

The Life Of Elijah Part I, Introduction

1 Kings 16:29-17:7

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Read 1 Kings 16:29-17:7

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction

How many of you are fans of old Western movies? I haven't seen a ton of them, but I particularly enjoy the ones like *Pale Rider*, *High Plains Drifter*, and *Tombstone* that seem to have similar plots: there's a town in the old west where bad guys are doing bad things and hurting good people, usually families. So after that scenario gets set up, the camera introduces this tough, stoic man who comes riding into town, sometimes minding his own business, sometimes hired to right the wrongs that are happening. The man shows up without any back story, without any explanation of who he is or where he's come from, but he's ready for business. He's ready to right the wrongs, kill a few bad guys, and then ride off into the sunset leaving justice and peace in his wake. And today's Scripture passage brings Elijah the prophet onto the scene in the same way. There was a bad king ruling over a bad people doing bad things worshipping false gods. And out of nowhere, with no backstory or much of an explanation, Elijah shows up to straighten things out.

The life of Elijah is an exciting story that will unfold for us over the next three months. Elijah, of course, is one of the greatest prophets in the history of the Hebrew nation, and is a giant of the Old Testament. Let me get us from Moses' day to Elijah's day very quickly: After the Red Sea crossing where we left Moses last week, he took the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years, then Joshua took over after his death and brought them into the Promised Land. Then the nation of Israel was ruled by military leaders called Judges for a time. But then the people begged God for a king so they could be like all the other nations. God said, "You have a King, I'm your King, but I'll give you a human king if that's what you want. But trust me, kings have a huge downside." So God gave them Saul who eventually turned from the Lord and was replaced by David, the great high King. Solomon, his son, continued David's great reign over a united Kingdom, but eventually grieved the Lord so much that God split the kingdom after that between Solomon's son, Rehoboam, who ruled the southern Kingdom, Judah, and Jeroboam, who ruled the northern Kingdom, called Israel. (Keep Jeroboam's name in mind for later) There are always two kings being talked about in this time period: one king over the 10 tribes in the North/Israel, and one king over the South/Judah. If you've studied the kings that came during this divided kingdom in the Old Testament, you know that most of them were bad, though there were a few decent ones. But you need to think of it this way: all of the good kings were in the south, over Judah. Out of 20 kings, 8 were good kings. But in the north, there were 19 kings and all 19 of them were bad. We're talking setting up idols, altars, and temples to foreign gods bad; we're talking making alliances with pagans that God forbid them to bad; we're talking sacrificing children to the god Molech bad.

So we meet Ahab as he comes to power as King in the North, over Israel in 1 Kings 16. The dates of his reign are 874-853 B.C. There are two Kings in the South during Ahab's reign: Asa who's bad and his son, Jehoshaphat, who's actually one of the good kings. We generally date Elijah's life in the mid-800s BC, and the Northern Kingdom ended in 722 BC, so its days are coming to a close, but not for over 100 more years.

Let's let the Scriptures introduce us to the main characters in the historical narrative. First we meet **I. The Villian/The Antagonist (16:29-34)**

²⁹ In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³⁰ And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. ³¹ And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. ³² He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³ And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. ³⁴ In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

There's an internet poll about everything these days, isn't there? I've seen several versions of "Who is the best movie villain of all time?" In one, the top spots are Loki (Thor's brother), the Joker, and #1 Darth Vader. In other lists, Sauran, Hannibal Lechter, Thanos, Voldemort garner lots of votes. If there was a poll for worst villains in the Bible, Satan is the obvious runaway, but as far as human villains, certainly there would be competition between Goliath, Judas, Pharaoh, Herod, and Haman. But if we narrowed it down to worst king, hands down the winner would be Ahab, the son of Omri. But he's not even the worst villain in his family; wait until you get to know his wife Jezebel!

The first note we have about Ahab is that he did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the Kings who had come before him; v. 33 says he provoked God to anger more than all the kings of Israel before him. Imagine being introduced like that in any sphere of life: "meet my son who has given us more grief than all of his brothers put together" or "that's the student who gives me more problems than any student in my 50 years of teaching" or "he's the most corrupt politician that the city of Chicago has ever seen by a wide margin." Verse 31 says Jeroboam's sins were easy for Ahab; they were a stepping stone. Remember I told you to remember Jeroboam's name earlier? Here's why: 1 Kings chapters 11-14 tell us that he was the son of Solomon's servant, and became King of the North when the kingdom split. God gave him the kingship. One of the first things that he did was build two golden calves for his people to worship. Talk about immediately putting yourself on God's bad side! God was angry at Aaron and the Israelites in the wilderness for building one golden calf to worship, this guy makes two so his people can have something to worship that's not down in Jerusalem, because that's in Judah in the South, the one area he didn't rule over. Then he appointed whoever he wanted as priests, not worrying about whether they were Levites like the law required, and had them sacrifice to these idols.

