

“Elijah: A Man Like Us”

1 Kings 16:29-34; 17:1; James 5:17-18

Some years ago, our family was without power for several days as the result of an ice storm. If you’ve ever been in one of those, then you know what it is like. You’re up the creek if you depend on electricity for heating or don’t have a secondary source of heat. You lose refrigeration, there’s no hot water for a shower, and there’s no lights at night for the dark. And once the power finally came back on, I don’t think that I’ve ever been more grateful for electricity. There are certain times in our lives when we experience darkness that makes us that much more appreciative for the light. I am not referring to the absence of electricity as much as I am the fog that is brought on by seasons of emotional and spiritual depression. We get disoriented and uncertain of direction. There’s an unsettled feeling that seems to wrap its fingers around our mind and heart. And worst of all, we feel powerless to escape and wonder why God seems so far away. Have you been there? If you’re there now, there is a way through it.

This morning we are beginning a study for the next several weeks on the life of Elijah. And I hope that you will find a D-group to get plugged into if you are not already. We will be looking at Elijah’s life together in a study we’re calling, “Ups and Downs.” Life as we know it is full of ups and downs. There are highs and lows, mountain tops and valleys. And sometimes we experience them all in one day. Much of what we’re going to look at in the next few weeks will deal with the subject of our emotions and our inner thought life. We will discover that even a godly man like Elijah who experienced the highest of highs also faced the lowest of lows. James 5:17 says that he was a man like us. (Read)

In his character study of the life of Elijah, Chuck Swindoll calls him “a man of heroism and humility.” He was a man who could boldly stand before the king

because he humbly bowed before God. Ours is a world that has lost its way, due in part to the lack of godly leadership. And we're more than ever in need of some 'Elijahs' who are not afraid to live courageously before men as they walk humbly with God. Even though he had a firm backbone, Elijah also had a tender heart. And that really comes out in the chapters from 1-2 Kings that are devoted to telling us his story. One person has said:

John Paul Jackson — *“Elijah was a paradox, a walking contradiction of foresight and blindness, faith and fear, power and weakness. He stood against 850 prophets of Baal, yet ran from one woman. He asked a dying widow to feed him before she fed herself and her son, then years later raised that son from the dead. He taunted kings, complained to God, healed people, and actually changed the course of nature. Elijah was a man's man with a nature just like yours and mine.”*

What exactly does it mean when James 5:17 says Elijah was a man with a nature like ours? It means that he was a man like us, someone with whom we can identify. Think about it this way (see screen):

“The story of Elijah is not the story of a great man, but of a great God working through a very human man.”

I think that we sometimes have this idea of the men and women of God in Scripture, that they were invincible or even super-human. Surely they didn't face the ordinary struggles of life like us. Somehow, they were able to live above it all, right? Not at all. The Bible has only one Hero, and it is Jesus. Everyone else is imperfect, flawed, and just as much in need of a Savior as we are. We can learn from both their successes as well as their struggles, while at the same time keeping our eyes on Jesus. Paul said it this way in:

Romans 15:4—“Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises to be fulfilled.”

Few prophets in Scripture have provoked as many people and inspired as many preachers as Elijah. A man from the desert, who seemed on one hand to be bold and invincible. While on the other hand, also seemed to know profound moments of despair. His life is just as much of a puzzle now as it was then. He takes his place among men like Moses, Samuel, and the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. He is one of the very few people in the Bible who shows up in both the Old and New Testament. His story takes place in 1-2 Kings, but he also appears on the Mount of Transfiguration. And some have identified him as one of the two witnesses who are mentioned in Revelation 11. When you consider his ability to cause droughts, raise the dead, and heal the sick, it may be hard to relate to him.

Yet at the same time, Elijah was also human—a man who experienced the range of emotions, faced fears, doubts, moments of elation as well as moments of depression. Elijah was a man who knew something about the ‘ups and downs’ of life. And so there is no wonder that James describes him as a man with a nature like ours!

How was Elijah a man like us? First of all, consider:

1—The TIMES he lived in (16:29-33)

“Ahab son of Omri began to rule over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of King Asa’s reign in Judah. He reigned in Samaria twenty-two years. But Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord’s sight, even more than any of the kings before him.”

