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## **Food For The Soul**

1 Kings 19:7

There are times in all of our lives when we discover that we do not have the resources to meet the challenges that are before us. In the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Kings Elijah finds himself at such a moment. A messenger from Queen Jezebel arrives to deliver a message to the young prophet. The message is a death threat from the Queen. When Elijah receives this message he wastes no time in taking to the road to flee for his life.

Elijah has been embroiled in a bitter struggle to overturn the policy of King Ahab which imposed the worship of Baal on the people of Israel. When Elijah succeeded in humiliating the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the momentum was clearly swinging in favor of the reformers. It appeared that those who wanted to restore the public worship of the Lord in Israel were on the verge of achieving their goals.

But Elijah's moment of triumph at Mt. Carmel proves to be fleeting. In fact, it simply opens the way for the repressive forces of Queen Jezebel to take the reins of power from the weakened King. A major crackdown is launched and Elijah's name is at the top of the list of those declared to be enemies of the state.

As Elijah takes to the road he realizes that he has lost the brash self-confidence with which he began his ministry. He sees that his dreams of success are only an illusion. The way forward is full of uncertainty and danger. It is obvious that he does not have the resources to prevail against the forces of the Queen. His only option is the life of a fugitive who is constantly on the run. The biblical writer tells us that in a moment of exhaustion Elijah lays down to sleep under a broom tree hoping never to wake up again. The prophet has fallen into a deep depression.

A similar moment came for one of the charter members of this church in 1822. John Watson was born in South Carolina in 1800. In 1808 he moved with his family to Illinois. They lived on both sides of the Mississippi River in the Edwardsville area on the Illinois side and near Louisiana on the Missouri side. They were part of a group of Scots-Irish pioneers who were pushing into Indian country. During the War of 1812 his family lived for several years in a stockade fort for protection from Indian tribes who had been induced by the British to massacre settlers. Some in their group were indeed ambushed and killed by Indians. Eventually they were evacuated to St. Louis by the militia.<sup>1</sup>

Watson and his twin brother Cyrus struggled to get an education on the frontier. They were bright and motivated but access to teachers was sporadic. Their best source of education came from the Presbyterian ministers who were missionaries in the back country. In 1821 John and his brother left home to live with a Presbyterian minister to be prepared for college studies. They both hoped to become Presbyterian ministers. They worked to support themselves by day and studied at night. After a year and a half the minister pronounced them ready for college. There was only one problem. They needed money for college and their family did not have it. A memoir written by John Watson's twin

brother Cyrus many years later describes the project they undertook to earn money for college to prepare for a future in the ministry:

Trade with New Orleans in country produce had been profitable for several years before, and our friends advised us to make a venture ... for the purpose of raising money to put us through college. ... We at once commenced building a flat boat and bargaining with the farmers around for a load of pork and beef and sundry other articles of less importance, all on credit. We sawed the planks for our boat with a whip saw, hewed out all the other timbers, and constructed the rude vessel with our own hands. We went through the wilderness ninety miles to Boone's Lick for salt, packed our pork and beef, cured and smoked a large quantity of bacon, and early in the following April set out on our floating voyage and early in May arrived at Natchez, Mississippi. There we found the market glutted, and believing that the prospect for making sales at New Orleans was even more unfavorable than at Natchez we determined to remain where we were until there would be a change for the better.

The first Sabbath after our arrival we attended the Presbyterian Church and Sabbath school. The second Sabbath a kind old elder who superintended the school... became deeply interest in us. He was greatly surprised at seeing two beardless boys so far from home and with so great a responsibility resting upon them... For about a month we remained there and regularly attended church and Sunday school. The good old gentleman called on us quite often... One morning he came to our boat quite early, and, with a troubled expression ... said, "My young friends, I have come to tell you that you must get away from this place as soon as possible; the Yellow Fever has broken out in the city and you will be almost certain to fall victims to it if you stay." I told him that... I was well aware of our peril. "But," I said, "What can we do?" "We are deeply in debt, and, under existing circumstances, can dispose of our cargo only at ruinous prices... We shall be rendered hopelessly bankrupt, and all our hopes of acquiring a good education and becoming useful in the world will be utterly blasted. We have therefore determined to remain until prospects become better and take the risk." "No," he replied, "that you must not do; you are promising young men and your lives are too valuable to be thrown away."<sup>2</sup>

The elder found a merchant who owed him a favor and agreed to pay twice the market rate for their goods. It was not enough to fully repay their creditors, but it enabled them to avoid financial ruin. They returned to St. Louis where Salmon Giddings, the founder of Presbyterianism in that city, allowed them to enroll in his school. Once again they worked during the day to pay off their debts and studied at night. In Giddings' school and church John Watson may well have formed a friendship with another aspiring seminary student, Elijah Parish Lovejoy.<sup>3</sup> Lovejoy would go on to Princeton Seminary while Watson gave up his plan to enter the ministry and found his way to Springfield to become a charter member and elder of this church. When Lovejoy graduated from Princeton Seminary he returned to St. Louis and then moved to Alton, Illinois to publish an anti-slavery newspaper. When he founded the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society in Alton in 1837 John Watson was at his side with nine other men from this church.

The significant contributions of John Watson to this church happened because an elder in Natchez saved his life. Recognizing that the lives of these young men were too valuable to be thrown away he provided for them the resources they could not muster on their own. The care he took and the guidance he gave was food for the soul.

This is the gift that Elijah receives on his perilous journey. While the depressed young prophet is trying to rest under the broom tree, an unexpected messenger arrives. As Elijah is slipping into that “no man’s land” between sleep and wakefulness, the messenger brings the simple gift of food and water. The message he delivers is “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you (1 Kings 19:7).” It was another way of saying “your life is too valuable to be thrown away.” The gift that Elijah receives in that moment is food for the soul. This moment is a pivot point for Elijah. No longer is he a fugitive. Now he is a pilgrim on his way to the mountain of God. There he will have a life changing encounter with his Creator, preparing him to shape the future of his people.

The gift received by Elijah and John Watson is the indispensable resource for our most challenging journeys. At the heart of our calling is the task of receiving and giving food for the soul.

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#### Endnotes

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1. Clayton Keith, “History of the Watson Family in America,” page 5, and Cyrus Watson, *Autobiography of Cyrus Watson*, page 305.
2. Cyrus Watson, *Autobiography of Cyrus Watson*, pages 307-310.
3. Cyrus Watson’s autobiography states that he and John were enrolled in college level studies in Salmon Giddings’ school in St. Louis from about 1825 to 1828 (pages 310-311). A “History of First Presbyterian Church of St. Louis” states that Elijah Lovejoy joined the church in 1827 during the ministry of Salmon Giddings. A biographical sketch of Lovejoy on the University Archives web site of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville indicates that Lovejoy came to St. Louis after graduating from Colby College and was teaching there in 1827. Two years later, he became a newspaperman. He enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1832 and completed his degree in 13 months, returning to St. Louis in 1834. Opposition to his editorials led him to move to Alton, Illinois in 1836. It is possible that Lovejoy was one of the teachers of the Watson brothers in Giddings’ school in 1827-1828.