them by the hand and leading them. He uses Moses, Joshua, the Judges, and now Elijah, Elisha, and the company of prophets. God's great desire is to redeem man to himself. As part of his plan, he allows the Israelite nation to suffer some of the consequences predicted for abandoning him as he prepares this nation to receive his one and only son and to become "a light to the Gentiles."

Read the following scriptures and note how God reveals his plan:

1. Isaiah 42:6 - What does it say God is looking for in the Israelites? What three things does he promise to do for them?

2. Luke 2:29-32 - In Simeon's song he praises God for allowing him to see Jesus. What does he say Jesus is to the people? And how will his life impact the Gentiles (you and me)?

3. Acts 13:47-48 - What do Paul and Barnabas say God has made them?

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's great plan of redemption. By sending his son, to live among his created people, to show them true love and to offer his very life up on a cross, God opens up a new way, a New Covenant. No longer based on laws, but on grace, the road to God is now an open highway, access provided by Christ and his blood. I love the visual of us on one side of a great chasm and God on the other with sin completely separating us. Then Christ, in his loving perfection, lays down his life on a cross that bridges the divide, allowing us to have full communion with God. Right before going to his death on the cross, Jesus raised up the cup and said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In Romans we read about God's great love for us, established through the law and fulfilled through grace. Fill in the blanks from 5:10:

"When we were God's _____
We were reconciled to him through the _____
of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled shall we be
_____ through his life!"

Reap the Rewards

The Shunammite woman comes back from seven years abroad, hoping to reclaim her home and her land. It appears that over the course of the time of the famine her husband has died, because she presents herself to the king accompanied only by her youthful son. As she comes into the presence of the king, Gehazi, Elisha's servant, is conversing with King Jehoram (also called Joram). The king asks, "Tell me about all the great things Elisha has done." The oral tradition of scripture involved the telling and retelling of many stories. Before the day of easy access to scriptures, it is possible that someone like Gehazi, routinely repeated the stories, word for word, to audiences so that the details became solidified in the people's minds.

I remember reading some of the kids' favorite bedtime stories from Dr. Suess. Sometimes, too tired for words, I would try to skip to the next page. With a vigilante's vigor, the children would quickly remind me that I skipped a sentence, and we would have to go back again. And so I imagine it was with the stories in the oft repeated oral tradition. The people did not tire of hearing how the boy was raised to life and all of the associated drama. Just as they are reaching the climax of the story, by God's providential timing, the woman and her son walk in.

We can see Gehazi eagerly pointing them out in the crowd, "There they are! It's the woman and her son. Just like I was telling you!" And so the woman shuffles through the crowd of those waiting for their audience with the king. He asks her about it and she repeats, word for word, the events that brought her son back to life. As she remembers,

no doubt she reaches for her son and holds him close, tears threatening to spill over as emotion fills the story again.

I have a friend that never fails to ask me for a “God story” when we get together for coffee. When she says this she is looking for a recent time when God has revealed himself in my life, whether through scripture, a recent teaching at church, or a series of events coming together—like they did for the Shunammite woman. While non-Christians sometimes talk about “coincidences,” it might be more accurate for us as believers to identify “God-instances.”

Can you think of a God story that you can share with others?

Can you think of a “God-instance” when you were able to see God’s hand at work?

God calls us to boldly proclaim his work in our lives to others. Sometimes known as “witnessing,” sharing what he is doing in our lives doesn’t have to fit in a particular format or meet specific criteria. He is faithful to put on our hearts what we can share so that it becomes a natural part of an exchange between two people. We all love a good story!

Let’s read some of what Jesus says about telling his story:

As he talks with Nicodemus in John 3:11:

As he talks to the Jews who were persecuting him in John 5: 31-47, what are his warnings?

As he spoke to those that believed in him in John 12:47-50, what does he say about his own words?

In Luke 9:26, what does Jesus warn us about?

As the Shunammite woman stands there, testifying to God's love, care and providence through the prophet Elisha, the king's pronouncement is swift and justice is sweet for she not only receives everything that belongs to her but also the income from the property since she has been gone.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

1. How do we accept direction from the Lord? Are we able to learn or do we disregard his instructions?

2. How do we do with telling the stories that the Lord gives us? Are we bold to share when the Holy Spirit prompts us?

Homework (or maybe "out of the home" work): share a God story with someone this week and give him the credit for the great things he has done!

General Naaman Marches for the Cure

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Lord, Help me to be able to accept your healing even if it comes in unexpected ways. Help me to not make things harder than they need to be, but to simply trust your word and leave the results to you. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

Read II Kings 5:1-19

Meditate and Seek Insight

Setting a Cadence

Our community has a very successful annual Walk to Defeat ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease). For ten years, we have set aside a Saturday in the fall to get together, put on our tennis shoes and walk around a park to help find a cure to this devastating disease. Our walking is a symbolic showing of solidarity and support, but as we go around, once, twice, three times we know that miracles really do take place. The money raised helps raise awareness, provide hope, and work toward a cure—all miraculous events in my book! In our story today, Naaman, the Aramean general, is also asked to do something symbolic to effect his cure from the disease of leprosy. He balks at Elisha’s instructions to dip seven times in what he considers to be the inferior River Jordan.

We first meet Naaman when he is grandly introduced with descriptive phrases such as, “A great man...highly regarded...valiant soldier.” In spite of his many accomplishments, this man who enjoys such high acclaim has leprosy, a disease that effectively ostracizes him from being in community with others.

Can you think of a modern day disease that is like leprosy? While HIV/AIDS and Ebola quickly come to mind, what about other diseases that are socially isolating such as Alzheimer’s, severe deafness, treatments for disease that cause immunosuppression? How are those alike/different from leprosy?

Backing up a bit to reset the stage, Aram is to the north of Israel where current day Syria is. The king referred to in this passage is Ben-Hadad who went to war with Ahab. Just

to refresh our memories, way back in I Kings 20 (Chapter 3, Day 2), he was the king that was drunk with all his friends, lost the war with Israel, and Ahab made a treaty with him and let him go... Despite the treaty between the two countries, the border skirmishes between Israel and Aram continue, so much so that a young slave girl captured from northern Israel is part of the general's household.

Naaman must have been a truly good leader for even his household staff hold him in high esteem and the young girl, speaks up to her mistress and says, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." (v.3) Her remarkable statement of faith shines forth with great hope and light in a dark situation.

Jesus admonishes us to have a child-like faith. In Matthew 18:2-4, he says, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

What point do you think Jesus is trying to drive home here? What is it about adults that makes a warning like this one necessary?

How do we cultivate and pursue a more child-like faith?

The girl's honest plea and sincere faith ring loud and clear in a household that must have been in the grip of fear— fear of contagion and fear of death for Naaman. Urged on by his wife and those around him, Naaman goes to the king and repeats the young slave girl's witness of faith regarding the power of the prophet in Israel.

The king decides that this is just the thing. "By all means, go," he says, and volunteers to write a letter to King Joram to let him know that Naaman needs a cure—pronto! Naaman sets off with his retinue to servants and gifts, no doubt making quite an impression as he arrives in Samaria, hand-carrying the letter from Ben-Hadad containing the non-negotiable orders, "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." Ouch.

Missing the Beat

King Joram, second son of Ahab, is not known for turning to God in his time of need. As you may recall, we read in chapter 3:2, "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord," and in 3:14, Elisha shows his disdain saying, "...I would not look at you or even notice you." Again, Joram fails to take hold of the unlimited heavenly resources that are at his disposal, and instead sees the general's arrival as a provocation from Ben-Hadad; he tears his clothes and loudly laments, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this

fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”

Joram has a classic case of “going it alone.” The weight of the world on his shoulders. It’s all about “me, me, me” and his “me” is not able to come up with a cogent response to a request that is certainly beyond his own human powers. As we have previously noted, it is tempting to think that we would never do that, but as I stop to consider, I realize I am guilty just about every day, of looking at a world class problem through my personal pinhole perspective which leads me straight to the middle of despair. There is no denying that our problems assault us at times: illness, death, children in trouble, mental health issues, marital problems—all can seem insurmountable at times. I can remember our kids as teens saying, “I don’t want to grow up and have grown up problems. It’s too hard!” So true.

Then God enters the picture. In this story he comes through the prophet Elisha, who sends a message that basically says, “What’s the trouble? Did you forget God? Send the man this way, and I will show him what God can do!”

So often in my life, God sends a messenger, too. Sometimes the message arrives first thing in the morning through a little devotional we read each day. Numerous times, the devotional, clearly written months before, speaks directly to my need that morning. Other times, the messenger is a friend that just “happens” to say exactly what I need to hear. At church, the minister’s words often hit home, addressing my concerns.

What about you? What are some ways that God sends you messages?

Psalm 119, is all about God’s Word as a message to us. In verse 105, we read, “Your word is a _____ to my feet and a _____ for my path.” When I read that verse, it reminds me of a children’s song that sets that particular scripture to music. So often, music is a real messenger from God in our lives, too. What type of music speaks to you?

Measured Response

My mother in law is a wonderful musician. An organist, pianist, music teacher, and composer, she is truly gifted. In addition to all her gifts enhanced by training, she has one gift that she was born with: perfect pitch. She can tell, just by hearing a note, what it is. The gift is a huge blessing but maybe just a tiny bit of a curse for she can be bothered by small discrepancies that would not bother a less gifted listener. Naaman is a gifted leader who has earned the loyalty of his men and his household, but his gift comes with a little curse: pride. He goes to Elisha’s house and suffers what he considers the indignity of receiving directions via a servant (Gehazi again?) who tells him to go dip in the

Jordan seven times and he will be cleans. Easy, right? Not so fast. Naaman doesn't simply follow these simple directions. Instead he gets angry. Fuming, probably pacing, he tells his aides, "Why, I've never heard of such a thing! He didn't even come out to greet me. Where are his manners? Doesn't he know who I am? I thought he would at least come lay hands on me. And that river! It's disgusting compared to ours back home. I simply will not do it!" Madder than a hornet, wouldn't you say? The Bible says, "He turned and went off in a rage." (v.12)

Pride. Little word, big problem for lots of us. In fact, I'd say all of us. Let's look at some scriptures about pride. When we are looking into pride, Proverbs is our place:

Proverbs 8:13

Proverbs 11:2

Proverbs 13:10

Proverbs 16:18

Proverbs 29:23

Solomon must have had a special interest in the area of pride, judging from the number of verses about it! Is there one of these verses that especially stands out to you? What is the virtue that we are encouraged to cultivate that is the opposite of pride?