Charles Dickens begins *Tale of Two Cities* with the famous phrase, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Well, when you think about the times in which Elijah lived, we might say, “It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times.” When you study the lives of people in history, you also have to study the historical context in which they lived. That’s because we can’t really separate people from the context of their times. Character is always forged within a context. I mean, when you think about Abraham Lincoln, it is impossible to understand him apart from the Civil War. The crisis of his day became the furnace in which his leadership was proven. And in the same way, we can’t understand Elijah apart from the spiritual crisis of his generation.

Maybe you remember the song that said something to the effect that ‘these are the days of Elijah.’ And that’s really a pretty good assessment. The political, religious, cultural, and spiritual context of Elijah’s day was not unlike our own.

Politically, it was divided by compromise

Many years before Elijah ever stepped onto the scene, the kingdom had been divided between Israel in the north and Judah in the south. For more than 100 years, Israel had lived under the reign of three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon. After the death of Solomon, the nation is divided due to the folly of his son Rehoboam. Ten northern tribes broke away from the house of David, while the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty. The northern tribes were known as the kingdom of Israel, while the southern tribes became the kingdom of Judah.

From the time of the split until Israel’s eventual captivity, the northern kingdom had a total of 19 kings who were all corrupt to the core. The Bible says that they did “evil in the Lord’s sight.” It is an expression used over and over again, and

you see it in verse 30. The southern kingdom of Judah had 17 kings spanning more than three centuries. Eight of these kings followed the Lord, and nine were wicked, much like their northern counterparts. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom collapsed and the people were carried away into captivity by the Assyrians, never to return. This was God's judgment on their idolatry. The southern kingdom lasted a bit longer, but was eventually overcome by the Babylonians in 586 BC. After a period of 70 years, they began to return to Jerusalem from their captivity, though they remained under foreign influence and control all the way up until the time of Christ.

When the split happened under King Rehoboam, we read in 1 Kings 12 that the northern tribes made Jeroboam, son of Nebat, their king. In order to maintain his power over the kingdom, Jeroboam introduced his own homemade religion to the Israelites. It was his attempt at keeping the people from returning to David's house. He had a worrisome fear:

1 Kings 12:26—“And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord.’”

And so to solve the problem, Jeroboam made two golden calves, placing one at Bethel and the other at Dan, and he commanded the Israelites to worship them as their gods. It was Jeroboam who introduced idolatry to Israel in the formal sense. For 22 years, he is king in the north. After he died, his son Nadab becomes king in his stead, and he is just as evil. But he's only king for two years before he is assassinated by Baasha son of Ahijah. And when Baasha becomes king, he immediately kills anyone left over from the house of Jeroboam. He

reigns for 24 years until his son, Elah, takes over and becomes king. Elah is king for only two years and is assassinated by his servant, Zimri.

When Zimri becomes king, he takes out everyone left over household of Baasha. Yet this guy is only king for a mere seven days. The people make Omri, the commander of the army, their king. In response, Zimri burns the palace down upon himself. When Omri becomes king, there is a civil war that breaks out between those that want him as their king versus those who don't. Omri wins and goes on to reign for 12 years over the northern kingdom. 1 Kings 16:24 says that Omri buys a hill upon which he builds a city, names it 'Samaria,' and makes it the new capital of Israel. But verse 25 says that Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and he did more evil than all who were before him. When Omri dies, his son becomes king in his place, and his name is Ahab. He is king in Elijah's day.

Bloodshed and assassination, murder and mayhem, lies and conspiracy, the proliferation of sin and immorality. This describes the culture of the northern kingdom for six long, dark decades. The evil that begins with one man on the throne permeates throughout all the land, corrupting land and people. It was indeed the worst of times.

Religiously, it was consumed with idolatry

Now, when Ahab becomes king, he takes things to a whole new low! R.G. Lee, the famous preacher, said it best:

"Ahab was a vile human toad who squatted befoulingly upon the throne of his nation, the worst of Israel's kings...and Jezebel was the adder beside the toad!"

Verse 30 says that Ahab did what was evil in the Lord's sight, more than any of the kings before him. Jeroboam's counterfeit system of worship had been institutionalized for decades so that an entire generation had grown up in this divided, idolatrous nation. King Ahab took that idolatry to extremes, going so far as to marry Jezebel, the Sidonian princess. Her name has become synonymous with evil and seduction, and it means 'Baal is lord.' Verse 31 says her father was King Ethbaal, king of Sidon, which was an ancient city located on the Mediterranean coast. They were of the Phoenician people who worshiped Baal, the Canaanite storm god. Ahab and Jezebel introduce Baal worship to Israel and even make it the state religion.

