

Cycle of Spiritual Formation FCC 1-31-21

When we look at nature we can observe cycles, patterns, and processes in the way living things grow, develop, and change. Many plants start out as seeds, which sprout, grow, the plant makes more seeds and dies, and the process starts over. Of course there's our parental concern for the growth of our children. We tend to their needs because we recognize the significance of those needs in the overall process of their development.

But what about our spiritual growth? Have you ever thought about the sort of cycle or process that might contribute to your spiritual growth?

Today we are going to look at that cycle in the life of Elijah. Now as we do this, I'm going to be using a couple of common words in a different way. Those two words are being and doing.

BEING encompasses all the facets that make up who you are: identity, character, intimacy with God, convictions, personality, conscience, giftedness, values.

DOING refers to activity in our lives that is directed by God or done for God, fruitfulness or ministry.

As we look at Elijah's life specifically, we will see that there are phases when Elijah is focused on carrying out ministry (which I will refer to as "doing") and other phases when God seems to focus on sustaining or shaping Elijah's heart and soul (which I will refer to as "being").

These phases rotate to form a pattern in Elijah's life.

DOING 1

Elijah enters the stage. He is sent to tell the king there will be no rain for 3 years.

1Ki 17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

At first glance this seems like a really short 'doing' time. But I really doubt that Elijah just strolled into the palace, spoke one

sentence, and then just walked out. I'd be surprised if he didn't get drilled with questions and arguments by King Ahab and maybe even other officials who may have been present. Who knows how long that took. Elijah is making a very big and bold declaration here. It's one thing for the meteorologist on TV to say that the forecast looks dry for the next few days or even the next few weeks. It's entirely another matter for a prophet to say there won't be one drop of precipitation from the atmosphere for three whole years. Imagine the conversation that would be prompted when Ahab thought about the socio-economic implications of that statement. Imagine how Elijah felt when he left the palace- I don't know about you, but I think I would be exhausted. And I don't think I would wake up the next morning from a great night's sleep with a big stretch ready to tackle the agenda for the day. I don't know about you, but I think I'd be so concerned about the future of my people that I couldn't function. I really don't think you just toss out a prophecy like this and then just go right on to the next thing. So this is a really hard day of ministry in Elijah's life being summarized in one verse here. So that's the first phase of doing in Elijah's life.

BEING 1

Then Elijah seems to exit the stage. God hides him east of the Jordan then in a widow's house for those 3 years.

1Ki 17:2 And the word of the LORD came to him:

1Ki 17:3 "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.

1Ki 17:4 You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

Then there was no rain and the brook dried up.

1Ki 17:8 Then the word of the LORD came to him,

1Ki 17:9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

God took care of Elijah and his needs for those three years. He wasn't all alone- he had company; and he wasn't doing nothing- he

helped that widow in miraculous ways. But overall this was a time for God to minister to Elijah's heart and strengthen him for the next task. That's the first phase of a focus on being that we see in Elijah's life.

DOING 2

Then Elijah enters the stage again. He confronts prophets of Baal and God's power is manifested (1 Kings 18:1-46).

1Ki 18:17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"

1Ki 18:18 And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.

1Ki 18:19 Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

1Ki 18:20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

1Ki 18:21 And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word.

Just to summarize the story, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal and Asherah to call on their gods to start a fire on their sacrifice and they couldn't do it. Then Elijah calls on the true God to start a fire on his sacrifice after soaking it in water, not gasoline, and the fire was so hot it even burned the water. This was definitely a day of victory and, although I use this term cautiously in reference to ministry, success for Elijah. But put yourself in Elijah's sandals: let yourself feel the emotions that Elijah is feeling as he confronts King Ahab, as he challenges 850 pagan prophets, as he rebuilds the altar, as he prepares a sacrifice, then in faith soaks it down, then calls on God for fire, then kills the pagan prophets, and then prays and waits intensely until the rain finally comes. Can you imagine a higher spiritual high or a greater

adrenaline rush? But at the same time, can you imagine the courage and effort it would take to squelch all your doubts and anxieties at each of those times? That's an emotional and spiritual drain. And then imagine the drain as you come down from what would probably be the highest spiritual high of your life, and the feelings that would set in when the adrenaline surge subsides. So yes, this is another significant phase of doing in Elijah's life, but a phase of that level of intensity cannot be sustained for long.

BEING 2

So then Elijah exits the stage again. He runs for his life and goes through a period of isolation (1 Kings 19:1-18).