Naaman's servants see what is going on here and know that their boss might just miss his chance for a cure by declining the conditions of treatment. Using their best powers of persuasion, they ask him to reconsider and to at least give it a try. Although the Bible doesn't tell us, we can imagine Naaman's pridefully puffed up self stomping down to the Jordan, muttering all the way as he removes his clothing and steps into the river, dipping again and again until on the seventh time, he arises from the waters —clean!

Singing a New Song

In an instant, everything changes. Naaman looks to one finger and then the other until he holds up all ten, perfectly restored. He exclaims again as he quickly surveys each arm and touches the tip of his newly intact nose then leaps out of the water, running from servant to aid as they all rejoice with him. Healed!

His baptism in the Jordan begins a new physical life for him but also marks the burial of his old self. He leaves behind his doubt and his pride and hurries back to Elisha where he speaks words full of humility and worship for the God of Israel. "Now I know that there is no God in all the world exempt in Israel." (v.15).

Have you been baptized? Think about your own baptism and the symbolism it entails of dying to self and rising to new life. Has your baptism been an encouragement to you?

Baptism is a sign of conversion, in other words, of turning in a completely different direction and starting a new life. In John 1:29-34, we read about John the Baptist baptizing Jesus as Jesus begins his official time of ministry on this earth. For Jesus, the baptism was a new beginning, not because he had any sins to repent from, but because it initiated his public role.

What title does John give Jesus? _____
What does John say about his role in relationship to Christ? _____

Why does John "baptize with water?" _____
John says, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him."
How do you think that looked physically?

Naaman is transformed by his submersion in the same river Jesus is baptized in several hundred years later. In his joy, Naaman offers Elisha the gifts that he has brought with him but Elisha refuses, unwilling to take payment for a gift that God imparts. Naaman, already marching to a new beat, is reluctant to leave the soil of Israel behind and asks for the favor of being allowed to load up two of his donkeys with local dirt. It sounds pretty funny to us, but in a culture where the gods were associated with the actual land, as in the dirt itself, taking it with him, meant the God of Israel was going back to Aram, too.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

- Where can you speak up and share words of childlike faith today?
- How can you include the excluded that you come in contact with?
- What area of your life do you feel the need to re-orient from pride and anger to humility and love? Prayerfully ask God to shine a light on the way forward.

Integrity

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, This day let me be of one heart and mind. Let me be solely devoted to loving and serving you. Let me not be distracted by temptations to compromise. Let me not lose my way in the world, but be centered on you. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 5:15-27

Meditate and Seek Insight

Tempted and True

Thomas More lived in the 1500's and served in the court of the volatile King Henry VIII. A brilliant politician, man of God, and writer, More also was known for his sense of humor and his wit. He was able to continue to find joy and fulfillment in life despite the increasingly difficult circumstances under which he lived and worked. Eventually, More and the king reached an impasse when Henry wished to annul his marriage to his most recent wife, Catherine of Aragon, and declare himself head of the church. More told the king that he could not agree and was eventually sentenced to death for his stance. While on the scaffold he declared that he died "the king's good servant, but God's first." While More's views on many topics of the faith are starkly different from my own, we cannot deny that he stood fast and died with his integrity.

Integrity? What is it? How do you define it?

Another great Englishman, C.S. Lewis, once said, "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching."

In the second half of the story of Naaman's healing, we see a cast of three characters: Naaman, Elisha, and Elisha's servant, Gehazi. Imagine for a moment, a classic painting of this encounter: Naaman stands at Elisha's door, flanked by his many attendants, arms laden with gifts and an expression of pure joy on his face. Elisha stands a few feet from the door, smiling slightly, with eyes turned to heaven as if to give thanks to God. Gehazi, holds the door knob with his left hand and reaches out for the riches with his

right. His eyes are steadily fixed on the new set of clothes and the bag of silver talents. Eyebrows arched, whites of his eyes clearly visible, we can almost sense his mouth watering at the prospect of donning that rich garment before his next trip to the market.

Then Elisha speaks quietly, in response to the offer of material reward for the miracle God performed through his words, “As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” (v.16). Incredulity seizes Gehazi and maybe he manages to contain his exasperated exclamation and maybe not, but we hear his mental scream of, “What? Are you kidding me?” In this moment of temptation, while Elisha stands true, Gehazi is ripped in two.

The fabric of Elisha’s life and ministry is all about integrity, being one in mind and purpose before God. And Gehazi, though in the proximity of greatness, has a heart that wavers between good and evil. Like most of us, he is beset with confusion; but instead of leaning fully into the example that Elisha sets, he continues to make poor decisions.

It is easy to see the word “integer” in “integrity.” An integer is defined as a “number with no fractional parts.” Our son teaches and studies higher math and knows all about integers, imaginary numbers and other concepts beyond my feeble mind, but most of us can grasp the idea of being whole, unified and undivided in our approach to life—fully integrated. A lack of integrity defines a split personality: someone who responds one way in one setting and another in differing circumstances. As a child (and maybe as an adult!), the ultimate offense in friendship is being “two-faced.”

Let’s review for just a moment, the times that we have seen (or maybe seen) Gehazi in previous stories. Do you get the sense that he is trying to decide where his loyalty lies?

- II Kings 4:11- At the Shunammite woman’s house
- 4:29- Laying the staff of the dead boy’s face without success
- 4:33- Praying with Elisha
- 4:36- Prayers answered
- 4:39- Gathering gourds for what turns out to be poisonous stew
- 4:43- Doubting God’s ability to multiply the loaves.
- 8:4- Telling the King stories about Elisha
- 8:5- Identifying the Shunammite woman to the king
- 5:10- Maybe as the messenger sent to deliver the message to Naaman
- 5:15- Opening the door to temptation

Jesus pointed out the pitfalls of being people of the world, not just in the world when he said, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives?” (Matt. 16:24-26).

In Romans 12:2, what does Paul say about how we live in this world as Christians? Skim down through the rest of that chapter and note some of the characteristics that we are to cultivate as transformed people who are one with God:

Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!

Gehazi considers and decides: this simply cannot be. His rationalization looks something like this, “Why turn down all that free loot? Elisha may not need it, but he can certainly use it!” And then he goes a step further down the sad road of iniquitous thinking when he says to himself, “My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him.” (v.21). Sin pays compounding interest, it bears fruit exponentially in this sentence where we see Gehazi move from self-pity to prejudice against a foreigner, to including God in his motivation for sinning. My, my! How I want to wag my finger at him. But please, take me by the hand and hold me firmly in place with the touch of love, for as I begin to judge Gehazi, I have three fingers pointing right back at myself. It is so easy for me to find all the rationale I want for doing the wrong thing.

How do we stop this process? There is hope and we find it in scripture:

- Run from temptation. When that first thought gets planted in there by the evil one, turn away and go in a different direction mentally. II Timothy 2:22-23 tells us to replace evil desires with what?
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- Seek refuge in God’s Word and in Godly friendship. Let the Elisha’s in your life inspire and guide. I Cor. 16:13 gives what instructions?
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- Do it until you feel it. Sometimes we know the right thing but we don’t want to do it. We must persevere with correct actions until the emotions follow along. Galatians 6:9 tells us to “not grow weary” because...
-
-

You may be mentally thinking, “That’s all well and good, but you just don’t understand what I am faced with.” You are so right. I really don’t. No one else does. But God does. And he can help. He promises to be our strength and our rock and our fortress. He promises he will never leave us. He promises that he will not sleep or slumber. He is always there. He simply waits for us to take the first step toward him; he will answer in

love and faithfulness. But he never pushes himself on us, he simply pulls with the chords of love—inviting, warm, gentle, kind.

Unfortunately, Gehazi does not stop to consider the full import of his actions. Instead he despises his master's integrity and goes running out after the illusion of worldly riches. Scurrying down the well worn lane, sandals kicking up a dusty trail, Naaman sees him from a distance, stops his chariot and gets down to inquire, "Is everything all right?" Then the lies begin to pour forth from Gehazi's mouth, like so much infectious vomitus, spilling down his front and contaminating his spirit. Though he tries to conceal his sin from Elisha, he wears it front and center, a mark of greed that shows itself to the careful observer.

Have you ever heard that mothers have eyes on the back of their heads? Three year olds are amazed when mom can say from another room, "What are you doing in there? Get your finger out of that socket!" Moms know, without looking, what their little ones are up to! And so it is with Elisha who immediately questions his servant, giving him the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. "Where have you been Gehazi?" (v. 25). By now fully committed to his prevarication, the lies trip out of his mouth and add slime to the filth that already covers him, "Your servant didn't go anywhere." Gehazi effectively pronounces his own sentence as he blithely trades all the opportunities God has offered him, for a couple of sets of clothing and some silver.

Just like a mother, Elisha knows where the man has been. More than anyone, Elisha knows what has been going on in his servant's heart. Time after time, he has kept the man close to him, allowed him to witness miraculous feats—and even participate in them—but ultimately, Gehazi has the free will to make his own bad decisions. He turns away from the true gold, the eternal life of the Spirit, for what he thinks will be glory on this earth.

Scripture has a lot to say about integrity. Look through the following passages and make notes about what integrity means when put into every day practice:

1. Job 27:4-6-

2. Ezekiel 18:7-9

3. Micah 6:8

4. James 1:22-25

This part of the country loves Tennessee Football. In the fall it is dressed in yellow leaves from the turning trees and UT Orange from all the shirts, ball caps and assorted paraphernalia. From time to time, we see a license plate that says, "House divided," meaning that the unfortunate souls driving the vehicle have children in competing schools. Alas! They must find their way through living in a split household. While this is a trivial matter in the scheme of life, the challenge Elisha faces is far from it. He, too, lives in a house divided, with a man who cannot fully commit to God and ends up succumbing to temptation.

