

ELIJAH: A PASSION FOR GOD

I. "Hope When Things Seem Hopeless"

1-26-03

I Kings 16:29-34; 17:1-6

INTRODUCTION

It was a sunny, spring Saturday afternoon, I was at home in the manse. This was when I was a pastor in Whitefish, Montana. Suddenly I heard a **WHOP** against the side of the house...then another, and another. I went outside to investigate what was hitting the side of the house. There, on the sunny south side, I found our 9-year-old son, Kris armed with a fly swatter, enjoying himself, assaulting the fly convention taking place in the sunny warmth of the southern exposure. Of course, I encouraged such an expenditure of energy. But, as I went back inside, I was struck with the futility of it all. Whether Kris killed 50, 100, 1000, or 10,000 flies made little difference in the overall problem. While he felt powerful and effective, ultimately it was of no real importance in solving the problem of flies. And then, in my imagination, I began to think what if I could mobilize the entire community of Whitefish (then about the size of Omak) so in every house someone would go out every morning and kill 100 flies on the sunny side of their house? Would it solve our fly problem? I expect we wouldn't even notice any improvement. I was gripped by the futility of Kris' effort and anything I could imagine doing.

You know that feeling, don't you? A sense of futility and hopelessness dogs our lives. Get through one problem and it seems three more move in to take its place. You may feel like former British prime minister, David Lloyd George, who said:

With me, a change of trouble is as good as a vacation.

Or, like Mother Teresa when she said,

I knew God would not give me anything I can't handle.

I just wish he didn't trust me so much!

And, evil in our world can feel pretty overwhelming and intimidating. Think of the scourge of drugs, the flood of pornography, and the insidious inroads of immorality in our society. Marriage and healthy family life is under attack. The business scandals of the last year were caused by dishonesty, deception, and hypocrisy. Other social problems like poverty, homelessness, and the world-wide AIDS epidemic seem beyond solving. Right now as a nation, we are focused upon clearing out nests of evil in our world like Al Quaida and Saddam Hussein. But then there's N. Korea and a host of other places fostering evil. And we know that all we can hope to do at best is slow down the progress of evil.

If you know your own heart well, it is not just the evil around us that alarms us. In our own hearts we discover appetites, sins, infinite variations of self-centeredness, character weaknesses that seem to form a never ending parade of dark things within threatening to destroy us. You may despair, thinking you'll never get free of that stuff that seeks our corruption.

Anyone depressed yet? Well, **I do** have good news for you this morning!

Where do you turn when things seem rather hopeless in your life? I hope the answer to that question for you is "God!" For, when we factor God into the equation of life, everything changes! God is never at a loss. Life may be too much for us, but it never is too much for God. As one of the greatest Bible expository preachers of all time, G. Campbell Morgan said:

*What we do in a crisis always depends on
whether we see the difficulties in the light of God,
or God in the shadow of the difficulties.*

Don't you like that picture? If we see God as bigger than life's problems or the evil of this world, His light shines over the difficulties and enables us to see them in the right perspective. But so often, we focus upon the problems and they seem so big they overshadow God. The Bible from beginning to end is story of God's unlimited resources in dealing with evil or the problems of life. When we let Him be God in our lives, turn control over to Him, peace and joy are restored and we can relax in His capable, loving care.

This morning we're beginning a series of six sermons on one of the greatest spiritual giants of all time, Elijah. If you had lived in Israel in about the 9th century B.C. and been a follower of God—to say you'd have felt overwhelmed by evil would be an understatement. It is one of the darkest times in all Israel's history. Yet, in the midst of that, God raised up a prophet, Elijah, with a spectacular ministry. Through him, God was calling the nation back to God, stemming the tide of evil, and restoring faith, hope, and confidence in God

SETTING THE SCENE

We need to take a few moments to set the stage for Elijah's entrance. Just a little history helps us appreciate the impact of our text. David was Israel's second king, and the greatest king in terms of spiritual renewal and conquering or subduing harassing nations. His son, Solomon's reign marked the golden age of Israel. There was unprecedented prosperity and building. Israel's influence was at its apex, a true world power. Reading I Kings, the five chapters following Solomon's death are some of the most discouraging in the Bible. In a span of 70 years, there is a descent into ever greater sin as a nation. Following the death of Solomon, the kingdom splits into two parts. The South, the tribe of Judah is ruled by one of Solomon's sons, Rehoboam. The Northern ten tribes of Israel were ruled by Jeroboam, who'd been superintendent of public works under Solomon.

