



## The Refining Place

“How badly do you want me?” This is the question God is asking those who are seeking Him in these days of spiritual drought. Jesus counsels us as he did the church at Laodecia to buy gold refined in the fire. Painful? Yes. But worth it.

*Then the word of the LORD came to him: “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” (1 Kings 17:8-9, NIV)*

In Canterbury Cathedral there stands a statue of burnished bronze. It is the effigy of the Black Prince, Edward of Wales, a military hero of his people in the wars with France. Over time, the statue, due to accumulated deposits of grime and protective enamel, lost its golden luster and actually turned black. Several years ago the deposits were removed, the statue was refined, and Edward’s effigy was restored to the glory of its original state.

Spiritual drought does the same thing to God’s people. As I’ve said previously, the problem in the church today is not a lack of Bible study or religious “exercises”. The problem

in the church today is that the things which are meant to be the means to an end – spiritual growth as seen in experiencing God’s presence and hearing God’s living word – have become ends in themselves. They are like the protective enamel meant to preserve the prince’s statue; they have actually become counter-productive.

Jesus warned the religious leaders in his day of this very thing saying that their interpretations of Scripture had replaced Scripture itself. Even worse, said Jesus, they had replaced the God of the Scriptures with the Scriptures themselves. (See Matthew 15:9 and John 5:39) Theologians actually have a word to describe this error, bibliolatry.

As I read the story of Elijah, I can’t help but relate what God does in the prophet’s life to what I believe he is seeking to do in our lives and in the life of the church today. For six months Elijah experiences the desert heat at Kerith. He learns to depend on God during his wilderness sojourn. Most important, he begins to realize God’s presence and provision in places and things he never imagined. A desert hideout? Unclean birds? But Kerith was only the beginning of God’s work in the life of his prophet.

After six months, the little trickle of water on which Elijah depended for survival dried up. That’s when God’s word came to him. I’m sure the word that Elijah received from the Lord was not at all what he expected to hear. How could he have imagined that for the next three years he would be living in Baal’s back yard? Zarephath was a city in Sidon. Sidon was the center of Baal worship. It was also Jezebel’s homeland. As if this were not bad enough,

God instructed this able bodied Jewish man to seek refuge and provision from a Gentile widow with an orphan. (Children without fathers were considered to be orphans in Elijah's day). What a lesson in obedience and humility for God's servant!

As I said, I can't help but believe that Elijah's experiences are in many ways a picture of what God is seeking to do in our lives and in the life of his church in these days of spiritual drought. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ to the church at Laodicea flash across my mind as I write these words – "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." (Revelation 3:17, NIV) These words describe the spiritual drought that exists in the church today. Most important, they describe the awful reality of how blind we are to the dry and thirsty land in which we live!

One of my favorite authors is Dick Staub. I want to encourage you to check out Dick's web site at [dickstaub.com](http://dickstaub.com). In his book, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, he asks a question that all of us need to answer – "What if we think we are at a high point in church history but are actually at a low point?" (p. 29) Obviously, I've answered that question and believe the church is, in fact, at a low point. We need to recognize that we are indeed, wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. This is why I keep hammering home the point that in order to experience God in times of spiritual drought we must first recognize that we are in fact living

in days of spiritual drought. This brings us to something that none of us wants to hear, but that is crucial to our spiritual health.

What advice does Jesus give to the church at Laodicea? What needs to happen to set them free from spiritual drought? “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 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 that person, and they with me. (Revelation 3:18-20, NIV)

Gold refined by the fire speaks of painful purging that comes through trials. The trial we must face is the recognition that we are living in spiritual drought. Once we recognize the reality, our souls will realize how thirsty and needy they are. This is a painful experience, but it leads to the white clothes that cover our nakedness and the salve that opens our blind eyes. Best of all, it leads to an open door and intimate fellowship with Christ. We share our meals, our life, with him. There is nothing in life that compares with this experience.

Christ loves us enough to discipline us. Don't think of this as angry punishment. It's not that at all! Think of it as painful, but necessary training that conditions us, and allows us to become the servants and disciples God is calling us to be. The biblical metaphors of athletes in training, or soldiers preparing for battle are the best pictures of the kind of

discipline that Jesus describes as we move from the nakedness and blindness of drought to the joy of fellowship and the living water that flows from our innermost beings.

Is this what you're looking for? Is this the cry of your heart? As you read these study guides and listen to the messages does something deep down inside of you cry out saying, "This is what I am seeking? This is where God is leading?"

It's not an easy path. It is the narrow path that Jesus speaks quite candidly about. But it is worth it. Life is found on this narrow road. Joy, peace, purpose, all those things the human heart cries out for are found on this difficult, but rewarding path. Join me. Let's walk it together. Let's invite others to take the journey with us.

### **Think About It**

1. By going to Zarephath in Sidon, Elijah really was moving into “Baal’s back yard. At the same time, God was doing a great work of refining in the life of his servant. Carmel and the fire from heaven was waiting at the end of this trial. What painful trials are you experiencing? Take some time to reflect on the lessons God is seeking to teach you.
2. As you think about both the broad and narrow paths that Jesus describes, are you able to identify areas of your life that need to be moved from one path to the other? Jesus calls the whole person to follow him -- heart, strength, soul, and mind. Meditate on what this means for you. Ask God to speak and help you identify areas that are uncommitted to him.