The sentence is harsh and reflects Gehazi's focus on the material world: he is sentenced to suffer the leprosy that had afflicted Naaman, "Then Gehzi went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow." (v.27)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

As we consider how to take this story from the pages of the Bible and apply its truths to our day to day life, let us carefully search our hearts and consider these questions.

- Where in the past have I lacked integrity? Is there someone that I need to make amends to?
- Where is my heart still divided? What trips me up? Is it material possessions like Gehazi or is it some type of unhealthy addiction? Or is it simple self-absorption and the unwillingness to put others' needs before my own?
- Let's ask God to unite the disparate parts of our lives and bring us into one harmonious whole, completely dedicated to him.

Work

Prayer for Inspiration

“May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands.” Psalm 90:17

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 6:1-6

Meditate and Seek Insight

Project Design

Are you a list maker? Do you enjoy crossing things off as you move through your day? We have a small white board in the kitchen that I use to make my daily lists, especially on the days when I’m at home doing chores. It’s just such fun to pull out that eraser and watch the chores simply disappear! But most of us can remember days when the plan for the day is firmly hijacked by unforeseen circumstances. On those days, the list stands in silent mockery of all that could have been...

In the miracle of “The Axhead Floats,” Elisha’s company of prophets decides to take on a large project. Apparently, their numbers are growing and the current space simply does not accommodate their needs. After discussion, they decide to go down to the Jordan River and get wood to build a place where they can continue to live and meet together in greater comfort.

Working together can be a bonding experience, can’t it? Our church’s youth group goes yearly to a small community down on the coast of South Carolina. While there, they divide into small groups and each one tackles much needed home improvements at their assigned sites. In the process of tearing out and replacing worn out roofs, decks, floors and bathrooms, the youth and their leaders come together and live into the prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth...”

Think about a time when working with family or with a group was a positive experience. Did you make new friends or deepen old relationships? Did everything go smoothly?

Now think about a time when working together was hard, when differences of opinion and leadership styles stood in the way of “peace and mutual edification.” (Rom. 14:19) What stands out in your memory about those times? Looking in the rear view mirror, can you see how God has put that experience to good use—or not just yet?

Let’s look at some scriptures to see what God has to say about work in general:

1. Genesis 2:15- God starts out his creation with the command to work.

2. I Kings 7:13-14- King Solomon attaches great value to fine craftsmanship.

3. I Thes. 4:11-12- Paul explains the importance of “working with your hands.”

4. Eph. 2:10- God created us to do good works.

I can remember as a child, hearing my mother say, “Working is the happy way!” with that too-bright voice of someone that wanted the chores done. Though children often grumble about working, the love of doing a job and doing it well, is a gift that continues to reward the recipient throughout life. God knows we need to work. At every point in life, we need to feel useful and productive. Now that most assuredly does not link payment and work. In fact, the Bible repeatedly emphasizes that we work for an audience of one:

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Col.3:23-24)

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (I Cor. 10:31)

Do you differentiate between the work you do “for pay” and your church, home and volunteer work? How are they similar? How are they different? Do you think God ascribes different importance to different types of work?

Do you consider creating something—a painting, needlework, a cake, a garden—work? Or is that pleasure? How is that different?

I wonder sometimes if we don't divide our lives into dichotomies—work vs. pleasure—where God meant for there to be unity. How can work become pleasure and how can our pleasure pursuits translate into part of the work of our lives?

As we try to relate further to this scripture, it might be helpful to put the prophets' problem and plan into more contemporary terms: this group of ministers needs a bigger conference center. They talk about it and plan a strategy, asking God's blessing on their ideas. The challenges of growth in our church congregations can be taller than the poles these men are talking about! Working with various personalities, devising projects, getting consensus, putting it to vote—all these steps are places where our differing personalities and gifts can both bless and curse us. I have a favorite saying, "The only normal people are the ones you don't know very well yet!" Funny, but so true. Quirks are attractive at first glance but can wear like coarse-grain sandpaper over time. God, in his infinite wisdom, makes us all unique and special though sometimes we want to sarcastically say, "Oh, yeah, he's special all right," without any appreciation for God's individual touch on our difficult friend or family member.

Lining up Help

The Company of Prophets has a problem and now they have a plan—they will build a new log conference center—or at least a larger framework of poles over which to hang their tent. They involve Elisha, God's representative, every step of the way. As they get ready to go, they humbly invite Elisha, "Won't you please come with your servants?" Elisha waits to be invited but gladly accepts their proposal, "'I will,' Elisha replied. And he went with them." (v. 3)

Waiting to be invited to help... We all know that feeling as we stand patiently by a three year old who is trying to tie his shoes, adamantly saying, "By myself!" with fat little fingers slipping around unruly shoelaces; or as we hold our tongue, refraining from giving our wonderful insight to our adult children until they ask; even later in life, helping a parent or a loved one get to the point where they are willing to accept a transitional housing arrangement.

My parents were not perfect but they were pretty darn good and somehow managed to navigate the rough waters of knowing when to actively intervene and when to wait quietly on the sidelines to be invited into a situation. I remember one particularly tumultuous time, when I was back in Brazil the Christmas of my senior year in college. I wanted to go to a New Year's party with some friends. My parents, rightly so, looked at the whole affair with a practiced eye and declared it not a great plan. I insisted, so Dad just said, "Call me and I will come and get you at any time." Way past midnight, things were not

going well, and I knew I needed to get away from that place. I left the group I was with and went to the building reception area and called my dad. It was a thirty minute drive but all he said when he got there was, "Thank you for calling me." No more. Ever.

Can you think of a time in your life when you waited to be asked to help?

Can you think of a time when you wish you had asked for help?

God wants to help us and longs to be invited to walk with us on this journey of life, but he never pushes himself into our lives. He is there. Waiting. Holding his end of the phone, ready to swipe the green "answer" button, if we will only ask. How many times do we worry that he might be too busy for our petty concerns, and instead say, "God, I've got this one—by myself. You've got the whole world to take care of. No need to bother you." I, for one, certainly don't understand why he loves me so. But he does. And he loves you too. Amazing, isn't it?

Implementing the Task

Elisha and the men set off to the Jordan where they begin the tough physical labor of tree cutting, each man working to contribute his pole to their new structure. Then disaster strikes as one man, using a borrowed iron axe head, sees the head fly off the handle and land squarely in deep, brown water. He cries out, "Oh, my lord, it was borrowed!" and Elisha is right there, to assist with this very practical, day to day concern. He throws a stick in, the iron floats, and he tells the man to reach in and get it.

God is the God of eternity, the God who holds the whole world in his hand, and yet he is always more ready to listen than we are to pray. He is more ready to give than we are to ask.

My husband's father was a minister and he can remember one day, as a small boy, approaching his dad during sermon preparation time.

"Daddy, can I interrupt you?"

"Is it important?" came the reply.

"Well, it's important to me, but maybe not to you."

At that point, his dad put his pen down on the yellow pad, partially covered with his meticulous, flowing script and said, "Son, if it's important to you, then it's important to me."

Sometimes, God intervenes in the practical, mundane aspects of our lives. He always listens and provides the help we truly need, what is best for us. However, it may not be exactly what we ask him for. Our challenge is to reach out and take the answered prayer as it is offered up to us, whether or not it takes the physical form that we expect. In this particular case, the prophet simply has to reach out and take the answer to his plea—sometimes in my life, and maybe in yours, too, the answers are not so immediate or easy to see.

Let's examine the scriptures about God's help below and fill in the blanks:

1. Psalm 46:1-

God is our _____ and _____, an _____ help in trouble.

2. Joel 2:32-

And everyone who calls on _____ will be _____.

3. Isaiah 65:24-

_____ call, I will _____; while they are still speaking I will _____. (This verse is especially comforting, isn't it?)

While God, through his prophet Elisha, readily intervenes to help out in this practical need, he is always more focused on our eternal need for him, on our ongoing relationship of love with him. Sometimes he doesn't respond to our requests for intervention simply because he has a bigger picture view and knows that the struggle and the waiting will pay off bigger dividends than the immediate response.

Can you think of a time when God responded right away to a pressing need?

Can you think of a time when he didn't?

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Read Psalm 1 and think about how it relates to you and your life work. What does this lovely poem have to say about how we spend our time and how God blesses our pursuit of righteousness? Where is God calling us to trust him more with the practical part of life?

Hearing and Seeing

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Help me to hear your voice with my whole heart. Give me the kind of vision that you want me to have, vision that allows me to see others as you see them. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 6:8-23

Meditate and Seek Insight

Good Hearing

People that have hearing loss often suffer from nerve damage that makes deciphering sound and translating those sounds into words difficult. Sometimes, as hearing loss progresses, simply increasing the volume doesn't help. Steps to use in aiding a person with auditory challenges include making sure they can see your face and mouth and sometimes even changing the words or phrasing so that the person with hearing loss can catch the message.

Elisha has absolutely no problem hearing. In fact his hearing is so acute that he is able to listen in as Ben Hadad, the king of the Arameans, discusses battle plans and troop positions. The prophet is fully in tune with God's messages; he is able to hear and act on whatever God tells him. He regularly reports these to King Joram, who carefully avoids the trouble spots.

When do you best hear God?

What helps you to really listen and obey his instructions?

Sometimes I feel "nudges" but wonder, "Is that really God or is it just me?" How do you discern what is his voice and what is your own will?

Look in the scriptures below and take notes on ways that God speaks and how we can know his voice. See if you find references to nature, dreams, scriptures, familiarity with Jesus and other indicators, showing the message we hear is from the Lord. Consider adding notes about verses that help you that may not be listed below.