So Jeroboam was bad, but Ahab makes him look like a boy scout in comparison. He married Jezebel, who we'll talk more about later, but she brought the worship of Baal and Asherah with her. Worshiping any false gods in Israel was an insult and a great evil in Yahweh's eyes. The first commandment, "*You shall have no other gods before Me,*" had never been revoked. It was first because it was of central importance to the Israelites being a community that worshipped and obeyed one God alone. In a negative parallel to Solomon's accomplishments building the house of the Lord, verse 32 says that Ahab had built a house for Baal and included an altar in it.

What is verse 34 about Hiel building Jericho and having two sons die about? Everybody knows the famous battle that Joshua won by having his people march around the walls seven times – "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came a-tumbling down." Afterwards, in Joshua 6:26, he

had pronounced a curse on anyone who would rebuild Jericho – “*at the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates.*” This literally came true for the man, Hiel, who rebuilt Jericho. It even gives the names of the sons who died because he defied Joshua’s prophecy and restriction. Hiel’s sin is included in Ahab’s list of sins, it happened on his watch.

Now that we’ve met the villain, let’s meet

II. The Hero/The Protagonist (17:1-7)

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.” ² And the word of the Lord came to him: ³ “Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴ You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” ⁵ So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. ⁶ And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. ⁷ And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

We get very little introduction to Elijah except where he’s from: Tishbe is part of Gilead. We don’t know exactly where that land was located, but the indication is that Elijah is not originally from Israel, he is an outsider, a foreigner. But his name means “My God is Yahweh,” and that’s exactly what this king who worships foreign, false gods needs to hear. Elijah just shows up on the scene unexpectedly, but the first thing we see him doing is speaking a word from the Lord to King Ahab: “The Lord is going to withhold rain until further notice, until I give the word.” Just in case everyone thinks it’s a coincidence that the rain has stopped, there’s not even going to be any dew in the mornings; it’s a total drought.

Why does God choose to send a drought to Israel at this point in time? It doesn’t immediately say in the text, but Baal was worshipped as the god who brought rains and insured the fertility of the land and production of crops. There were statues of Baal depicted as a bull standing with the club of thunder in one hand and lightning in the other.¹ The message was very clear: this god is in charge of the weather and we need to worship him to ensure continued crops, health, and prosperity. So stopping the rain is Yahweh’s direct challenge to these “powers” of Baal, just like all of the plagues in Egypt challenged their false gods. The aim is to show how utterly powerless those gods are because they don’t actually exist. This king who worshipped a false god that was supposed to provide rain was to find out how powerless it would be over the next 3 years.

God had warned Israel many years ago that drought could be a punishment for their disobedience. Not that Ahab spent time worrying about God’s commands, but Leviticus 26:3-4 had promised rain and blessings for obedience: “*If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit... and you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely.*” Then Deuteronomy 28:24 prophesied drought when the nation disobeyed: “*The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.*” It should not be a surprise that the worst king that Israel was to have would bring an extreme response from its true King of kings.

¹ August H. Konkel, *The NIV Application Study Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 296.

And then God immediately sent Elijah into hiding. One commentator said that, “to the famine of bread, Yahweh adds a famine of the word”² by taking his prophet away from the world into hiding. Not only will the nation lose its water and therefore eventually its crops and food, but it will not get fed by God’s word through His prophet for these years. God sent Elijah to a spot where he could drink from a brook and be fed by ravens who have been commanded by God. God not only controls the weather, but all His creatures as well. What does this picture of birds bringing God’s people food remind us of? We should be reminded of how God supernaturally provided for the Israelites in the wilderness with manna. God provides his daily bread, which is something that we pray, but we often mean it symbolically. God provided for Israel in the wilderness and for Elijah in a drought on a daily basis, in a very literal way. And He promises to provide for us: Matthew 7:25-26, 31-33 says, *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*

But even Elijah is not immune to his own prophecy, right? He had told Ahab that the land would not receive rain, so obviously this brook is going to dry up eventually, which it does. So we’ll have to stay tuned to see how Elijah survives. There was not really an explanation for why the Lord withheld rain at the beginning of chapter 17, but we’ll be told eventually, and it’s pretty obvious from the context of the discussion of Ahab’s life, that it’s punishment for Ahab’s sins. This is one of those punishments that affects a lot more people than just the person who sinned. Ahab’s a scoundrel, so the whole land is going to have a drought. That doesn’t seem to be very fair of God. How about the whole “punishment fits the crime” thing? Why can’t God just punish the King and leave the poor, innocent citizens of Israel alone? Well, that’s making a huge assumption that the citizens are innocent as well. True, there is no explicit condemnation of them here, but the prophets are full of diatribes against the sins of the people, not just the kings and leaders. For example, Jeremiah 7:8-10 says about the people: *“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?”* It’s clear that the people shared their leaders’ sins and deserved their punishments as well.

