

Package Deal

900 tired eyes watched as bucket after bucket of water drenched the sacrifice upon Mt. Carmel. Earlier, the prophets of Baal had vainly prayed and danced and even drawn blood to get the attention of a lifeless god. Now, Elijah calmly commanded his temp-assistants to make the sacrifice to Jehovah as wet as possible. He was supremely confident as he spoke, *“LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”*

You know the story. Fire came down from heaven and consumed not only the burnt sacrifice but the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the surrounding trench. Now when all the people saw *it*, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He *is* God! The LORD, He *is* God!” And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!” So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there.

After this, he boldly instructed the wicked king Ahab to eat, drink and then to ‘hit the road’ because it was going to rain (something it had not done in three years due to Elijah’s prayer). Subsequently, he prayed for rain to return and sure enough,

dark clouds and heavy showers covered the land. Then, on foot, he outran the king’s chariot arriving at the royal city ahead of Ahab. Awesome!

Hundreds of mocking eyes watched as mountains of lumber and lakes of pitch were used to erect a strange edifice, something so large in size and structure as to awe even the ridiculers. Noah and his sons labored with fantastic patience and tenacity. Simply setting the massive skeletal timbers in place required incredible planning, preparation and pulley genius. Surely, years and years of constant prayer, dialog with the designer, was necessary. Dozens of times, an exhausted Noah probably felt challenged to give up. But he didn’t. He was taunted, harassed, oppressed, and discouraged by nearly everyone. In an environment where the thoughts and imaginations of all people – every man, woman and child, had become violently evil continually, you can imagine his concern with vandalism to say the least. He was alone, but he was faithful.

And he finished! He did all that the Lord God instructed him to do. No detail was tossed aside. No effort was considered a waste of time. Finally, the time arrived. With just a week’s warning, Noah prepared to board. Perhaps it was a crisis of faith. God had to beckon him from within the ark to enter. Noah knew that in going into the ship, he was leaving behind all he knew, the entire world was going to be destroyed. He obeyed but surely with overwhelming sobriety. Shortly afterward, pair after pair of all sorts

of animals filed tamely into the monstrous structure.

Curious neighbors looked on. Rumor had it he thought it was going to rain (something it hadn’t ever done before). And there in the boat was this preacher of righteousness along with his family.

“Hey! How are you going to close the door??” they laughed. But the mirth changed to dearth when God Himself closed the doorway. Awesome!

Thousands of anxious fearful eyes gazed upon a young lad as he exited the king’s tent. Some shook their heads, some turned away, dropping their weapons in sheer disillusionment. Some shouted ‘atta-boys’ but they could barely be heard above the din of jeers and laughter coming from across the valley. Poised on opposing sides of the gulf between them which was strewn with discarded armaments and the previous days’ casualties were the hosts of the Philistines and the army of Saul. ‘Surely this was a ruse,’ some thought. Perhaps it was Saul’s way of discrediting the taunting challenges of the enormous man now standing between the armies.

They all watched in fascination as the young lad trotted down to the stream and seemed to be praying. “No, he’s not bowing, he’s picking up stones?!” said one Israeli soldier to another. Stones?? The young boy was David and before him a giant nearly twice his height.

“Eliab! Isn’t that your little brother??”

“What!??” Eliab’s face was part angry, part shocked, part afraid as he noticed it was true. He was about to run down and stop his youngest

brother when suddenly the giant roared again, “Am I a dog? Who is this pitiful little runt with a stick in his hand?” David shouted something back but it was hard to hear.

“Don’t worry Eliab,” said one of the soldiers nearby holding him back. “He’ll dance around, dodge a spear and then come back up here as fast as a mountain goat.”

‘I hope so!’ thought the older brother knowing his father was going to hold him responsible. But just then David ran headlong towards the giant. Straight at him!

“What’s that in his hand? A SLING??” someone nearby shouted.

A veteran fighter next to Eliab turned away. “I’m sorry, friend. It’ll be over quick.”

Suddenly, there was a thunderous CRACK that rang out across the valley and where the giant had stood arose a cloud of dust. In the midst of it, a large sword flashed in the sunlight.

Both hoards could not believe their eyes as the young boy held up the dismembered head of Goliath the champion of Gath. Like a mighty wave, courage filled the hearts of Saul and his men while horrible fear engulfed their enemies. The battle was engaged. Victory was complete. Awesome!