1. Deut. 32:1-2- Moses' song: "Listen, oh heavens, and I will speak;..."

2. Psalm 119:105- “Your word is a lamp to my feet...”
 3. Job 33:14-18- “For God does speak—now one way, now another...”
 4. John 10:2-5- Jesus, the Good Shepherd
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-
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Fighting Mad

King Ben Hadad is “enraged” that his plans are somehow getting back to the king of Israel, and he logically assumes that one of his men is guilty of treason. When confronted, one of his officers speaks up (Do you think it might be Naaman?) and says, “None of us, my lord the king, but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.” (v.12)

That comment must have brought the king up short! I remember when our oldest started kindergarten and would come home from school with all sorts of stories about his day, all told with a five year old’s perspective. When questioned, the teacher, always with a great sense of humor said, “Let’s make an agreement that I won’t believe half of what he tells me about you, if you don’t believe half of what he tell you about me!” The teacher knew just how to handle that situation with aplomb; Ben Hadad is not so subtle. He sends out his special ops unit by night to capture Elisha in Dothan (north of Samaria, the capital). They surround the city, and when Elisha’s servant looks out the next morning at the first light of dawn, he sees the silhouettes of Aramean troops encircling the town. He runs to Elisha and cries out in fear, “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” (v.15)

And here is one of the best responses anywhere, “Don’t be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed, ‘O lord, open his eyes so he may see.’” In my mind’s eye, I can envision Elisha expansively sweeping his arms around, hands pointing out all the armies of the Lord, including horses and chariots of fire. We don’t need the Bible to tell us that his servant’s mouth was wide open in wonder! How many times in life do we feel all alone? Or feel that we have no recourse? Or feel like there is no way out of what we are going through? And yet, through stories like this, God reminds us that he has great armies at his disposal. When we call on his name, he will answer us, and he is powerful.

Let’s face it. The world can be a depressing place. Global news batters us daily with shootings, wars, epidemics, natural disasters and stories that highlight the negative side of humanity. While staying abreast of the world situation is important, it can almost slay our spirits and pull us down to the level of losing our faith in God’s ultimate victory and God’s power over all events. Clearly, bad things happen. And bad things happen to good people. We don’t understand it, and we won’t fully comprehend on this side, but as people of faith, we are invited to look upward and move forward.

Below are some scriptures that give us strength in the knowledge of God's ultimate victory. Finish the verse or write a few words about how it bolsters your faith:

John 16:33- "In this world you will have trouble..."

Ephesians 6:10-18- Putting on the armor of God

I John 4:4- "...the one who is in you is greater..."

I John 5:4-5- "...for everyone born of God overcomes the world..."

Vision vs. Sight

As the elite force of soldiers, advances into Dotham, Elisha prays and God strikes them with blindness. In contrast to the spiritual vision God has just allowed Elisha's servant to have, here he removes physical vision and the men are completely lost.

In the Star Wars Trilogy there is a character called Obi Wan Kenobi, a Jedi master, who successfully uses mind control powers to protect the young hero of the story, Luke Skywalker, and his friends. At one point when the bad guys, the stormtroopers, are looking for Luke's robots, or droids, Obi Wan tells the troopers, "These are not the droids that you are looking for." The soldier almost comically repeats the sentence and he and his cohorts leave to look elsewhere. Elisha, as God's minister, tells the Arameans, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." (v.19) He then leads them into the center of Samaria and directly to the king before praying and asking the Lord to open their eyes and allow them to see.

We can easily imagine the fright these highly trained men have when they "wake up" only to find themselves fully surrounded inside the enemy's compound. Even King Joram is caught off guard and asks Elisha whether or not to kill them. Elisha responds that kindness and compassion are in order and suggests instead a huge banquet, a gesture of good will and friendship.

Elisha serves as a peacemaker, finding a way to create vision in a person who has none and to alter the perspective and viewpoint of the soldiers whose eyes had been focused on violence. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God." (Matt.5:9) This story is so wonderful because it seems hopeless at the outset. I can so identify with the servant in the story, throwing my

hands up in despair and asking heaven, "What is the world are we going to do now?" all the while forgetting that God is beyond this world and is not bound by my limited ideas. He can find a way.

After eating, drinking and toasting one another, the soldiers from Aram head home, satiated and at peace with their neighbors. For the price of a meal and some mercy, the Israelites are able to buy a great deal of peace for their land. Through Elisha's hands, God shows all those involved, both the Arameans and the people of the northern kingdom, a new way: fellowship, camaraderie, sharing a banquet table. Instead of violence, God illustrates grace, new vision, and hope.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

How is our spiritual hearing today and what can we do to make it more sensitive?
How is our spiritual vision and what can we do to see with God's vision?
How can we be peacemakers in our own corner of the world?

Prayer for God's Guidance

Anonymous

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing.

The Siege

Prayer for Inspiration

Lord, Sometimes life gets hard—the mountains are too high, the road too long, the obstacles too great. Please give us faith to persevere and to trust, knowing that you will help us through and beyond. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 6:24-7:20

Meditate and Seek Insight

Troubling Story Line

If “The Siege” were a movie, it would be rated “R” for disturbing content! I, for one, would love to press “delete” and eliminate this stomach turning chronicle of events, but it is included with the purpose of hammering home the message of the importance of worshipping God.

Some time has passed since the Aramean soldiers feasted in Samaria. Their master, Ben-Hadad, forgets the mercy shown to them and orders an all out invasion of Israel and a siege of Samaria. Surrounded by the enemy armies, the people inside the walls are slowly starving. Two women, desperately hungry, eat one of their children, fulfilling the covenantal curses that we read in Deut. 28:53, “Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the Lord your God has given you.” That scripture goes on to describe in great detail the depravity of the people who have turned their hearts away from God.

Steve Green, a Christian musician sang a song called, “People Need the Lord.” Yes, we certainly do! For without God, humanity is a sad lot, prone to injuring each other, committing murder, genocide and even—God forbid—cannibalism. Detailed in all of the second half of Deuteronomy 28, are the curses which will accumulate on the Israelites if they fail to worship God and fall into the practice of those around them, idolatry. This is in stark contrast to the first half of the chapter which promises life and light, “If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you.” (v.1-2)

If we know that worshipping God is the source of true happiness in life, why and how do we stray away?

What is it that we worship as individuals and as a nation in these days, that draws us away from God and into the danger zone of apathy?

How do these warnings about the dangers of straying, draw us closer to God as individuals? How can we keep our hearts from idolatry?

The literal law of Moses with its rules and regulations is not supplanted by but instead fulfilled by the law of love, instituted by Christ with his death on the cross. He came to offer us grace and to show us a new way of living. In Galatians 5:13-15, we read about the dangers of spiritual self-destruction, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” In this linchpin verse, Paul puts forth, in simple terms, our choices: love or devour.

Underline the parts of those verses that stand out to you. When and how do we “bite and devour each other?”

Where is God calling us to love someone that we really want to destroy? How can we become people that are transformed by our freedom in Christ to truly love others?

Prepared for Action

We are blessed to live near the mountains and fairly often go hiking with friends. My husband, a former Boy Scout, is always prepared—First Aid kit, maps, water, raincoat, extra layer for warmth, chocolate—all the essentials. Maybe I am simply relying too much on him, but I usually put on my hiking shoes, grab a jacket and figure, “It’s just a short hike. I don’t need all that stuff.” And you know, we often don’t need everything he brings along, but it’s surprising how many times we do! It’s so nice to have one of us be prepared.

Elisha is prepared. Sadly, when King Joram hears the woman’s story he tears his clothes but not in repentance. Instead he is angry with Elisha, God’s representative, and vows to kill him that very day, immediately sending a messenger to find him. Elisha

knows the king's nefarious ways and has heard from God ahead of time about how all of this will end. He is in his house, surrounded by the elders of the city. As a sideline, it is interesting to note that in this time of deprivation and great need, the community leaders are all with him and not with the king. As they near death from starvation, they turn to God, the true source of everlasting strength. (Prov. 18:10) Elisha has a plan and they help put it into action—barring the door as the executioner approaches to follow through with the orders of the king. Joram himself, follows behind and it appears that they speak through the door. Elisha lets all of them know that the crisis will be over the next day; the king's assistant gives voice to his doubts about Elisha's words. Obliquely, the prophet tells him that he will not live to see the end result.

Elisha is spiritually and physically prepared to do battle. He is saturated in prayer, surrounded by those who are seeking God, and ready to hold a defensive position as God fulfills his word. In yesterday's reading we talked about putting on the armor of God. Look at Ephesians 6:10-18 again and list the various components of protection in spiritual warfare:

1. Be strong _____ and in his mighty _____.
2. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your _____ against the devil's _____.
3. For our struggle is not against _____ and blood but against _____.
4. Therefore, put on the _____ armor of God
5. So that you may be able to _____ your ground
6. And after you have done everything, to _____.
7. _____ firm then,
8. With the belt of _____
9. The breastplate of _____
10. Feet fitted with the _____ that comes from the gospel of peace.
11. Take up the shield of _____
12. Take up the helmet of _____
13. And the sword of the _____ which is the _____
14. And _____ in the Spirit on all occasions.

Four different times in this passage we are told to “stand.” And that is just what Elisha does—he closes the door and stands firm in his faith, waiting on God's timing to deliver.

Deliverance

This summer and fall our son went to Australia to study abroad. Within his first two weeks, his I-phone was stolen while he played soccer. He called us, dejected. Through some kind of techno-miracle, his dad was able to go on line and have his phone display a message about how to call our son there in Brisbane. Then, the phone locked and became useless to the thief. Not only that, the miracle went further for it pinpointed the ex-

act location of the phone. Google earth went so far as to show us a front view of the house in which the phone currently resided. Armed with this information and a little gentle prodding, our son quickly convinced the crook that returning the phone was his best recourse. Pretty amazing!

God's solutions to intractable problems are also amazing. The end of this story is a case in point. That same day, at dusk, four men afflicted with leprosy are lingering by the city gate, starving. They decide to turn themselves in to the Arameans, preferring sudden death to their current plight. As they approach the tents of the enemy camp, things are eerily silent; all they hear is the gentle flapping of the wind on the open doors of the tents, the nickering of abandoned horses and mules and camp fires crackling as they burn down. "For the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army." (v.6) The lepers are ecstatic and begin collecting the loot and running off to hide it. After several runs back and forth to their cave through the night, all the while eating what they can grab, they suddenly stop and say to one another, "This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves." (v.9)

Keeping the good news to ourselves... Surely we are not guilty of such a deed are we? And yet I think about how I am content to sit in my seat on Sunday morning, absorbing the worship, praise, and teaching and then neglecting to tell a single soul about the blessings I receive during the service.