Now, the first time that 'Baal' is mentioned in the Bible is in Numbers 22. Baal worship originated with the Canaanites and had long existed in the areas surrounding Israel. Yet it didn't really find its way into the hearts of the Israelites until it was formally introduced by Ahab and Jezebel. What was Baal worship, and what was involved? Let's just say that it was perverse, to say the least!

Baal was worshiped as the storm god, the god of rain and fertility, seen as the one who was in control of the seasons and the harvest. Baal was often worshiped along with his female consort, Asherah, who was seen as the goddess of good fortune. Ahab had an altar built for Baal as well as a pole for Asherah, and invited all of Israel to join he and Jezebel in their idolatry. I have often wondered what made Baal worship so appealing to them. All throughout the OT, we read how Baal worship is a real snare to Israel, from the time of Judges onward. Baal was a popular alternative to the worship of the Lord since the people were dependent upon the rain.

Why is this so? Keep in mind the fact that OT Israel is an agricultural society. As such, they were always dependent upon the rain for the success of their

economy. Canaanite religion worshiped Baal as the storm god. Baal's female counterpart, Ashteroth, was worshiped as the goddess of fertility. And the Canaanites believed that when Baal and Ashteroth got together, rain was sent upon the land. Baal worship involved a system of ritual prostitution to elicit the gods. The whole system was unspeakably wicked and sexually perverse.

Imagine how an Israelite man could be drawn to this. Baal worship appealed to the flesh, to the emotions, and to the senses. It was something that they could see, touch, and taste. The worship of God was based on a covenant that was written in a book, something that never strictly appeals to the senses. It is a matter of faith and understanding that leads to convictional living. And that faith goes against the grain of cultural gods that make their appeal to the desires of our flesh. This is how idolatry always works. It takes us down the same dead end road:

- Idols **entice** us— Idolatry takes a part of creation and makes it the ultimate source of security, identity, and satisfaction.
- Idols **ensnare** us— The idol only makes you more miserable the more you give your heart to it. It is a vicious downward spiral. An idol fails to deliver on its promises. When its expectations are not met, it robs you of joy.
- Idols **enslave** us— We become trapped. Whenever you make an idol out of something, it always binds you to it and makes you its slave. You absolutely have to have it, can't live without it, so you can't so say no to it.

This is not something that is strictly reserved to an ancient culture, but is just as true today as it was then. False gods still appeal to us, but they go by different names. It may not be Baal and Ashtoreth, but prosperity and pleasure?

Tim Keller — *“Our contemporary society isn’t fundamentally different from these ancient ones. Each culture is always dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its priesthoods and rituals. Each one has its shrines—whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios, or stadiums—where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster. What are the gods of beauty, power, money, and achievement but these same things that have assumed mythic proportions in our individual lives and in our society? We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.”*

Israel was awash in idolatry that led them away from God. But then notice how:

Spiritually, it was ripe for revival

It is against this cultural and religious backdrop of idolatry and compromise and wickedness in high office that Elijah’s life shines forth. That’s the time in which the prophet lived and served God. Elijah will be the instrument that God will use to call His people back to repentance and faith. When times are dark, the light of God’s truth shines bright. It was true then, and it is still true now. Then I want you to notice a second thing:

2—The TRUTH he stood for (17:1)

“Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, ‘As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!’”

Politically and religiously, things were in a mess. And by the time Elijah steps onto the stage, the kingdom has been in this condition for roughly 60 years. He did not live in the immediate aftermath of the division, but at a time in which an entire generation had grown up knowing nothing but a divided kingdom and a depraved system. Like a streak of lightning that illuminates the nighttime sky, Elijah suddenly bursts onto the scene in 1 Kings 17. All the information we read about him is given right here in verse 1. If you were to go back through the previous chapters, you wouldn't find a thing mentioned about him. He just shows up on the scene out of the blue. However, what we are told about Elijah is very significant. The way he is described communicates a message before we even get into what he said.

His name declared his conviction

The name 'Elijah' is a compound word. The Hebrew word for 'God' in the Old Testament is 'Elohim,' which is often abbreviated as 'El.' The word 'jah' is the abbreviated word for 'Jehovah.' And so in Elijah's very name, we see both the word for God and Jehovah. Between them is the little letter 'l' which in Hebrew has reference to the personal pronoun 'my' or 'mine.' When you put those three together, Elijah's name means 'My God is Jehovah.' Or, 'The Lord is my God.' His name served as both a witness and a rebuke to his generation. Ahab and Jezebel had led the kingdom to bow down to Baal, but Elijah declared, "The Lord is my God!" It's interesting that it is this very truth that the people will cry out later on Mount Carmel.