To summarize this part of the story, Jezebel threatens to kill him, so he leaves everything, even his servant, and flees to the wilderness, and an angel fed him, and then he flees to Mount Horeb and lives in a cave and God speaks to him. He sees wind, earthquake, and fire from God, but God was not in them. God was in the low whisper that followed. Elijah had done some amazing things for God, by God's power, to demonstrate God's glory. God is now nourishing Elijah's spirit with the truth that God does not only speak in shocking or fearful ways, like fire or drought or strong rain. God speaks in gentle, quiet ways as well. God brought tranquility to Elijah's heart, and shaped Elijah's understanding of how God may more often relate to his people and to Elijah personally. Elijah had a renewing experience of time with God. That's a second phase in Elijah's life in which God shapes Elijah's inner being.

DOING 3

Then Elijah enters the stage a third time. He is sent to begin the mentoring process with Elisha (1 Kings 19:19).

1Ki 19:19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and

he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.

After this, Elisha follows Elijah and learns from him. So this would be a phase of doing in Elijah's life, but it's interesting that the kind of doing he does is to train Elisha. That training is not just one of passing on skills and information, in other words, the training is not just about doing; it's not just about what Elisha is supposed to do. That training is also, and primarily, one of being, as Elisha would be shaped in his own inner being by the character, convictions, and identity of Elijah as a man of God. The being of one shapes the being of another. That's a third phase of doing in Elijah's life.

We could look into further details of Elijah's life that are relevant to this pattern of doing and being. But it's time we should cut to the proverbial chase.

APPLICATION

The reason I share this with you is because I think there is valuable insight to be gained by understanding the various ways God has worked in our lives to shape us. Many Christians experience a cycle of spiritual growth that involves an oscillation between phases of doing in which God challenges you to do things for him and that helps you develop your skills, abilities, and gifts; and phases of being in which God moves you to experience him in new or deeper ways in order to form your character, convictions, or sense of identity in Christ. This cycle could go on over your lifetime. And over your lifetime, ultimately, God is at work to help us learn to prioritize being over doing, so that what you do for Christ flows out of who you are in Christ.

Eph_3:16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

Over time then, God grows us so that doing flows from being and the seasons may become less distinguishable as your life becomes more integrated.

In my life, seasons of God's deepening or renewing work have been followed by seasons of growth in ministry. This cycle of being and doing is a pattern that I have noticed in my own life as I look back. Funny thing is, I don't always know for sure which phase of the cycle I'm getting into until I'm in it. For example, when I started seminary, I was taking classes back to back and I thought that would be a time to get better at actually doing ministry. I went into those classes with questions and I wanted answers. The church had needs and I wanted to know how to go about meeting those. I wanted to know how to reach the world and grow the church. And yes, over time I learned a lot about all of that. But I was surprised how much I grew in my inner being during seminary, especially during the on-campus intensives. It was as if God had to work deeper in the area of being before He could move me into another phase of ministry or doing.

Maybe you don't notice this pattern in your life, at least not in such an obvious way. It's a rather obvious pattern in Elijah's life, and when I look at my own life it seems obvious, but there have been some big changes in my life at different times. Maybe this pattern is more subtle in your life. That's ok- your life might be more consistent and integrated than mine. Or maybe you see these phases but they overlap. They certainly have overlapped in my life.

That's because being and doing are not mutually exclusive phases. Being does not equal inactivity. It is simply a focus on heart, soul, character, inward journey, deepening. Being does not always require stepping away from doing. By the same token, a focus on doing does not mean, certainly should not mean, an abandonment of reflection and inward change. Changes in your inner being can definitely happen at busy times of serving God.

The bottom line is that in the Christian life depth determines height. If you want to do great things for God, you have to be deeply rooted in God. It's just like a building- the taller the building is going to be, the deeper the foundation needs to be. You can get away with setting a little old granary down just on concrete blocks, you see that all

over, but I wouldn't do that with the state capitol building. God has to work on the foundational issues in our lives, our inner being, in order to be strong enough to support the assignments he gives us- the doing part.

Have you noted seasons when God seemed to focus more on being (character, heart, soul) and seasons where He seemed to focus on doing, that is, serving him and being fruitful?

Try to find one of each kind of season in your life. What happens when you look at your life through this lens? What do you see? And how does that help you see the means God has been using to form Christ in you over time? And how might that also help you understand how God is going about shaping you right now? Or how God might go about shaping you in the future? My challenge to you today is to reflect on that, and to share with at least one person this week one way in which God is shaping you. Share the means he is using to shape you, or the way in which you are being shaped, or both.

The big picture here is that we each need to give thought to our spiritual growth. Every Christian can experience a great blessing by observing the means that God has used or is using to shape them, and experience even greater blessing by cooperating with God in those times. Change in the human heart is the greatest miracle God does. Each of us can be observers of the God of wonders at work in our own lives. Let us pray.

Benediction: 2 Peter 3:18