Let's look at some scriptures that remind us to share the Good News with others:

Matthew 28:19,20- The Great Commission

Mark 16:15- Go into all the world

Luke 19:40- The rocks will cry out

Rev. 14:6-8- The angel proclaims

Make a few notes about how you plan to intentionally share the news of God's blessings with someone else this week:

The king is initially skeptical of the four men's report, but after investigation, the fact of God's deliverance is announced to the whole town, resulting in a stampede as the famished people pour through the gates to the Aramean's camp. The extent of the miracle is all the more remarkable because not only does God eliminate the opposition, he provides for the people from the provisions of the enemy. It is truly an unimaginable turn of events—less than twenty four hours earlier the entire town was at death's door.

Can you think of a situation in your own life that is completely impossible? One where you simply cannot see a way out? Does this story give you some sense of encouragement as God finds a way, through the darkest of circumstances? Pray now about the difficult relationship, problem, or obstacle that you face. Put it at the Lord's feet; ask him for help in trusting that he will find a way to a resolution.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Reviewing today's reading:

When do we devour one another with criticism and judgement? How can we lose the spirit of criticism and become more loving and kind?

How do we get better prepared to face spiritual battles?

How can we trust God to accomplish the mission impossible in our lives?

It's All in the Name

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Give me clarity in a world that thrashes around in confusion. Shine a light of truth on my path today and help me to be able to take your hand and follow you. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 8:7-29

Meditate and Seek Insight

What's in a Name?

When I was a girl, I had a friend named Bonnie. She had five brothers and sisters, all with names that started with a "B." My own three brothers have names that start with "R." Somehow, I escaped being the fourth "R" in the family. It appears that the mothers of Israel seriously needed a new book of baby names because all the "J's" threaten to sabotage our study, leaving us muddled and confused. Let's take a minute to look at a chart and attempt to get some clarity before we move on.

This is a quick sketch of the Northern Kingdom:

Prophet	King	Length of reign	Enemy King
Elijah	Ahab	22	Ben-Hadad (Aram)
Elijah	Ahaziah (son of Ahab)	2	Ben-Hadad
Elisha	Joram (son of Ahab)	12	Hazael (Aram)
Elisha	Jehu	28	
Elisha	Jehoahaz	17	Ben-Hadad II
Elisha	Jehoash	16	

The trouble is, the Southern Kingdom is also very partial to names that start with the letter "J" and not only that, but some of the names are exactly the same! Much like the beginning of a long Russian novel, we have to dedicate some initial time to getting things straightened out enough to read.

Southern Kingdom

Prophet	King	Length of reign	Enemy King
Elijah	Jehoshaphat	25	Ben Hadad
Elisha	Jehoram (Joram)	8	Ben Hadad
Elisha	Ahaziah	1	Ben Hadad
Elisha	Athaliah (evil grandma)	7	Ben Hadad
Elisha	Joash (priest Jehoiada)	40	Hazael (Aram)

Elisha's ministry is moving from miracles directed at individuals and small groups to a more political and national stage. Led by God, he is anointing leaders and influencing the circles of power of the day. We also see an intermingling of the stories of the northern kingdom and southern kingdom. We already know that a cursory reading of the Old Testament and its stories gives us a cursory understanding. Here we seek to dive deep into the word, to find less obvious meanings and purposes to apply to our lives today.

When the kids were all in high school, we decided to take scuba diving classes together. Part of the process of diving is remembering to breathe continuously. Holding your breath while scuba diving is a big "no-no" and can lead to serious problems as you ascend. So, while diving, I could see all the cute little fishes and the seaweed and other amazing things, but mostly my mind was very busy with a monotone, "Breathe, breathe!" I think the same applies to this section of our study, except that our mantra is "pray, pray." Let's ask the Holy Spirit to give us the grace to glean truth as we move forward.

Murder and Mayhem

Elisha travels up to Damascus, part of the territory of Aram. When he arrives, word filters back to Ben-Hadad that the great prophet has come into the country. Ben-Hadad, suffering from an unknown illness at the time, is attended by his advisor, Hazael. The king asks Hazael to go to Elisha, bearing gifts to ask if he will recover. Elisha tells Hazael to provide the king with reassurance that he will heal, but shares with Hazael that God has revealed the truth: the king will not heal and Hazael will become king in his stead.

During the conversation, Elisha stares steadily at Hazael, and then the prophet begins to weep. As Elisha stares him down, we can almost see Hazael's face reddened and his eyes avert, as he feels the guilt in his spirit convict him via the penetrating stare of the man of God.

Elisha's clear vision of the future, deeply disturbs him and he cries tears of sorrow for all those Hazael will eventually harm, "You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women." (v.12). Hazael doesn't trouble himself to deny that these deeds are within the ability of his own heart and hands. He feigns humility and hears Elisha confirm that he is to become king.

Hazael, unwilling to trust in God to take care of Ben-Hadad in his time, hastens his coronation by suffocating the ill king, becoming King of the Arameans.

Elisha goes home, possibly with "forty camel-loads of all the finest wares of Damascus," but for sure with a sad heart. He obeys God's command, initially given to Elijah (I Kings 19:15), but we have to wonder how he felt about it. God's ultimate plan is difficult to discern in this story as it is in our world and in our lives today. It's puzzling that Elisha is anointing an enemy king. Not only that, but Elisha is anointing someone that will mistreat the children of Israel, the very ones that Elisha is working so hard to draw back to God.

Have you ever been able to foresee the future for someone headed down the wrong path, but been unable to stop them from ruin?

Has God ever asked you to help someone who you knew would just throw away the assistance and the goodwill with which it was offered?

How do we obey God's instructions even when we can't understand the logic involved?

I have mentioned our little dog, Mikey, before. Let's be honest, the dog tolerates and even likes all the other family members, but he adores me! He watches my every move and waits faithfully at the bottom of the steps if I have to go up. When I come home, he runs to greet me, just like I've been gone for months instead of just a few minutes down to the store. But there are many times he doesn't understand the things I do. When he has to go to the vet to have his teeth cleaned, I have to take away his food and water the night before. In the morning he looks at me with pleading eyes, as if to remind me, "Uh, my food. You know. You forgot." He will even trot off to the room where we keep his food bowls as if to lead me in that direction, and he looks up in disappointment when I fail to take the cue. But he trusts me. Even when he doesn't understand, he still comes when I call and still loves me.

I hope that I can be like that with God—able to follow his directions and carry out his instructions even when I don't fully understand.

Meanwhile in the Southern Kingdom...

Here in the South, we are known for our beautiful scenery, sweet ice tea, and wonderful hospitality. Of course all of our good old southern niceness covers up lots of steely determination and a stubbornness that sticks to us like sweat on the Fourth of July. We are sweet and nice but don't cross us! I would say we appear to be more different from our northern neighbors than we really are.

And so it is in the southern kingdom of Judah. When Jehoram (son of Jehoshaphat) is king, he marries into the family of Ahab, by wedding Athaliah, a true Baal worshipper who brings her idol worship with her to the south. As long as Jehoshaphat is king, things are kept under control, but as soon as he dies, overt idol worship begins to be the norm in the south as well, becoming even more pronounced when Athaliah and Jehoram's son, Ahaziah, comes to the throne. His mother's influence toward evil is similar to that of Jezebel in the north. She uses all her powers of manipulation to turn the country steadily away from the worship of the one true God and instead to bowing to handmade idols and performing despicable acts in honor of the pagan god.

Mothers and fathers have lots of power, don't they? And even if you are not a parent, you most likely have family that you influence—or maybe you are a Big Sister or Big Brother or you sponsor a child through Compassion. When I was in college and my parents were still on the mission field, a kind lady from our local church “adopted” me. She had me over on week-ends and made fresh strawberry pies for me to share with my roommates. “Aunt” Ruth and I become so close that we gave our daughter her name as a middle name.

Who in your life do you hope and pray you are influencing for the good?

Like Elisha, we may be called to do work that we don't like or understand. But God gives us the grace we need through Jesus Christ. Our good deeds (or bad ones) have a pronounced effect on the world around us, moving from us like ripples on a still pond in ever-widening concentric circles, touching others, even far away.

In John 15:1-17, we read about the Vine and the Branches. Jesus gave this illustration to his disciples in his Parting Discourse—those last words that were intended to sustain them through all that he knew would come.

Let's look at what he says about staying connected to him, as the single most important action we can take in life and the one that bears fruit on down the road.

Every branch that does bear fruit he _____ . (v.2)

Remain in me and I will _____ . (v.4)

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must _____.(v.4)

Apart from me, you can do _____. (v.5)

If you obey my commands, you will _____. (v.10)

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, _____. (v.11)

You are my friends, if _____. (v.14)

Then the father will give you _____. (v.16)

This is my command: _____. (v.17)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Let's be looking out for places where God is calling us to obedience even when we don't understand.

Let's be looking out for ways we can influence others for God.

Let be looking out for insights on how we can more fully abide in Christ.

Jehu

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, I want to experience more of you. I am awed that the God of the universe would dwell within me, and I give more and more room within this mortal frame to your presence. Take charge. Amen. — Joshua Dubois

Breathe In Scripture

II Kings 9 & 10

Meditate and Look for Insight

Jehu Anointed

This may be one of those times in our study when it behooves us to step back a bit and look at the bigger picture, remembering that the truth is more important than the facts. There are more facts in this story and those surrounding it than we can possibly understand, but God's message is above and beyond time and its chronological progression. God's message is bigger than the characters in this story. God's message ultimately shines through if we keep his love, his unchanging character, and his desire that all men come to salvation at the forefront of our minds as we proceed.

A few truths stand out to me:

1. God has an ultimate purpose in mind from Genesis to Revelation.
2. God desires that all men come to know his saving grace.
3. God provides opportunities for repentance but judgement does come.
4. While God includes many stories in his Book, I don't see that he condones all the methods used. Even in my own life, I can see him use some mistakes that I have made and cause good to come from them.

