

ELIJAH

The Making of a Man

1 Kings 16:29 – 17:7; James 5: 13-20

This morning we begin a series of sermons on the life of Elijah. Elijah was a great prophet, and he has much to say to our age today. Indeed, he is a prophet for our time for what he has to say, in terms of his life and his words, is as relevant as when they were first spoken. Elijah was the most notable prophet in the Old Testament, and is treated that way in the Scriptures. He lived during the time of the notorious King Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

We do not know much about Elijah's origins. We are not told who his mother and father were, which is unusual for a prophet. In that day a prophet's credentials were established by who his family was. We know nothing of his parents. We are told in Kings chapter 17 that Elijah came from Gilead, which was a wild unsettled region of Palestine, east of the river Jordan. He is described as a 'sojourner' there, a word indicating a sort of nomadic individual, a rootless person who travels from place to place, and never settles down.

When a king of Israel once asked what sort of man Elijah was, the prophet was described in terms of dress. The question the king actually asked was, 'What is the judgement of the man? What is the ruling principle of his life?' He was told that Elijah was a man who had a great deal of hair. Probably he had long flowing beard and hair, a goatskin coat with hair on the outside. He was also described as having a leather belt, indicating that he was very simply and modestly dressed. In those days people put their money into clothing. Wealthy people today have

investments and property, but in those days the wealthy put their money into clothing, especially their belts. Belts were normally made of some sort of fine woven fabric, and were indicative of the person's social position. So Elijah was also described in terms of his dress. He was a very simple man, which was really an expression of the inner character of the man. As a matter of fact, for the most of his life he was in protest against the ease and affluence of his age. The way he dressed indicated the spirit of the man, as it did with John the Baptist.

Elijah ministered during the reigns of two rotten kings of Israel, Ahab and his son. He outlived them both.

There are three things about Elijah that I think are significant.

The first thing we ought to note about Elijah is that he was a man who was set apart by the truth. He was a very unconventional man, but the reason he was different was because he walked according to the known Word of God. He described himself as a man "stood before the Lord." He was subject to His Word, and that is what made him different. Christian distinctiveness is the result of walking according to the Word. If we walk according to the Word, we are going to be different. We are going to have different values, different goals, and different priorities in life. So, first of all, Elijah was the man that he was because he was subject to the known Word of God. He sought to obey it.

The second thing we see as we look at Scripture is the enormous impact Elijah had on his society. He didn't save the nation; it was too far gone. Within 125 years the nation collapsed. He didn't save the leadership of the nation, it was beyond hope of recovery, but he did save many individuals in the nation. He was on a rescue operation, and many people responded to his message. He set the standard for the

prophetic ministry in Israel for years to come. He had a tremendous impact in his time. The New Testament always looks at Elijah as the outstanding example of a prophet. Malachi predicts that the Messiah would be like Elijah. And when Jesus began to teach and to minister, the question on everyone's lips, was 'is this Elijah'?

The third thing that we note is that Elijah was just like us. He was a man of like passions. James, chapter 5 tells us that he was far from perfect. He was human, subject to the same sort of passions, the same sort of limitations, the same sort of weaknesses, as us. Not only was he a man of great power and influence, but he was a man who was inconsistent and weak. One minute he is challenging the four hundred prophets of Baal, the most awesome representatives of that time, the segment of society that was to be feared, and taking them on single handedly and defeating them. The next moment he is running for his life because of the voice of Jezebel. You know it is a great encouragement to me, to know that Elijah was that kind of person. He was like I am, and like some of you. He was often inconsistent and weak. He didn't always pull it off. You know how often we have decided to turn over a new leaf, and it lasted only for a short period of time. So when we see a man like Elijah, we understand him. He is just like we are. And yet he was a man of great impact on his society because basically his heart was the heart of submission to God. When I look at his life, he encourages me. I know that by God's grace, any one of us can be like Elijah. At the same time I understand that God is very much at home with failure. He understands; he knows our hearts. He isn't down on us. He does not turn away because we fail. There is hope.