His home demonstrated his obscurity

In addition to his name, verse 1 also tells us where Elijah is from. There is no mention of anything about him outside of the fact that he was from a little place

called Tishbe in the mountains of Gilead. If you are looking on a map of Israel, Gilead is the mountainous region east of the Jordan River. Back in 2019, Anita and I spent some time with friends of ours who were serving with the IMB. And we actually got to visit the traditional place where Elijah was from.

(Picture of Tishbe from my trip to Jordan)

As you can tell, there is nothing spectacular about the spot. It wasn't much then, and it isn't much now, but that's where Elijah was from. It was obscure. It wasn't a place of polish and sophistication. And it is usually from such places that God raises up a prophetic voice. Who would have thought that God would have raised up a young man from rural NC to preach the gospel to more people than anyone else in history? You and I wouldn't have thought to do that, but that's what God did with Billy Graham. And that's exactly why Elijah is such a contrast in his day. Desperate times call for different men. Ahab and Jezebel represent wealth, power, international influence, and royal sophistication. Jezebel came from Phoenician royalty. Baal worship had institutional backing. Against all of that, God sends Elijah the Tishbite, a rugged and obscure man from Gilead.

Elijah arrives in Scripture without genealogy, credentials, or introduction. And it emphasizes that God's power does not depend upon human prominence or résumé. The times did not need another man who knew how to fit in. Instead, the times called for a man who was willing to stand out.

His faith displayed his courage

Notice in verse 1 how Elijah boldly tells Ahab, "As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give word!" In both his name and his message, Elijah hoists his colors high on the mast. My God is the Lord, He is the God of Israel, and He is

the One I serve. It is a declaration that God will not share His throne or His people with another. It is a statement that the Lord God alone is worthy of worship and not Baal. And there is no room for negotiation.

As a prophet, Elijah is not confronting a sudden departure from God. The sin he confronts did not happen overnight. He's confronting the accumulated consequences resulting from decades of spiritual compromise. The biblical role of the prophet was essential in the overall plan of God during Israel's history. God called prophets to declare His Word to wicked kings and to His wayward people. And as you can imagine, the job of a prophet was tough. The prophet was not popular. He was often hated because of his message of rebuke and repentance.

In an act of judgment against Israel's idolatry, Elijah makes the bold declaration that there will be no more rain until he gives the say so. Baal was supposedly the 'storm god' in charge of the weather. Baal was associated with rain and the productivity of the land. So that when Elijah announces there will be no more rain, he is saying, "Let's just see who really is in control of the weather!" The people had served a false god who supposedly controlled the rain, and so the Lord is essentially saying, "Then let Baal make it rain." For the next three and a half years it will be evident he cannot! Maybe you wonder how Elijah arrived at this idea that God was going to send drought upon Israel. I mean, is it simply something that picked out of mid-air? No, I don't think so. It goes back to something that God had previously said:

Deuteronomy 11:16-17—“But be careful. Don't let your heart be deceived so that you turn away from the Lord and serve and worship other gods. If you do, the Lord's anger will burn against you. He will shut up the sky and

hold back the rain, and the ground will fail to produce its harvests. Then you will quickly die in that good land the Lord is giving you.”

It was on the basis of that promise that Elijah began to pray earnestly according to James 5:17 that it would not rain. It was Elijah’s faith in God to do what He said He would do. I believe that long before he showed up before Ahab, he had received a Word from God and had been praying. His faith came by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Elijah knew what God had said and he prayed accordingly. And our prayer life will become richer whenever it is informed by God’s Word and reflect His priorities. Instead of just asking God to bless your children, pray that they would “walk in truth” (3 John 4). Instead of simply praying for our church to grow, pray for believers to be “filled with the knowledge of his will” (Col. 1:9). Or instead of asking God to remove difficulty, pray that trials would produce maturity in your life (James 1:2-4). The prayer of faith is Scripture-fed and Spirit-led! One of my favorite definitions of faith is this one from an old SBC evangelist:

Manley Beasley — *“Faith is acting as if something is so, when it seems not to be so, in order for it to be so...because God said it is so!”*

Elijah was a man of conviction and faith in God’s Word. So we’ve seen the times in which he lived, and the truth that he stood for. There is one more thing that I want you to see, and it is:

3—The TRIALS he went through (17:2-7)

“Then the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go to the east and hide by Keith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.’ So Elijah did as the Lord told him and camped beside Keith Brook, east of the Jordan. The ravens

brought him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank from the brook. But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land.”