Jehu seems to be a man who desires to follow God's direction to eliminate idol worship from the land. But his methods are harsh and the way he goes about it makes me cringe.

Look through these scriptures and write down some adjectives that you think describe Jehu as a person:

Would you characterize him as “good” or “bad?”

Is he someone that you would like to share a meal with?

What is his leadership style? Check the one that you think fits best:

- Servant leader
- Charismatic general
- Itinerate evangelist
- Dictator

Think about your own past or current work, church, or political leaders. Can you think of someone who had Jehu’s leadership style? How did that work out? What are some of the things that we can learn from this passage to help us in times when we don’t understand why someone we don’t agree with is in power?

At the end of II Kings 8, we see King Joram of Israel and King Ahaziah of Judah together in Jezreel where Joram is recovering from wounds suffered in a battle at Ramoth Gilead against the Arameans. Left unattended, the army officers are all together most likely discussing their inept leadership when Elisha sends one of his young prophets to anoint Jehu.

Taken to a side room, the ambassador does with Elisha told him to and speaks these words, “You are to destroy the house of Ahab your master, and I will avenge the blood of my servants the prophets and the blood of all the Lord’s servants shed by Jezebel. The whole house of Ahab will perish.” (v. 7,8) The prophet immediately leaves, running back to his master, questions following in his wake.

When the officers ask Jehu, “Why did this madman come to you?” (v. 11) Jehu evades the question and they press the issue until he tells them he has been anointed king. At this, they don’t hesitate to see the confirmation of what they had probably already suspected and blowing trumpets they shout, “Jehu is king!” (v.13)

Jehu most likely showed leadership qualities prior to this event since the other officers were so willing to go forward with what they understood to be God’s directions.

What are some things that God looks for in those he appoints to be leaders?

1. Abram- Genesis 15:6- What did Abram have that counted?
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2. Moses- Numbers 12:3- What does the Bible say about Moses?

3. Joshua- Joshua 1:6-9- What are some characteristics God looks for in Joshua?

4. Peter- Matt. 16:18- In spite of all his failings, what does Jesus call Peter?

5. Paul- Acts 9:15- What does God call Paul in speaking to Ananias?

Rick Yancey wrote, “God doesn't call the equipped, son. God equips the called. And you have been called.” It's comforting to know that when God calls us, he also prepares us to do what he wants us to do.

Where is God calling you today? Is he asking you to take a new leadership position or to be a support person? Is he calling you to persist in being faithful right where you are?

Jehu immediately seizes the reigns of power, both figuratively and literally as he bounds into his chariot and takes off for the ride to Jezreel, men and officers falling in behind him. He is seen from a distance by the lookouts on the wall who summon the kings to decide what to do. They send out two scouts who end up joining the military coup before riding out themselves and being killed by Jehu.

Jehu throws Joram's body on the field of Naboth, to symbolically avenge the murder of the righteous owner of the coveted vineyard. Ahaziah, of Judah, makes it to Meggido before he dies of his wounds and is carried to Jerusalem for burial.

When we were in Israel several years ago, we visited Meggido, a natural plains cross-road that holds this “tel”—a great hill of layers of ancient civilizations built upon each other. Looking out over the plains of Meggido is awe inspiring because in that place there is a real sense of connection between the past and what lies ahead.

Jezebel's Death

Jehu is just getting started. Bolstered by the support he enjoys after killing the two kings, he makes his way into the town of Jezreel where the first person to greet him is Jezebel, the queen mother, painted eyes and artfully arranged hair completing the pic-

ture of an unrepentant lifelong servant of Baal. Looking out from her window, she taunts Jehu and calls him a murderer. He gives her eunuchs instructions to throw her down where her remains are run over by the procession of chariots and men.

Later, Jehu sends men out to bury her, and they find nothing left except a few body parts after she is consumed by dogs. The messengers remind Jehu that Elijah the Tishbite long ago forecast her death saying, “On the plot of ground at Jezreel dogs will devour Jezebel’s flesh. Jezebel’s body will be like refuse on the ground in the plot at Jezreel, so that no one will be able to say, ‘This is Jezebel.’” (v. 37) Yuck! That is a desperately awful story, isn’t it? God’s judgement is not always swift, but it is sure. Whether in this lifetime or the next, justice will prevail. While I hope that we don’t spend our lives looking for vengeance or counting the days until the unrighteous perish, we can know that their evil will not go on forever.

In Isaiah 32, we read a comparison of a Kingdom of Righteousness and a land of the unrighteous.

What are some of the word pictures used to describe the righteous? See verses 2-4:

What are some actions of the unrighteous? See verses 5-7:

In verse 17, we read the ultimate outcome of justice:

“The fruit of righteousness will be _____; the effect of righteousness will be _____.”

Jehu Kills Ahab’s Sons and the Prophets of Baal

“Are we there yet?” my brothers and I pleaded over and over again on the long, hot journey into the arid, dry interior of Brazil to visit missionary friends. Unprepared for the extreme heat, my parents hadn’t brought enough water. We stopped at one of the few huts along the way only to find they only had “Agua com gas” or “seltzer” water, definitely not our favorite. We longed to arrive and enjoy the cool refreshment of a nice tall glass of ice water.

As we proceed through these long lists of killings, a purging out of evil, I want to say, “Are we there yet, Lord?” Can we be done with all of this? When are we going to learn to turn to you, and receive the refreshment that you offer?

Sadly, the killing continues as Jehu seeks to eliminate any of Ahab's decedents who might one day rise to the throne. He seeks out the king's sons and beheads them, and follows that up by murdering the relatives of Ahaziah and finally the prophets of Baal. Jehu draws the people's attention to God saying, "Know then, that not a word the Lord has spoken against the house of Ahab will fail. The Lord has done what he promised through his servant Elijah." (v.10) By drawing attention back to God, he makes the point that God's word, both for good and against evil, will not go unfulfilled. He brings the people back to the central theme: Worship God and him alone. Once that truth is firmly enshrined in the hearts of the children of Israel and in our hearts today, then all else will fall into place beautifully.

Jehu's Evaluation

How do you feel about evaluations? We all get some type of evaluation, whether it's from a work boss or a committee or even our children as they get up from the table, "Great meal, Mom (or Dad)!" But there are times in life when we dread our evaluations and the constructive criticism that often bites a chunk out of our spirits. "This is good and this is good but you could improve here..." All of our human evaluations pale by comparison to the one we will all receive from God someday.

In the Book of Daniel, King Belshazzar sees the writing on the wall, "Mene, mene, tekel, parsin." Daniel translates God's evaluation to the king which read in part, "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." (5:37)

So it is with Jehu. He reigns in Samaria for twenty eight years, at the end of which God pronounces the following: "Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation." Then comes the second half of the verdict, "Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart." (v.31) Jehu, like many of the kings before and after him, partially removes the idol worship that has such a firm hold over God's chosen people. However, he does not remove the golden calves from Dan and Bethel. The phrase, "He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit..." (v.29) is repeated in many assessments of northern kings. The phrase refers to the fact that the removal of the calves would have meant the people needed to go to Jerusalem for worship, something the political leaders of the north never want to fully trust God with. They seem to fear that if the people worship in the south, then their allegiance will be to the king of the south. In some ways, it is similar to controversies about re-drawing district lines or changing voting patterns. Politicians tend to be passionate about such moves, worried that their power base will be eroded. Jehu and other northern kings are no exception to the pattern of trusting God to a certain extent. His trust did not extend to changing borders, something that could easily have cost him his position. For this, he is indicted by God and held accountable.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

If God were writing our evaluations today, what do you think he might say?

Are we willing to trust him with the very borders of our lives: our family, our jobs, our secret prejudices, our bad habits? Can we push on through and allow God to destroy those “golden calves” that keep us in bondage?

Raised Upright

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for your loving protection over me and my loved ones. Thank you for how you protect us even when we are not aware. Open our eyes to see the many ways you do good for us today. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 11 & 12

Meditate and Seek Insight

Athaliah, Evil Grandma

On the northeast coast of Brazil, there is a beach called Ataliah which is considered one of the most dangerous in the country for drownings. At the confluence of a river and a bay, the undercurrents are strong and the benign appearance of the smooth waters belie deep and treacherous canals where people often lose their footing and perish. I wonder if the beach is named for the treacherous matriarch of the royal family of Judah, a Baal worshipper, directly related to Ahab. When she hears that her son, Ahaziah, is dead, she proceeds to kill the remaining potential heirs of the royal family so as to consolidate her power and become queen.

Unbeknownst to her, Jehosheba, one of King Jehoram's daughters, takes the baby prince Joash, along with his nurse and puts them in hiding in the temple of the Lord. Her husband, Jehoiada is the ruling priest of the the time. They stay in hiding for six years until Jehoiada develops a plan to pronounce the now seven-year-old king, using some mercenary troops and those loyal to the Davidic Dynasty.

Young Joash is certainly raised up in the church, isn't he? With the priest for a father figure, he is heavily influenced by people who love the Lord and are against idol worship. During his coronation, Jehoiada, "put the crown on him; he presented him with a copy of the covenant and proclaimed him king. They anointed him and the people clapped their hands and shouted, 'Long live the king!'" (v.12)

The Bible tells us to, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." (Prov. 22:6) During Joash's infancy and early childhood, no doubt the priest spent many hours in the child's hiding place, telling him Bible stories, teaching him about God and preparing him for a role of leadership.

On a scale of 1-10, where “1” is not important at all, how important is attending church worship for you and your family? Why?

Sometimes as children or young people go to church services they will say, “I don’t want to go there anymore. Those kids don’t like me” or “I don’t like those kids” or more likely, “It’s boring. Why do I have to go to church?” How did you or would you answer these questions/comments:

Make a list of some positive things that children (and adults) learn by attending church:

What are some possible negatives?

