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God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha

I. Drought in the Land

I Kings 17:1-16

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In the many years which followed the death of King David, Israel had a long succession of bad kings, with a handful of really bad kings thrown in. But King Ahab was in a class of badness exceeding them all. I Kings 16 tells us that King Ahab *“did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him.”*¹ Then, a little further on: *“Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.”*² King Ahab was nothing but bad news before the Lord God of Israel, nothing but bad news for the people of God in Israel.

Now what, specifically, did Ahab do to make him worse than every king before him? I Kings 16 says that he continued all the usual bad stuff of the kings before him – practicing injustice, exploiting the poor, and just generally doing everything to make everyone but his own royal household miserable. What set Ahab apart, what makes him the worst of the worst, came out of his marriage to Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was not of the chosen people of God – she was from the pagan people of the kingdom of Sidon, who fervently worshipped the false god Baal. So, the problem wasn't simply that he had married a foreign woman from a pagan people – the real problem is that Jezebel brought with her into Israel the worship of Baal. And Ahab not only allowed this to happen, but he also heartily embraced Baal for himself. I Kings 16:32 says that Ahab not only began to worship the false god Baal instead of the true God of Israel, but that Ahab even erected a temple and an altar in Samaria so that the people of God could join him in worshipping Baal.

In other words, what made Ahab the worst of the worst of the kings of Israel was not just that he trampled all over the First Commandment (*“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”*³), but also that he encouraged, nigh unto commanded, the people of God to do the same. King Ahab was not only an idolater himself, but he encouraged Israel to follow him into idolatry. And this is not only what marks him as worst of the worst, but is also that which brings crashing down upon him and upon the people the fierce anger of the Almighty God – the only true God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Which is where Elijah enters the story, seemingly from out of nowhere, as God's prophet to declare to Ahab the punishment for his sins and for the sins of the people into which he has led them: *“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.’”*

And so begins the conflict between the true God of Israel and the false god Baal, as well as the conflict between their earthly representatives, Elijah and Ahab, which will occupy our attention over the next several Sundays. We don't know much about Elijah, except what we read in these stories in Kings. We are not told about his life before his work as a prophet, nor about how he came to be a prophet. But his name, itself, is full of clues. His name, Elijah, is the combination of two different Hebrew words – the first part, “Eli”, coming from the generic Hebrew word for God or for a god (“El”); and the second part, “Jah”, coming from the holy name God had revealed to Moses at the burning bush (“Yahweh”)⁴. “Elijah,” therefore, means “Yahweh is my God” – “Yahweh, the true God of Israel, is my God.” So, right there we see what this conflict between Elijah and Ahab is going to be all about. Ahab bows down before the false god Baal, but Elijah bows down before the true God of Israel. In the conflict to come, we shall see which of the two has made the right choice.

And, in so doing, we shall also see who really is the true God, who it is who truly has the power to protect and provide for the people, who it is who truly rules over both heaven and earth – whether Baal, and along with him all the other false gods we mortals have made, from the Golden Calf⁵ to that great deceiver Mammon⁶; or whether Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And, in this opening battle between Ahab and Elijah, Baal and Yahweh, the early victor is clear. In fact, Baal gets trounced here in the opening skirmish. Elijah is sent by God to announce a drought over all the land, as punishment for Ahab's sin. This is significant not just because drought (and, inevitable in its wake, the double curse of famine and pestilence) is such a dire punishment upon a people already living in a place where water is scarce, but also because Baal was, among other things, worshipped as a rain god. In the pagan land of Sidon, and sadly also, under Ahab, in the idolatrous land of Israel, if you wanted rain you went to Baal, the rain god, to deliver the goods. God, the true God, strikes right at Baal's breadbasket with his pronouncement of a drought. God says no rain, Baal is the god of rain – so who actually controls the weather? Skipping ahead a little bit in the story, I can report to you that it did not rain in all the land for the next three years after Elijah's proclamation. It did not rain again until God sent Elijah to Ahab again, this time to announce the end of the drought – just as God had said through Elijah at that first visit: *“There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”*

And, as for Ahab and Elijah, how did they fare during this God-ordained, three-year drought? The drought in the land led to a famine so severe in Israel that people were dying, and even the royal household suffered greatly because of the drought. Bowing to Baal is already looking like a bad bet for Ahab and for the people of Israel. Although neither Ahab nor Israel is ready yet to throw in the towel on Baal worship just yet, as we shall see.

And, as for Elijah, having spoken God's Word to Ahab, he was then sent by God off to the east, to a brook called Cherith. And there God provided for Elijah in the midst of the drought, so that he suffered not. In Baal-land, the creeks ran dry, and the crops and cattle wilted and died. But by the brook of Cherith, God provided not only abundant water for his servant, but also gave him a generous daily ration of food to eat, courtesy of a raven Uber Eats delivery service. The meaning is clear. “Yahweh is my God” says the name of Elijah. And Elijah, worshipping and trusting in the true God alone, is provided for in the midst of the drought. He suffers no want, no lack – God

provides all that he needs to make it through the crisis. As for Ahab, bowing down before Baal, there is thirst, there is hunger, there is want and wasting away.