Jerusalem where Solomon's magnificent temple stood was the center of Israel's worship. But, Jerusalem was located in Judah, the South, ruled by Rehoboam. Jeroboam knew be dangerous to have people continuing to go to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. So, he built two worship centers in his territory: at Dan and Bethel complete with golden calves. This of course opened the door for idolatry. Thereafter, he was known as "Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin."

Things went from bad to worse. Each succeeding king being even worse than the one before in terms of evil they committed. Finally we come to Ahab. Let's turn to I Kings 16:29-33 (pg. 345 in pew Bibles)....

Ahab...did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. (I Kings 16:33). He married Jezebel from Tyre. This looked like splendid match. Tyre was considered queen of seas and her ships traveled as far as England. But Jezebel also imported her religion, the worship of Baal. The worship of Baal was not only idolatry, but it also involved temple prostitutes. Jezebel kept 450 priests of Baal on her personal payroll. She sought out the prophets of God and had them killed. Obadiah took and hid a few prophets in caves to save lives. Things look pretty grim for the worship of God. Only around 7000 remained that had not bowed down to Baal.

One might suppose the worship of Jehovah would pass into oblivion never to again regain its prestige and power. The principle actors on the stage thought so: Ahab, Jezebel, and the false prophets. Evil, and immorality seemed unstoppable.

GOD'S ADDITION

Then, we come to chapter 17, where Elijah steps on the stage for the first time. This is our text on the back of the bulletin and follows what we just read at the end of I Kings 16.

Notice, it begins with a connective: "Now" in the NIV and RSV. The KJV uses "and." The Message gives us, "And then this happened..." However we translate the connective, it is clear that this is an addition to previous litany of Ahab's evil. And, it's God's spectacular addition. When people are done and finished with their evil and destruction, it's time for God to begin. God is never at a loss. The land may be over run with sin, and the lamps of witness about gone out. The whole current of popular opinion may be against the worship of God. But, God has been preparing a man for just this time, over in the obscure mountain hamlet of Tishbe. It is so obscure, it is not known for sure where was except that it is on the East side of Jordan, in Gilead.

Elijah stands before Ahab and announces God's judgement: three years of drought. In the judgement, God is demonstrating the futility of Baal worship. Since Baal was the god of fertility and lord of the rain clouds, this is a direct attack upon him. So here, in a rather unpretentious way, with the appearance of this obscure, strange man, God begins to raise up His flag against the flood of evil.

I expect Ahab wasn't terribly impressed with this odd nut and his threats. I came across something interesting: on July 4, 1776, King George III of England wrote in his diary that nothing important happened that day. That was probably about level of impact Elijah had in King Ahab. While the beginning may have seemed insignificant, when God acts the tables begin to turn.

Throughout history, God has been adding his chapters. The greatest addition, of course, was the coming of Christ. Probably at the birth of Christ, King Herod could have written in his diary, "Nothing much happened today." But never underestimate God, and His beginnings. In your life—your personal history, it may feel like you're at a dead-end or you may feel overwhelmed by the powers of darkness. That is just the time God chooses to begin a new chapter.

GOD USES PEOPLE

From the beginning, God's method has always involved people. He works through individuals to bring redemptive work to fruition. As Sir Thomas More said:

The times are never so bad that a good man cannot live in them.

Here, Elijah serves as a powerful model for us. I want us to look at **three things** revealed about Elijah here. His two statements when he confronts King Ahab reflect where he is coming from. And third, his name gives us the source of his strength.

First, "*As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives.... (17:1)*". To all else God may be dead. But He is the one supreme reality of Elijah's life. God is not remote, unaware, or uninvolved. He is the living God who knows, cares and is active in the affairs of men. Elijah gives no philosophy here and doesn't argue theology. It is a simple proclamation of the Living God, active in history. If you're going to be effective in ministry to the Lord, standing in the gap, you too have to be certain of this reality. As the early Christians were empowered in the knowledge and certainty of the risen Christ and turned the world upside down; we too must go and minister in this same certainty.