Just before we finish, I want to give you a bit of background to the study of Elijah in 1 Kings beginning with chapter 16. We are told some interesting things about life in Ahab' time. Ahab's father was Omri. From a purely historical standpoint, Omri was considered to be the greatest king who ever sat on the throne of Israel. He was a greater king politically than Solomon. For about 12 years after Omri was on the throne, the literature of that time refers to Israel as the 'land of Omri', or 'Omri's land'. He had a great political influence in his time. In the Bible Omri is given six verses, and, apart from information given very frequently in historical accounts, the only significant thing that is said about him is that he was the most wicked man who sat on the throne of Israel up to this time. That is God's estimate of Omri. I am sure that Omri must have appeared frequently at royal occasions and was introduced as the king of the four corners of the earth; the saviour of the world, the greatest king who ever reigned in Israel, and so on. But God's estimate of this man is that he was the worst king in Israel's history. He passed on to his son Ahab not only a kingdom, but a depraved one. He also gave Jezebel to Ahab, to be his wife. Omri had made a political alliance with the Sidonians and, as a result of this alliance, gained a princess for Ahab. We know from history that Jezebel's father was the king-priest of the Phoenicians. He murdered his own brother in order to come to the throne. He was a cruel and vicious man. He was the high priest of Baal in Phoenicia, and his daughter Jezebel, was the supervisor of the cultic prostitution that was carried out in the temple of Baal at Tyre, in Sidon. When Jezebel came into Israel she brought along all of her gods, bag and baggage, the whole group of Canaanite gods, with all of the awfulness and degrading aspects of that religion. Their sacred prostitution and all of

the things that are associated with the worship of Baal, came into Israel with Jezebel. Ahab began to worship Baal and erected a temple to his honour. It was in the mist of this climate that Elijah appears, as described in verse 1 of chapter 17: “Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘as the lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years, except at my word. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, ‘leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed your there.”

Before he goes into hiding he makes a visit to Ahab, probably at his palace. It would have been very interesting to have been at Ahab’s court when Elijah made his appearance. He seems to show up without a formal announcement, dressed in his moth-eaten fur coat, in the midst of all the pomp and affluence of Ahab’s court. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom at this time. It was a beautiful place, especially in Ahab’s time, with the mountains covered with trees, and with lush valleys. This was Ahab’s winter home, the seat of the government. He had built a beautiful palace there and he and Jezebel lived in the midst of pomp, ceremony and wealth. Into this scene Elijah walks and makes his announcement: ‘it ain’t going to rain, no more, no more.’ Then he turns around and walks out; and disappears into hiding by the brook Cherith. It would appear that what Elijah is doing is hitting people where it hurts the most, in their pocketbooks. If there is no rain, the crops are a failure, and the economy falls apart. But there is actually something much more significant going on. What Elijah is doing is challenging the very foundation of their lives because in Canaanite worship, it was Baal who brought the rain. Baal was the rain-

giver. He is always depicted as the god of the rain and the storm. He has a club in one hand to symbolize thunder and a lightning bolt in his other hand. You see, the Israelites had transferred their allegiance from the Lord God of Israel, to the god of the Canaanites, Baal, with all the corruption and degrading aspects of that religion. They had turned away from the Lord. The Lord now is reaching out to bring them back to Himself. There is only one substantial basis for life, and that is the Lord himself. That is what Elijah had to learn himself, to trust alone in Jehovah. So he is taken off into the desert and is hidden away along the Jordan river. And the Lord provided for him, through supernatural means, by ravens bringing him their food which was quite unnatural, and through a natural means, water from a stream. But after a year the natural means of provision, the stream, began to dry up. It became a trickle, and then it was gone, and Elijah was drinking out of the puddles. His natural source of supply was gone. In that sort of situation the issue is always, 'who do you trust then? who do you turn to.?' As we move through life, we face uncertain times, some of us will find ourselves in a very insecure job market, or our health goes, or we face early retirement, or other challenging situations. Our natural supply is drying up, and we wonder, 'what's next.?' Or some of us who are counting on someone else for strength, find ourselves alone. Who then do we depend upon? Who do we trust when there is no one else, or nothing left to place our trust in? Wisdom, would direct us to God. That is what Elijah had to learn, and that is what we have to learn. The Lord said that the greatest command is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Loving God with your whole heart is the name of the game, not dividing your allegiance or your love, but loving him and depending on him and

trusting in him. That is what we need today, that we will love the Lord like that, trust in Him, and count on Him. The Lord sees our hearts, and though you and I may fail, and though we may feel insecure we say “Lord, I want to love you with all my heart, and with an undivided love and loyalty.” God knows, and He himself is the One who is going to see that process through. He is the One who having done a good work in us, will continue it until the day of Christ.

LET US PRAY: Father, it is a great encouragement to look at a man like Elijah and see that he is a man of like passions, and one you taught to be a person of power and influence because he learned to trust you. Teach us to trust you Lord. For we ask it Jesus’ name. Amen.