



THE
FALLS
CHURCH

Sunday, August 16, 1981

Elijah - One Man Alone

SERMON
ARCHIVES

I Kings 17:1

Today we begin a four week series of sermons on Elijah. There are many prophetic giants who loom large on Israel's historic horizon - known for their courage and the closeness of their relationship with God. The influence of men like Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah and women like Deborah, Esther and others is well known to those who know the Bible.

None, however, was more powerful and influential than Elijah - perhaps the most mysterious of all the old testament prophets. He bursts onto the biblical scene, already well known in his day, although we know almost nothing about his origins. He was a phenomenal hero and yet, at the same time, a frustrated quitter. Elijah stood up against towering odds in conflict against the king and the prophets of Baal of his day, and yet he ran into hiding at the threat of an angry woman.

It is my intention to focus on 4 major events in the life of Elijah between now and Labor Day. I would like to ask you to turn in the Bible to page 311, I Kings, Chapter 17. We are not going to get to that for a while, but I would ask you to hold your finger there so that when we get to the place, you can refer to it. I want to acquaint you with the background about this first incident in the life of Elijah.

There are a number of parallels between Elijah's day and our own. Just as in our time the major concern of the nation was economic concern. Solidifying Israel's economic security was uppermost in the mind of King Ahab.

The second major concern of the day was both a moral and spiritual concern. In spite of Israel's unique ties to Jehovah, the Lord God Yahweh - the God of Abraham - who had brought the nation of Israel into existence, there was now a powerful movement towards paganism among the people. Baalism was the chief rival to the worship of the Lord God. Baalism was closer to the pervasive secularism of our own day than you might initially think. Its emphasis was on personal pleasure - do your own thing. The appeal of that is obvious and the whole Jewish religion appeared to be in danger of collapse.

The time was the latter part of the 9th Century B. C., the place was Jerusalem, and the king was Ahab, the 8th king of Israel. He was a pragmatist with no particular faith in the Lord God.

Ahab was often at war with Syria. We know that he fortified all the cities of the land, he decorated the palace in Jerusalem with fancy inlaid ivory, and he married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, the king and chief priest of Tyre and Sidon. It was a political marriage to solidify the alliance between Israel with this seacoast country that was important to their economic well being. But the major impact of the marriage came through Jezebel's fanatical determination to convert Israel to the worship of Baal. She brought with her 450 priests of the Baal god, Melkart, and 400 priests of the fertility goddess, Ashtarte, demanding that her pagan gods have equal rights all up and down the line with Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Baalism exercised unbelievable appeal - it emphasized power, success, and pleasure - the ends justify the means and the end is security and pleasure. Dishonesty, bribery

even under certain circumstances murder could be justified. Nothing could have been more in disagreement with the lifestyle and faith of the people of Abraham. The worship of Baal which involved sleeping with temple prostitutes of both sexes, encouraged the most lascivious kind of sexual practices, and its most famous and horrible practice was that of child sacrifice.

Baalism held the day. Its aggressiveness appealed to the young people of Israel and it encouraged their natural rebellion against the older values. Calling the people of Israel back to the strict, moral demands of God seemed almost a hopeless task. Perhaps the most insidious lie of the prophets of the new religion was the principle that a person could be Jewish and yet embrace the sensuous Baal practices at the same time - have your cake and eat it too.

For all these reasons, most people thought that Judaism was on the way out, would never again acquire its former place in Israel. Baal altars had been built all over Israel and the Jewish priests had lost their moral power. Under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, faithful Jews had become afraid to speak out against the evil practices of the day. Hundreds of the prophets of God had been murdered by Jezebel's representatives.

Ahab, according to I Kings 16, "did more to provoke the Lord God than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

Never had the national character of Israel seemed so bankrupt.

We do not like to think of our own America today as morally bankrupt and it certainly is hard to generalize and we must be careful in our generalizations about so varied and diverse a people. And yet there are definite parallels. When has personal security and pleasure ever been so great a goal in our land? The titles of some of our best selling books are really frightening. The two that came out at the same time that stand out in my mind always are: "Looking Out for Number One" and "Winning Through Intimidation". Advertisements for everything from underwear to far away resorts stress the need to get all we can in this one opportunity that we have to go round in life. Last year Americans spent 244 billion dollars in the endless pursuit of leisure. One out of every eight dollars spent in America last year was spent on pleasure.

America's radically shifting sexual mores have been annually documented for many years. Chastity and faithfulness in marriage are now the exception rather than the rule.

We are too sophisticated to use the name of Baal today, but sometimes I wonder just how different are the secular goals of "making it", "self actualization" and success from the goals of the 9th Century B. C. in Israel.

From the paganism of the past there is even a parallel to the horrible practice of child sacrifice. Since 1973 more than 8 million unborn babies have been aborted. Last year 1-1/2 million lives were terminated by the abortionist. Twenty years ago practically everyone in America agreed that abortion was criminal, and yet today the abortionist is seen by many as the emancipator of womenkind. 74% of Americans approve of abortion in most circumstances. Abortion is not just a problem of women. Men and women equally bear the burden. It is a complicated issue. While a very small percent of these abortions are certainly necessitated by tragic circumstances, it is my opinion that the vast majority are simply sacrifices to the god of convenience.