Second, "*Whom I serve.*" (17:1) (NIV). However I prefer RSV and KJV as they translate it, "*Before whom I stand.*" While it means the same thing, I find this image powerful. Elijah is standing before Ahab, but he's more conscious that he's in God's court. He is clear in his allegiance. He is responsible to God alone. This frees him from the necessity of pleasing men. He is impervious to the pomp, the greatness of Ahab's court. He can't be bought or influenced by this world. Elijah stands before God and serves God alone. Wherever you stand in this world, know ultimately you are accountable to God alone. Be sure of your standing before Him. When you know that, it will protect you from the undue influence of this world's system.

The third fact about Elijah revealed here is in his name. Elijah means "Jehovah is my strength," or "Jehovah is my God." This ministry is not in Elijah's power, but in the strength God supplies. A choice we must make: to operate in our own power, or in God's? His name, his identity is caught up with being what God desires and empowered by Him. Whatever your other name, may this dependence, and trust be central to your identity. I want to be able to say in all sincerity, "My name is Ken, and Jehovah is my strength!"

A man by the name of Edward Kimble, a clerk in a dry goods store, was a Sunday School teacher for teens back in 1855 in Boston. An 18-year-old by the name of Dwight L. Moody had begun attending. Kimble believed that Moody didn't have a personal relationship with Christ. As Edward Kimble was praying, he felt he should go and share Christ with this young man. He knew Moody worked at Holston Shoe Store. But as he got near the shoe store, he began to get cold feet. Talking to him at work didn't seem like a good idea. If some of Moody's friends were around, they might make fun of him and cause him to drop out of church. Then, maybe Moody's boss would be upset. With Kimble's doubts, he just walked past the door of the store. Then, a block later, he stopped and thought: he'd prayed about going today and felt now was the time. So, he went back to the shoe store and found Moody alone, in the back stacking boxes of shoes. There, in that back room, Kimble led D. L. Moody to Christ.

D. L. Moody became one of the greatest evangelists of his day. Without radio or TV, he reached 100 million people with the Gospel. He founded Moody Church in Chicago which became the second largest congregation in America in his day and continues to reach countless numbers. Though he only had the equivalent of a 5th grade education, he founded three schools of higher education. In one of Moody's evangelistic trips to England, F.B. Meyer committed his life to Christ. F.B. Meyer became one of the greatest preachers in England. Through his preaching, J. Wilber Chapman was saved. Through J. Wilber Chapman's sharing of the Gospel, an ex-baseball player, Billy Sunday, came to know Christ. Billy Sunday brought Mordecai Ham to faith in Christ. And, in one of Mordecai Ham's evangelistic crusades in a tent in Charlotte, NC, a 17-year-old young man by the name of Billy Graham gave his life to Jesus Christ.

One Sunday School teacher being faithful. WOW... what God can do!

CONCLUSION

At times it does seem the enemy comes in like a flood in waves of despair, fear, and futility. I'm sure some of you face personal problems that seem beyond solving. Maybe your own sins or failures feel overwhelming. In spite of your resolutions, you're afraid you'll only fail again. And certainly we live in a world full of the dangers of evil.

But, the exciting thing is that to each of these situations, God has an addition to make! His great "**and**". That "and" involves you. The first step must always be to open your heart to His life. At your invitation, He will enter in and become your Savior and cleanse your heart of all sin. Then you know you can stand before God pure, whole, forgiven. There is no condemnation. You stand in absolute assurance of your salvation. Not because of anything you've done, but with confidence in the greatness of our Savior.

With that invitation, as Christ enters in by His Spirit, we receive His power to live— the power to overcome sin. But also there is hope springing up within in the face of difficulties. This is not of our own doing, but is supernatural coming from the Spirit of the Lord. We **know** He's in control, though may not understand how. Have you made that choice? That surrender?

Then, know that God wants to use you to change our present age. To bring hope to those who feel hopeless and help people grab hold of the greatness of God. It need not be in "big" obvious ways— but be faithful. Do it, even as Elijah:

- Undaunted by tides of evil, no matter how overwhelming.
- Make sure the fact that "the Lord lives" is the supreme reality of your life. He is active, powerful, involved.
- No matter where you serve or stand in this world, know you're standing before God and serving him.
- Don't let your identity be in your strength for ultimately that is never enough. Live, knowing Jehovah is your strength. Daily choose to rely upon that and that alone. Reject the illusion that we can do the work of God in our power and strength. And, as God opens doors, share that strength with those around you.