The scripture is filled with such stories of supreme faith and obedience. In considering them meditatively, we can almost hear the crowds cry out or mock or cheer. Nevertheless, these heroes inspire us to greater obedience to the Lord. As Rich Mullins sang, *“...stories like that make a boy grow bold. Stories like that make a man walk straight”*.

But we have a particularly nasty aspect to our nature that God doesn't. We are awed by the heroic deeds of the faithful, but we are also inclined to critique anything and anyone that falls short of our personal standards. When someone fails our measurement, we are often moved to 'write them off', to look elsewhere for our picture of perfection. Thus, marriages crumble; thus, pastors fumble; thus, friends and followers grumble. Yes, even heroes fail.

Elijah sulked. Exhausted from his arduous journey to the back side of the desert, there he moped and felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. The hole he was in was more than this cave; it was darker than the mountain's hole. It was lonelier than the desert wastes. It was a fear filled depression. God spoke to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

So he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

Noah puked (possibly). There in the lonely tent, he fell down utterly drunken from the wine he had made. Was it because of the reality of worldwide devastation set in? Was it fear of the burden of starting a new world all over from scratch? Was it unexpected fermentation? What ever the cause, he was drunk as a skunk and as a result presented a real stumbling block to his family. The preacher of

righteousness was wasted, inebriated and probably 'in the buff'.

David stared. He had turned from leading the armies of Israel to voyeurism. His lust for the naked woman on the nearby housetop erupted. Orders were given and in a short space of time, David had violated terribly the marriage of one of his most trustworthy mighty men. Not content with betrayal, he plotted deception and when that failed, he plotted murder. In doing so, he set in motion the consequences that brought life long tragedy, personal grief, family chaos and national disaster.

Heroes and 'hienies'. Just about the time we're thinking someone is really awesome, they turn out to be awful. And we're bitterly disappointed. We break up, walk away, go to yet another church. We become 'monastic', bombastic, sarcastic and sad. But someday you'd think it would sink in – it's a 'package deal'.

Now, God is never surprised. He knew it before they blew it. He knows the 'end from the beginning'. We, however, are amazed and disillusioned by how those we admire can rise so high and yet fall so low. Why do you suppose God promised, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."? Precisely because it is our inclination to believe that He is caught off guard and becomes as bitterly disappointed as we are in others' failures or our own. But He is not.

That is not to say, however, that He condones our sin or even tolerates it. He dealt with it eternally on Calvary and deals with it even

now as we submit to Him (yes both dealings are part of the 'deal'), but He made the 'package' in its original perfection and understands exactly what we have become in its corruption. When He died on the cross, He bought the whole package if you would. It's not that part of our nature belongs to us or to the devil and part to God. He owns it all, lock, stock and barrel.

So when He put you together with that spouse, it wasn't surprising to Him that you've had 'challenges'. And when He led you to that church, He knew you'd find people and situations that rubbed you the wrong way. And when He says, "I love you," it's not because you've fooled Him into thinking you're better than you are.

I submit that a significant part of the fractured, disintegrated condition of the contemporary church is related to this issue. The Bible makes it clear that our faults need to be confessed -- not so we can react to them in knee-jerk fashion but so that we will humbly "pray for one another". One thing I so greatly appreciate about my own pastor is his candor and awareness of his need for God's grace.

Understanding that we are each a 'package deal' so to speak won't make it hurt less when the ugliness of our sin nature rears its head. But, if we do, perhaps we will consciously seek to appropriate more of the heart of God when such is the case. How does the Lord deal with us?

He chastises His children to be sure but always in love. He never gives up on you – in fact, the completion of His good work in you will skyrocket your appreciation into the heavenlies. He is so patient and

longsuffering as to boggle the mind. He is always lifting up those who are bent or loaded down. He forgives and forgives and forgives and... He always welcomes back those who have strayed. In fact, He also searches them out. He guards and protects the weak. He binds up the broken hearted. He is never too busy for us. He is never insincere. On and on it goes.

Has someone let you down? Have you been the letter-downer? Step back for a moment before you react. Go to prayer. Consider the package. Seek the heart of God.

In his book "What's so Amazing About Grace," Philip Yancey tells a story about a man and wife who one night had an argument about how supper was cooked, it was so heated that night they slept in separate rooms. Neither has approached the other to say I'm sorry or to offer forgiveness, and they have remained in separate rooms years after the argument, each night they go to bed hoping that the other will approach them with an apology or forgiveness, but neither goes to the other.

"... in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."—Yancy

Elijah, Noah, David, you and me – we're all a package deal in God's eyes and, Praise His Name, He knows just how to deal with it.