And therein lies the lesson, the great truth of our story. False gods, no matter how bright and shiny, no matter how big and attractive the promises they make of safety and security and success, will always let us down in the end. Baal, the god of rain, is helpless and hopeless and useless when God brings the drought. False gods cannot protect, cannot provide, cannot save. But if we will instead trust in the true God, bow before Him above and before everything else in our lives and in the life of this world, then we also shall always have what we need. The Lord will provide, and abundantly so – even in a time of material or spiritual or emotional or relational or any other form of drought. He will always give us what we need. He will always bring us through the drought, whatever form it may take:

*For your generous providing
which sustains us all our days,
for your Spirit here residing,
we proclaim our heartfelt praise.
Through the depths of joy and sorrow,
though the road be smooth or rough,
fearless, we can face tomorrow
for your grace will be enough.⁷*

But the deeper implication of all this, what all of this requires of us – the point where you and I enter into this story of Elijah and Ahab, God and Baal, is found in what happens next. When the brook at Cherith runs dry, God sends Elijah to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon. Here again God is having some fun at Baal’s expense, at Ahab and Jezebel’s expense. Because Sidon is where Jezebel is from, and Sidon is Baal’s home field advantage. God sends Elijah into Baal country just to show what a useless thing Baal really is. When God declares a drought, Baal can’t even make it rain back home.

In any case, in Zarephath there is a widow, to whom God now sends Elijah. When Elijah first lays eyes on her, she is stooped over by the city gates gathering sticks to make a fire for her oven. Gathering sticks, she tells Elijah, so that she and her son might have a last meal together with their very last bits of food before starvation overcomes them and they die. For the famine has affected Sidon as well as Israel. Picture that scene with me again, that stooped-over widow gathering sticks so as to prepare the last of the food she possesses and seemingly can hope to possess in the midst of this drought. Preparing for a last meal with her son.

Picture that again because it sets into proper relief the audacity of the request Elijah then makes of her, at God’s direction. “*Bring me a little water,*” he says to her, “*that I may drink*”. In a land of drought, where water is worth more than gold and scarcer than hen’s teeth – he asks her to give him of what little she still has. And then, were this not enough, as she goes to fetch what water she has, he calls after her, “*And bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.*” And this last is too much for her, even by the very rigorous standards of middle eastern, biblical hospitality. She explains to him how little she has and how she is planning to prepare this last little bit she possesses for a final meal with her son before they both die of starvation. But notice this – how she begins

her response. “*As the Lord your God lives,*” she says to Elijah – meaning that she knows of the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, even in this land where the worship of Baal reigns supreme. In other words, she knows both Baal and Yahweh – which sets the stage for what Elijah then says to her:

And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord [once again] sends rain upon the earth.’”

In other words, Elijah puts before her a choice – a choice between the false god Baal whom she knows, and the promises of the God of Israel, of whom she has heard. Which will she choose to trust? Perhaps even deeper, what he puts before her is a choice regarding how she will choose to live – whether by the reality of Baal-driven scarcity she sees with her own eyes, or by the promise of abundance she is hearing through the Word of God.

And right there is us, you and me – this is where the story gets personal. For we are one with that widow. We face that same choice daily, even hourly, even moment by moment. Will we trust in, we will build our lives upon the Word of the Lord, in the promises of our God to provide for us? Will we trust the abundant promises of God, amid the scarcity of this world’s moral and spiritual drought – meaning will we actually risk our lives upon God’s Word over and above the ways and means of the world around us? Will we turn away from the ways and means of this world in order to learn instead from Christ how to live, and for what to live? Will we trust God enough to do what He calls us to do, even when it seems to run as counter to what our eyes see of the way this world appears to work as sharing her last bite of food with a bossy foreign stranger must have seemed to that widow?

For this is what faith is really all about. It is not about saying the right things. It is not even about thinking the right thoughts. It is about being willing to live those right things. It is about putting into practice those right thoughts – to put into daily practice the things which we find laid out for us in the promises, in the Word of God. Daily, hourly, even moment by moment, we, like that widow of Zarephath, must make that choice between Baal and all his modern successors and God, the living God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Daily, hourly, even moment by moment, we make our choice about whom we will trust, about whom we will obey, about to whom we will offer up our very lives. We make our choice.

As did that widow. The Bible reports what happened next – as well as the result of the choice which she had made: “*And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.*” Even in the midst of drought, she knew no want, no lack, no need – because she had chosen to trust her very life to the Word of God. And the same will prove true for you and for me.

*Hush our world's seductive voices
tempting us to stand alone;
save us from the siren voices
calling us to trust our own.
For those snared by earthly treasure,
lured by false security,
Jesus, true and only measure,
spring the trap to set folk free.*

*Round your table, through your giving,
show us how to live and pray
till your kingdom's way of living
is the bread we share each day:
bread for us and for our neighbor,
bread for body, mind, and soul,
bread of heaven and human labor—
broken bread that makes us whole.⁸*

¹ I Kings 16:30.

² I Kings 16:33.

³ Exodus 20:3.

⁴ Exodus 3:14.

⁵ Exodus 32:1-35.

⁶ Matthew 6:19-24.

⁷ Leith Fisher, "For Your Generous Providing," in Elizabeth Steele Halstead, et. al, eds., Dwelling with Philippians (Grand Rapids: Willam B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p.240.

⁸ Fisher, p. 240.