So we’ve met who we’ve the labelled the villain and the hero, but as with all Scripture passages, we need to look deeper and see

III. The Actual Hero (17:1, 5)

As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives... he went and did according to the word of the Lord.

As we approach this story, it’s easy to just see this all as confrontations between a noble prophet and a corrupt king. But the prophet is a mouthpiece, a human vessel enacting the will of the true hero in the story, Yahweh God. We need to learn to read the Old Testament with eyes that see God as the hero. There were some very noble, virtuous men in the Old Testament that we would do well to emulate – David’s courage in confronting Goliath, Noah’s obedience to build an ark despite no sign of rain – lots of men like that. But the most important lessons we take away from these stories cannot be “You need to have faith like Joshua” or “Dare to be a Daniel” or “Have integrity like

² Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p. 126.

Joseph.” Those all may be good points of application, but always *always* the hero of every Scriptural narrative is God. The Bible is His Story, one complete overarching tale from Gen. 1:1 “in the beginning” to Revelation 21-22, the new heaven and the new earth. It is a true story easily told with the headings: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. God is the author and the main character, the first cause of all things and the hero worthy of honor and praise.

God uses Elijah and also protects and provides for him. And God is also showing grace to Ahab here.³ What? Isn't he punishing him and taking away the rain for a few years that will destroy the land and make the people miserable? Yes. But God could have done that without telling Ahab what He was doing. Anytime God reveals Himself, He is being amazingly gracious to His creatures. He doesn't owe us any explanation. But He tells us in the pages of the Scriptures or in the mouths of the prophets in Ahab's case what He is doing. God is actually giving Ahab a chance to repent. Here's what Solomon prayed earlier in 1 Kings (8:35-36): “*When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants... and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.*” Ahab could have truly repented and turned from his sin, and God would have forgiven him and brought the rain back. But Ahab is not going to do that. There will be an incident of repentance in Ahab's life that we'll look at, but it's not here.

Conclusion

The book of James in 5:16 says that “*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*” How does back up this assertion? How does he illustrate it? The next verse (v. 17) says: “*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.*” That's interesting. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. You probably don't feel like a prophet, like someone who does huge things for God; maybe you don't have the same calling as he did. But the Bible says that you and I have the same nature as Elijah and that our prayers can accomplish great things. Our prayers are heard by the same great God, and even though we might not be able to control the weather, God can accomplish great things through our prayers and courageous actions.

There was a woman named Margaret at my last church who had been suffering from a long bout with vertigo and asked the elders to pray over her. So the elders went, and prayed, and anointed her with oil. Three months later she stood in front of the church and testified to the healing power of Jesus Christ. She had a chart from her doctors showing her symptoms getting worse and then getting better. It was in the shape of a V. And she pointed to the bottom of the V and said, “that was the day the elders prayed for me.” I make no promises about what your prayers will accomplish, but God calls us to pray and that He will honor our prayers in some way.

The last thing I want to look at is the last verse, verse 7. It says that the brook that Elijah drank from dried up. That's what happens with water, it gets used up or the person who has drunk becomes thirsty again. But there is water that will fill you up where you will never be thirsty again. In John 4:13-14, Jesus promised the Samaritan woman who was getting water from a well – “*Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*” Three chapters later (7:37-39): “*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever*

³ John Woodhouse, *1 Kings: Power, Politics, and the Hope of the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), p. 470.

believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Now this He said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because was not yet glorified."

We have a thirst inside of us. It's a thirst for significance, a thirst to be loved, a thirst to be cleansed and freed from the guilt of the things that we've done. And we try to drink from different wells hoping to find those things. We try to drink from the well of accomplishments but it doesn't satisfy for long, someone's always accomplished more than we have. We try to drink from the well of other people's love, but then we live and die by their approval. We try to drink from the well of pleasure, but it wears off and leaves us feeling empty. All of these wells run dry and leave us still thirsty. So Jesus invites us to drink from the true well, the water that He gives, living water which is the Holy Spirit inside of us. When we drink from it, we turn from our sins, repent of them, and have them forgiven because of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. We drink from it and have the Holy Spirit come inside of us and give us a new heart as we become new creations who are obedient to our heavenly Father. We are forgiven and set free, adopted into His eternal family and loved for all eternity. Amen.

Prayer leading to communion

Benediction - Romans 15:13

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."