I heard the other day of a person who is contemplating abortion because her pregnancy will inconvenience her family vacation!

While this is not a sermon on abortion, you must know that, complicated as the issue is, I believe this to be a horrid sin, but a sin for which there is forgiveness, thank God.

If Jesus Christ taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that the potential of murder or the intention of murder in the human heart is as bad as the actual deed itself, then certainly the actual murder of a developing, potential person in the womb is murder as well. I fear God's judgment on America because we tolerate abortion!

Israel in Ahab's day, was fast becoming simply a pagan land. There seemed to be no faithful and courageous men or women who could speak out effectively against the powerful tide of hedonism.

But even at such a time, God was not at a loss. God is never at a loss. God had been preparing a man - a weak man in an obscure village - for the task of bringing Israel back to God. Elijah was his name.

Elijah came from a tiny hamlet in the mountains of Gilead called Thisbe, hence "Elijah the Thisbite." It was a rugged land of solitude that produced sturdy folk. Elijah was a roughly clad, rather frightening looking person with unkempt beard and hair. God had given him the gift of prophecy, and when he preached, the word of God came through with a power that was overwhelming. His name means Jehovah, or Yahweh is God, or Yahweh is my strength, and his life was dedicated to serving Jehovah God. He had no seminary training; he was not ordained. It is interesting to note that few of the truly great men and women spiritual leaders of holy scriptures had professional training. His training was a lifelong study of the holy scripture - mostly the writings of Moses. He had an intense desire to serve God.

No one in Israel had watched the spiritual and moral decay with more sorrow and anger than Elijah, as bits of news filtered across the Jordan river to where he lived. Most of his time was spent in solitary meditation in the hills, tending sheep and goats perhaps. But a day came when Elijah knew that God was calling him to a dangerous and daring mission.

Elijah had been praying for his country which is a task we should all set ourselves to with passion, and evidently he had been studying the Bible. Sometimes in such a moment God speaks, sometimes he will speak to us in times of prayer and meditation. And he spoke to Elijah.

Apparently Elijah was led in his meditation to a passage from the 11th Chapter of Deuteronomy - a frightening denunciation made by Moses to the people, that if they ever turned aside, worshipped and served other gods, the Lord God's wrath would turn against them, the heavens would be shut up and there would be no rain.

Evidently following this idea in his mind, his thoughts must have run something like this:

"If God does not fulfill this threat, the people will think it is an idle tale or that He is a myth, an old, dead tradition. This must never happen. Better by far that the land should suffer drought and famine, that the people suffer the worst economic and physical woes, than that we should come to think of God as dead or powerless."

And so Elijah set himself to pray - a terrible prayer - that God's word be fulfilled and that it might not rain. An awful idea - yet not as awful as for the

people of God to turn away from Him and give themselves to the orgies of Baal.

Physical suffering is a smaller calamity than moral delinquency. If the suffering brought by drought would bring the people back to God, it would be worth it. There are times when God allows suffering to turn us back to Himself. There are times when God sends punishment on a people, even a nation, for their sin.

As Elijah prayed, the conviction grew within him that he should go to the court of Ahab, which was many days journey, and confront the king personally with the word of God. In his heart, Elijah knew that God would keep his word and drought would come. Only national repentance, beginning with the king himself, would avert the coming drought.

How he managed it we cannot know. How Elijah, in spite of all the palace guards and court attendants came face to face with Ahab, we do not know. But he did. And now I want to read to you from the passage that I asked you to turn to a few minutes ago. This is the beginning of the tale of Elijah - I Kings 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.'"

What a confrontation that was - the puny, dirty little man of the desert against the greatest man in Israel. Nothing could have been calculated to have made Ahab more angry. It was nothing short of a miracle that Elijah escaped from Ahab's presence that day alive. The man had courage and it grew out of an unshakeable faith in God and righteous indignation for the sake of God.

Elijah's strength and his courage - his greatness - lay not in himself, his family, his training. Later on, we shall see, as James says, that Elijah was a weak man with the same tendency to sin and fear as you and I have.

No - Elijah's strength came from God and we see that in his two preliminary statements to Ahab:

"As the Lord lives" - God was the supreme reality in Elijah's life. Jesus Christ lives today and the fact that He lives and that His word is eternally true is more important than anything else; just as the living God was more important to Elijah than anything else.

"Before Whom I stand" - Elijah was standing before Ahab, but he was conscious of standing in the presence, more importantly, of God Himself. You and I need to cultivate the same moment-by-moment awareness as well. Wherever we are and whoever we are with - most importantly, we are in the presence of God.

Well, this is the beginning of the story of Elijah - a weak man made strong by faith; a man who stood alone against a nation but with whom stood God - whose Authority was God; a man who studied the times and who studied the word of God, who interpreted the national scene in the light of Biblical truth; a man whose prayer brought ultimately a whole nation back to God.

We need men and women of the stamp of Elijah today.

As we learn about him, may God develop in us the same qualities of faith, moral character and courage for Jesus Christ's sake.