You may rightly thinking, “Ok, hold the bus here. Aren’t we free in Christ? Didn’t he die so that we don’t have to follow rules—like going to church? How do we impose laws and rules on our children?” Yes! Christ died and set us free from the law by his grace and love. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.” (Gal. 5:1) It is all about the attitude of the heart when it comes to following rules and customs related to our pursuit of a relationship with God. In his book, **Traveling Light**, Eugene Peterson writes of a potentially dangerous attitude toward rules:

“If we engage in particular rituals and keep certain rules, we always know where we stand. If we know what we can do that will make us more acceptable in God’s eyes than a person who doesn’t do them, we, by doing them, can advance our status. Such a religion puts us in control. We no longer have to live by faith, trusting in God to accept us in mercy...but we can trust instead in ourselves.”

Church attendance, and in fact all that serves to deepen our relationship with God, comes from a stance of freedom, from a response of love. We don’t do it to follow rules. We don’t do it to impress others. And just as we want to go to worship for what we can offer to God and to others, so we want to instruct our little ones and those that are in our sphere of influence, to do the same. Just as with the example of our little dog, Mikey, on Day 1, not fully understanding all that we do for him, so it is with our children. We persist in “training them up in the way they should go,” even when they are not fully on board with our plans.

Joash Repairs the Temple

If you own a home or have ever owned one, you know that the projects are continuous and numerous. Leaky faucets, roofs and basements can keep our free time fully booked and our bank accounts permanently set on “low!” Finding ways to prioritize and simplify, most of us make a way to keep things operational. Apparently the temple is due for an overhaul in the days of King Joash. The Bible doesn’t specify what is in need of repair but apparently the worshippers of Baal have carried off some of the items used in worship and the building itself requires structural repairs. At our church, we recently had a financial campaign to repair the steeple and rotting windows which wasn’t nearly as exciting as building something new, but was an important part of keeping the doors open.

Initially Joash tells the Jehoaida to collect the money and to do the repairs. He allows plenty of time, “but by the twenty-third year of King Joash, the priests still had not repaired the temple.” (v.6) At this point, the king and his mentor take a more pro-active approach. Apparently, the money intended for use on the temple is consistently being diverted elsewhere and while there is no indication of wrong-doing, budgetary concerns continually impede the renovation project at the church. So they make a big chest, bore a hole in the top and designate the funds “For Repairs Only.” As the chest fills up, they develop an accounting system that keeps everyone accountable and the work begins.

The verse that follows states, “They did not require an accounting from those to whom they gave the money to pay the workers, because they acted with complete honesty.” (v. 15). Even in that time of turmoil, there were some people were known to be so scrupulously honest that their reputation was unimpeachable.

Who do you know that would fit the the description of “complete honesty?”

I know that at times I can look inside myself and find areas where I am deficient as relates to honesty—and mostly honesty with myself. I can overlook my own excesses or faults or criticisms as being fully justified. I find it less easy to be so generous with others...Does this ring a bell with you? How can we become more honest in all our dealings?

Trouble from the North

It sounds like shortly after all the work is completed and things are back in order at the temple, King Hazael of Aram is on the prowl (Remember, he is the one that was anointed by Elisha and then turned around and murdered Ben-Hadad by smothering him). After capturing neighboring Gath, he turns his wandering, lustful eye toward the prize of Jerusalem. To appease him, King Joash gathers all the gold he can find, including the

newly dedicated items and sends them off the Hazael who decides to accept the bribe and move on.

Unfaithful at the End

At this point, our passage summarizes the rest of Joash's reign in verses 19-21, saying that he goes on to be murdered after reigning for forty years. Sadly, in II Chronicles 24:17-27, we see some expansion on the king's final days, and it is not a pretty picture. After his mentor, Jehoaida the priest, dies, Joash, seems to lose his center. He listens to flattery and appears to develop a bad case of pride and also of amnesia about what God has done for him. "After the death of Jehoiada, the officials of Judah came and paid homage to the king, and he listened to them." (v. 17).

Listening to flattery— it is so easy to do; so hard to resist! Abraham Lincoln once said, "Knavery and flattery are blood relations." Joash certainly proves the truth of this dictum as he quickly slides from a position of ruling with righteousness and descends rapidly into idol worship and depravity.

We might think that he was "trained up in the way he should go" so what about the second half of that verse? Why is he straying away at the end of his life?

It is possible that Joash kept the rules, followed the commands, but all under the firm hand of his father figure and protector, Jehoaida. With the priest's last breath, the leash of moral guidance slipped from Joash's conscience. He appears to have had a "grand-child" relationship with God—not a direct connection, but more of a second hand faith through his mentor. God invites us to be in a one-on-one close relationship with him. He loves us deeply and desires an intimate walk with us. There is a lot of truth to the saying, "God has no grandchildren." Joash's fragile faith quickly shatters and collapses under the syrupy sweetness of the flattery that comes to call.

Are we guilty sometimes of connecting more with God's messengers than with God himself? As we continue on our journey of faith, do we sometimes gravitate toward different spiritual leaders? Authors of great Christian books? Sunday School teachers? Specific ministers? Our parents? Does our faith ebb and flow with our allegiance to these people? Do we feel our faith dying a little when our favorite pastor moves to a different church? Or when we are disappointed in our leader's behavior?

Can you think of a time when your loyalty to a spiritual leader created problems in your life?

Jesus invites us to keep our eyes firmly centered on him. People will always disappoint us—every last person on the face of the earth will eventually disappoint us—because we are all broken people. Some of us hide it better than others, but just scratch the sur-

face a bit, and out it comes, rust and ruin, barely concealed by the make-up of good behavior and window dressing.

King Joash's life is a warning to us that in our spiritual journey there is no setting for auto-pilot. Each day we get up, put our feet on the floor and walk humbly with our God. We enjoy the security of his love and his salvation but we also know that we are susceptible to temptation at any point along the way. Solomon, in all his wisdom, built a kingdom, a temple, a body of God-inspired literature but even he, at the end of his life, suffered the corrosion of sin from living in close contact with his myriad pagan wives day after day, night after night. Even as we reach old age, we must continue to pursue opportunities to read scripture, commune with God and with his people, and to spend time in prayer, while avoiding the sirens' song of temptation, mouths filled with their canticle of ease, flattery, and dissolution. As God himself expresses it to Cain in Genesis 4:7, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

How can we become people who make gathering with other Christians in a church setting a priority? How can we be invitational and nonjudgmental at the same time?

How can we become people who bring others into a one-on-one relationship with Christ? How do we take people by the hand and lead them closer to him, all the while acknowledging the fact that we are all broken and have many shortcomings?

How can we continue to stay connected to God through the different phases of our lives? How do good spiritual habits help us along this path?

Elisha Dies

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God, Let my deeds in this life be the kind that will keep producing good fruit even after I am dead and gone. Let me be the kind of person that leaves this world a little bit better than I found it. Amen.

Breathe in Scripture

II Kings 13

Meditate and Seek Insight

Meanwhile in the Northern Kingdom...

In our family, we tried to teach our children how to leave things a little better than they found them, meaning that when we stayed in someone's home or went camping or rented a cabin, we tried to look around before leaving to make sure we picked up our own trash and left things in good order. Notice the operative word, "tried!" The children did not learn this simply by our telling them. Starting early, we attempted to set a good example, using our words to explain why, and then coaching them in following the modeled behavior. In this part of our story, we see a king who is initially sadly lacking in any effort to leave his kingdom a better place.

After Jehu's death, his son, Jehoahaz takes the throne. He "does evil" (v.2) in God's eyes and the Lord uses the king of Aram, Hazael, and his son, Ben Hadad, to oppress the people. They all suffer because of his poor leadership for "a long time." Jehoahaz must have had what I like to call a "come to Jesus moment," when he realizes that he needs to reform and through his leadership, pass on that reform. "Then Jehoahaz sought the Lord's favor, and the Lord listened to him..." (v.4)

Even if we head down the wrong road "for a long time," God stands ready to listen and to help us turn around if we will only ask.

In your own life, have you had any times when you were going in the opposite direction from the way you knew God would have you to go? What made you seek the Lord?

“The Lord listened.” What a wonderful reassurance it is to know that the God of the universe listens and responds when we reach out to him. Look at the following verses and make a few notes about what stands out to you:

Psalm 18:6

In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.

Jeremiah 29:12,13

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 33:3

Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.

I John 5:14

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

Because Jehoahaz asks, God answers and in a mighty way. In verse 5 we read, “The Lord provided a deliverer for Israel, and they escaped from the power of Aram.” That small sentence comes fully loaded with a stack of unanswerable questions: Who? How? The Bible leaves the events that actually transpired to our imagination. But that word, “deliverer,” is the same word that is used for Moses; the fact that their resources were so completely depleted (see verse 7) also intimates that the deliverance might have been quite a miraculous story. The end result is that through God’s power and might, he delivers the people once again and they are able to go back to living in their own homes (v.5).

Although Jehoahaz does an about-face and seeks God’s hand of mercy, he and his people do not turn fully to God, continuing with vestiges of their former idol worship. When the king dies, the country is not necessarily better than when he arrives. He leaves some litter strewn around to contaminate an otherwise beautiful passage.

Elisha's Final Words

Continuing in the rather tiresome tradition of naming all their children names that start with the letter "J," King Jehoahaz's son, Jehoash, takes the throne when his father passes away. During his reign, the great prophet Elisha becomes ill after nearly six decades of dedicated ministry. The king goes down to visit Elisha and weeps over him, saying, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" using the same words Elisha once used as he bid Elijah good bye.

Why do you think he uses these particular words? One thing is clear: the story of Elijah's departure in the whirlwind via a horse and chariot of fire, is widely known and repeated verbatim. Even at this early date, the story has already joined the national narrative of God's chosen people.

It is possible that in using this particular phrase, Jehoash wishes to honor Elisha by equating him with Elijah. Or maybe he wants to somehow receive some of the blessing and wisdom of this great man before he departs the earth. Whatever the reason, the dying prophet responds to the appeal and asks the king to bring him a bow and arrows. Putting his hands over the king's hands, he guides the arrow to demonstrate the power to defeat Aram, their enemy to the north. Then he follows up by asking the king to "Strike the ground." The king must not have been enthusiastic enough because he only hits the ground with the arrows three times, bringing about the exasperated exclamation from the prophet, "You should have struck the ground five or six times..." (v. 18) Elisha's anger possibly stems from the lack of vision that he perceives in the king, a man seemingly without the intensity and resolve to completely finish off the Arameans.