When you consider the time in which he lived and the truth that he stood for, it is of little wonder that Elijah also faced his share of trials. We'll have to come back to this the next time, but Elijah's conflict with Ahab will make him a marked man. But let me mention a few of his trials, and then see if you can identify:

Deprivation—the brook dried up

God leads him to a place where He provides for his needs, but eventually the drought will affect even him. The brook dries up and Elijah has to leave. Have you been there?

Confrontation—the enemy rose up

Ahab will search high and low for him and put out an 'APB' on Israel's most wanted man. It will lead to a confrontation on Mount Carmel where he will face a showdown with the 850 prophets of Baal. Have you ever had to stand alone?

Depression—the prophet gave up

In chapter 19, Elijah will be a man on the run and we will see him collapse under a juniper tree and pray to die. It will be a low point in his life. He knew well the experience isolation from others, deprivation of needs, accusation from friends, confrontation with enemies, and exhaustion from his struggles. That's why James says he's a man like us, someone with whom you and I can identify. If it could be shown that Elijah's place in history was the result of some unusual talent or ability, then his story has no real meaning for us. But if he's a man like us, a man who operated out of a Source of strength which is also available to us,

then his story is all the more important. For when things look most dark and ominous, when evil seems to have done its worst, that's when God begins. He usually begins in a very obscure place by preparing a very obscure person. That's the message of the gospel, isn't it? It is into our darkness that God sent His Son with the light of His truth.

Galatians 4:4-5—“But when the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Before we finish, I want to give you two closing thoughts for personal application:

- *In a world of compromise, we must stand up for truth and stand out from the crowd.*

If these are the days of Elijah, then what does that imply for our responsibility as God's people? Ours is a society that has lost its way, a generation that has grown accustomed to the darkness, with a culture that has become swept up by the spirit of Ahab of Jezebel. You can either get swept up by it, or you can stand up for truth and stand out from the crowd. And if ever there was an opportunity for us to stand up, stand out, and let our light shine, the time is now.

David Roper—*“Perilous times are times of unparalleled opportunity. Those who know God must not fear them. They should rather buy them up, making the most of every opportunity to show their faith and to share it because the days are evil.”*

Jesus said that His disciples are like salt in a flavorless world, and light in a dark place. The world is our mission field and the gospel is our message. And if you and I are going to take our role as Christ's witnesses seriously, then it means that we will be swimming against the current of society. And that is not an easy thing.

- *In life's ordinary ups and downs, we must learn to trust an extraordinary Savior.*

That may be the great encouragement of Elijah's life. He really was "a man with a nature like ours." He had his ups and his downs, his highs and lows. There were days when he stood courageously before kings and days when he sat discouraged beneath a juniper tree. There were moments when his faith seemed unshakable and moments when fear got the better of him. He experienced provision and deprivation. He knew the thrill of victory and the sting of disappointment, courage and exhaustion. Elijah's life was not a straight line upward—and neither is ours.

But friends, the hope of Elijah's story is not ultimately found in Elijah. It is found in Elijah's God. And the God of Elijah has revealed Himself fully to us in Jesus Christ. Our faith is not in our ability, but in Christ. Our circumstances will change. Our emotions will fluctuate. Our strength will sometimes fail. There will be days when faith comes easily and days when simply taking the next step feels difficult. But our trust is in Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). In the person of Christ, God became Man. In Him, we have someone like us, One who was tempted, yet is sinless and perfect. And He had to be made like us in every way so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service of God, to make atonement for our sins (Heb. 2:14). That means He knows our weaknesses. He carried our sin, and at the cross He suffered the judgment we deserved. God raised Him from the dead, and having sat down at the Father's right hand, He is now interceding for us.

Elijah means, "The Lord is my God." Jesus means, "The Lord is salvation." The extraordinary Savior we need has come, and today He invites ordinary, sinful

people like us to come to Him. Turn from your sin, place your faith in Jesus Christ, and receive salvation that only He can give!