God longs to fill us with big visions and dreams that are beyond our ability to accomplish on our own. Several years ago, Bruce Wilkinson published a short book called **The Prayer of Jabez**. The book is based on I Chron. 4:10, "Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.' And God granted his request." Wilkinson went on to write that this scripture leads us to a prayer life that can open up our lives to new possibilities.

Let's look at some scriptures about God's take on what is possible and what is impossible:

Matthew 19:26-

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'" What is Jesus referring to here?

Ephesians 3:20

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory...” This verse is part of a prayer that Paul says for the Ephesians. What are some of the phrases he writes in the verses preceding this particular verse that express so well some of the grand visions Paul has for the young church at Ephesus?

Philippians 4:13-

“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” This is the ultimate power verse, isn’t it? Can you think of a time when these words spoke especially to you and provided that much needed boost to help you keep going? Consider memorizing this verse and it’s reference so that it is always on the tip of your mind and easy to get to when you need it.

I remember a particularly vivid sermon illustration my dad used when I was a young girl. He said there was a man who went to heaven and St. Peter met him at the pearly gates to give him the grand tour of all the fine sites. The man was thrilled with his guide and with all that St. Peter showed him: streets of gold, jewel encrusted sidewalks, beauty beyond compare. But as they walked along, they passed a door that clearly had a lock on it. Brown, nondescript, the door stuck out like a sore thumb. Intrigued, the man stopped St. Peter, and pulling on his cloak asked him, “I thought that in heaven there wouldn’t be any more locks or closed doors. What is behind there?” St. Peter tried to distract him but the man simply would not move on. Finally, St. Peter sighed and said, “I’m sorry to tell you, but behind that door are all of the blessings you were not prepared to receive.”

Sadly, God is much more willing to give than we are to ask. He wants to bless us beyond our imaginings. But the cost is simply this: everything. We give him our all—our will, our obedience our very selves. In return, we live lives that reflect the Prayer of Jabez, full of wonder and light. The children of Israel, God’s chosen people, are simply unwilling to consistently worship God and him alone. They chose instead the path of unfaithfulness and idolatry. The resultant judgement fulfills God’s word.

Bones Bring Life

“Elisha died and was buried.” (v.20) The verse is short and sweet. No whirlwind or chariots of fire. And yet what comes next is a bit of jolt. Moabite raiders routinely come into the area to kill and loot, surprising the local residents and in this case catching them as they are burying a man. In their haste to seek shelter and protection, the men throw the body in Elisha’s tomb on top of Elisha’s bones. As soon as the corpse touches the

bones, the man comes back to life and “stood up on his feet!” (v.21) It almost makes me chuckle to imagine the hair-raising scene as the friends run in one direction, the Moabites in another, and the newly resurrected man stands looking down at Elisha’s bones wondering what is this world happened to him. Though dead, Elisha’s remains continue to give life to others—his bones give literal life in a rather dramatic fashion— but more than that, Elisha’s life continues to give us new spiritual life today through the challenges that his ministry presents to us. We study his words and deeds and try to discern truths that take us into lives of greater faithfulness to God and loyalty to his Word.

As we wind down our study of Elijah and Elisha and the company of prophets, God’s mercy and grace have the last word, “But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day he has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from his presence.” (v.23)

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

Leaf back through some of the Elisha stories that we have studied. Which ones stand out to you?

Which one do you think was the greatest prophet: Elijah or Elisha, and why do you say that?

Make a list of some practical steps that you plan to take to live a life of greater faithfulness and vision before the Lord:

Chapter 7
Day 5

The New Testament Elijah

Prayer for Inspiration

Dear God,
I am still having trouble with
right and wrong.
Sometimes I am certain I am doing
the right thing and I get wrong results.
Other times it is obvious to me
that I am doing the wrong thing,
But I get positive results.

Learning that everything is relative
has made it even more difficult.
Collecting data, opinions, taking polls,
even reading the Bible,
all add to the confusion.

Sometimes I find myself concealing
what I know to be true,
in order to make possible a greater good.
Surely you know, O God, how I struggle with that.
I want to be your obedient child.

Please, please, never tire of reminding me
That it is not what I do that is right and good,
that makes me your blessed child,
but the fact that I am, indeed, your blessed child
that makes me yearn to do what is right and good.
Whisper it to me again, as
Brother Martin did long ago,
“The tree bears the fruit and not the fruit the tree.”
—John Winn

Breathe in Scripture

Malachi 4:5-6- Prophecy
Luke 1:16-17- John the Baptist
John 1:19-28- John is confused with Elijah
Matthew 16:13-20- Who are you?
Matthew 17:1-13- The Transfiguration

Meditate and Seek Insight

The Last “J”

Do you like to play Scrabble? Back when our youngest was learning to spell, I tried all sorts of creative ways to work on spelling lists: we used tactile learning techniques by tracing letters into flour or shaving cream. But the most successful approach also proved to be the most enjoyable—playing Scrabble together. We started out with the simple words and worked up from there—well, he did. Now he is so competitive that I don’t stand a chance! But if you remember playing the game, one of the hardest letters to play is the letter “J.” It can make the difference between winning and losing, between an ordinary score and a stratospheric result. So it is with the final “J” in our study. If you are like me, you have had quite enough of names like Jehoahaz, Jehu, Jehoshaphat and on and on...Now let me introduce you to the one “J” that makes all the difference. Coming from the lineage of David, this “J” surpasses and fulfills all the prophets and prophecies. Our beloved Jesus came to live among us, to lead us into a relationship with God, and to make the ultimate sacrifice for us so that we might “have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Elijah and Elisha and all the prophets to come before Jesus, paved the way for him. Through their miracles, these men of God led by example, working to draw the children of Israel away from a wasted life of idolatry to a life full of promise and hope. The Old Testament closes with these words, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Mal. 4:5,6) In Luke 1:11-17, we see an angel appear to Zechariah, a priest destined to be the father of John the Baptist. Read over this passage and consider these questions:

How does Zechariah react?

What does the angel say John will be to them and to others?

How will the Lord regard John?

Why is John not to be given wine or other fermented drink?

What will be the result of his ministry?

Whose spirit and power will he emulate?

Are the closing words familiar? And what does the last phrase say is the end result of John's ministry?

Words of Prophecy

Jean Piaget, the cognitive-developmental theorist, wrote about children going from magical thinking to concrete thinking then transitioning into the higher level abstract thinking as their brains mature and they move into adulthood. But so often it feels that in the spiritual realm many of us remain magical thinkers or concrete thinkers, reluctant to move to higher levels of reasoning when it comes to God's word and its interpretation. God gives us the Bible so that we can know about him but also so we learn that we cannot fully understand. We read the stories, discover facts, explore correlations and cross references, but at the end of the day we have to acknowledge that much remains a mystery. And so it is with the ancient prophecies, like that of Malachi.

As the New Testament opens, we detect confusion about the fulfillment of these words. As magical or concrete spiritual thinkers, the people are looking for the same Elijah to return. So they question both John the Baptist and Jesus about who they are and whether they are the reincarnation of Elijah.

In John 1:21-27, we see a group of emissaries question John the Baptist about his mission. They press him by asking, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" (v.21) John patiently replies to their queries by pointing them away from himself and toward Jesus, the answer to all their needs.

What does John say about Jesus in verses 27,28?

Jesus himself brings up the question about his own identity in Matthew 16:13-20. Look at this passage and consider the following questions:

1. Who do people say the Son of Man is?

2. But what about you? Who do you say that I am?

3. This was not revealed to you by man, but by—Whom?

Through Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, we are also invited to answer that question for ourselves. Who is this Jesus to me? Do I simply admire him and all he said and did or do I accept him as Lord and savior of my life, relinquishing my all to him?

Transfiguration

A short week after Peter hears himself identifying Jesus as God, Jesus reveals himself more fully to Peter, James and John when he takes the three of them up a high mountain. "There he was transfigured before them." (Matt. 17:1-13) The dictionary defines "transfiguration" as "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state." The Bible tells us that Jesus' face "shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light." Moses and Elijah appear with him and they begin to have a conversation among themselves. (Don't you wonder what they talked about?) Moses stands as the representative of the law and Elijah of the prophets. Jesus is the culmination of all the other two ever hoped to do, and he basks in the pleasure of God the Father who speaks out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Peter, nearly overcome, babbles about building shelters until he hears God's voice; then he and James and John drop to the ground, facedown, in silent terror until Jesus approaches and with a gentle touch says, "Get up. Don't be afraid."

As they walk down the mountain together, the four of them talk about what has happened and Jesus makes them promise not to talk about it until he is raised from the dead. They seem to mentally skim right over the part about Jesus dying and move into their questions about whether or not Elijah is coming back. Jesus clarifies that indeed, a spiritual Elijah had already come, but they "have done to him everything they wished." At this point, the disciples are able to make the move from concrete thinking into the more abstract, realizing that Jesus refers to John the Baptist.

Breathe Out Actions and New Life

When we first started this study, we discussed how our lives consist of breathing in and breathing out: breathing in personal piety and breathing out social action. My prayer is that as you have moved through these ancient stories of droughts, feedings, fire from heaven, wars, idols, death, and resurrections that your faith has grown and been strengthened. From Genesis to Revelation our God, creator of all the universe, seeks to draw us to himself. Holy and mighty, he is also a God of justice and judgement, one who does not allow us to divide our worship. The unifying message of love, compassion and salvation from a holy God shines through as we move through these scriptures.

Let us close by reviewing I Kings 19, where God comes to meet Elijah on the mountain top. Listen to God as he speaks to Elijah and also to me and to you, dear sister or brother in Christ:

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

And now this...

What are you doing here, my friend?

As you close this study, write a few words below to the Lord, asking him to lead and guide you as you move forward in your journey of faith. May God bless and keep you!

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**Joy Eastridge
November 11, 2014**

Comments or Questions?

You can contact me at joy@eastridges.com. I look forward to hearing from you!