

THE TISHBITE

Daring to Live for the True God (Book of Kings Pt 2) | 1 Kgs 17:1-6

We left the BOOK OF KINGS last week at a moment of suspense. It was the ninth century before Christ came. The northern kingdom of Israel was enduring an era of superficial flourishing. The Jewish king, Ahab, had married a woman named Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the prosperous Phoenician people to the north (in what would be modern-day Lebanon). The marriage brought greater political and economic might to Israel. It lessened the chances that Israel and Phoenicia would go to war with each other – a major function of international marriages throughout human history. Had there been such events in those days, I'm sure the palace press conferences would have been declaring progress on many fronts. But something else was happening.

When I was a child, I walked to and from elementary school each weekday down an old dirt road. One of my favorite sights on those walks was a magnificent willow tree that grew along the edge of a stream that ran under the road. You've probably seen trees like this. This one was so large and beautiful that when the sunlight filled its branches, it seemed almost supernatural. I was sure the tree had been there for a century and would be there forever. But one morning, to my heartbreak, I found it cracked in half and toppled over into the stream. There had been a storm the previous night and the tree had not survived it. Upon closer inspection, I could see why. The core of that great tree was HOLLOW. All those days when, to my eyes, it looked so healthy, it had been secretly rotting out from the center.

There is a famous line from the lips of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament that you may have heard quoted before. Samuel says: **People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7)**. That's true of individuals, families, businesses and entire societies. They can look pretty good on the outside, but be very unhealthy on the inside. Eventually, under pressure, they can suddenly fail. This, to me, is another one of the Lessons of the BOOK OF KINGS. Health at the center matters most. For all the strengths they brought as charismatic leaders of their country, Ahab and Jezebel were very bad for the core health of Israel.

Israel had been founded as a nation devoted to the service and standards of one true God. Under King David and then King Solomon, that strong spiritual center had helped the tree of Israel grow large and strong, albeit never perfectly. But as the next series of rulers progressively lost their spiritual center the rot began. Then Ahab and Jezebel took it to a whole new level. You can get a refresher on HOW if you go to our Christ Church Connect app and listen to last week's message. Suffice it to say that the one-God-focus (monotheism) that had been Israel's strength and inspiration now gave way to a multi-focus spirituality (polytheism) involving the worship of the Phoenician gods, Baal, Ashtaroth, Asherah and eventually many others.

The great British author, G.K. Chesterton, is credited with observing that *when people stop worshipping God, they don't worship nothing; they worship anything.*¹ Think about this, because it's such common sense. Take out of the center of your life the great God of love and beauty and wisdom that Jesus helps us know and it leaves behind a very large HOLLOW space. Blaise Pascal, the brilliant French mathematician, famously called that space, "a God-shaped vacuum which cannot be filled by any created thing." Even if we consider ourselves non-religious, we will subconsciously FEEL the hollowness of that space where God belongs.

Remembering, as Aristotle, said that: "*Nature abhors a vacuum*" what's the logical thing we will tend to do? We're going to stuff STUFF into the vacuum. We're going to try to get rid of the emptiness. We're going to WORSHIP – as in praise, devote ourselves to, and sacrifice for -- almost ANYTHING we think will fill that space. Remember, worship isn't about a building but a mindset. Altars can be anywhere. We may worship the perfect hair, skin, abs, breast, or behind. We may relentlessly pursue material things and never feel we have enough. We may adulate celebrity or anticipate our next escape experience like we were going to heaven. We may bow at the altar of sex, control, intoxication, power, popularity or sports. YOU and I never do that, of course, but let's pray for the person sitting next to us!

Here's another takeaway: The pagan idolatries that Ahab and Jezebel led Israel to pursue were about all the same sorts of obsessions that afflict us today. Idolatry is what human beings perpetually turn to when they no longer have the great GOD of love on the throne of our soul or at the center of society. Sadly, these various "Baals" don't have the power to fill us up. They're more like termites or tree rot that hollow us out even more. And when the inevitable storms come in the night to our body, our family, our community or country, it can be hard on the willow tree. God doesn't say: **Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3)** because he is insecure or stingy. He says it because he LOVES us and wants us to be able to stand strong throughout this life and into the next. As the very first Psalm puts it: **Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on [it] day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither (Psalm 1:1-3).**

How many of you remember the story of the Emperor's New Clothes? In Hans Christian Anderson's classic folktale, an extremely vain Emperor has shelled out a fortune to buy from a tailor the world's most fabulous outfit. The hitch is that only very intelligent people can see the clothes, or so the swindling tailor says. The Emperor himself, all his advisors, and then pretty much everyone else in the kingdom don't want to look stupid, so they all pretend to admire the non-existent clothes. When the Emperor holds a parade to show-off his magnificent threads, the crowd oohs and ahhs. Until at long last, a lone child shouts out the truth: "The emperor is naked."

It takes courage to challenge an almost universally accepted lie. In the ninth century B.C., at the height of the spiritual swindling operation propagated by the prophets of Baal and bought by the Emperors, Ahab and Jezebel, one lone voice cried out from the crowd, saying in effect: ***"These idols have no power to help you, to clothe you, to keep your tree standing in the storm. You will be judged by God for not putting him first and injuring people by selling this scam."***

The BOOK OF KINGS literally reads: **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." (1 Kings 17:1).** The jig is up. The tree of your administration and this whole system of idolatry is hollow. God is going to see that you get no more water for it – not a drop of rain or even dew – until he sees that you turn from your wicked ways and tells me to say: "Let there be water again."

Like the *Mandalorian* in Disney's series of that name, or almost any character Clint Eastwood plays in his long movie career, **"Elijah the Tishbite"** appears out of nowhere in a moment of crisis as a voice for God's truth and justice. So, what do we know about this guy?

The BOOK OF CHRONICLES which parallels the BOOK OF KINGS tells us that Elijah was one of three sons born to the family of Jeroham (1 Chronicles 8:27) in Gilead, a region to the east of the Jordan River in what is the modern-day country of Jordan. As in the case of Jesus, the Bible gives us very few details about his beginnings because the main focus is on what he did when his time had come. ***What makes Elijah so special?***

Elijah will go on to play not only a very dramatic role in the history of Israel; he will become a model of courage, obedience and perseverance for the people of God in all times and places. Elijah is not just ONE name in a long list of people in the credits, he is one of the really MAJOR figures of Scripture. Alongside Moses gets the same level of billing as Elijah does as one of the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament. The NEW Testament mentions Elijah more often than any OTHER Old Testament prophet. More than Samuel, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel, Job, Ezekiel, Micah, Malachi and others.

Before Elijah's time, prophetic figures were relatively rare. From his time forward, they would play a significant role in Israel's history. There would be many prophets and even a school of prophets. Elijah is the only human being regarded as so special to God that he is "taken up" to heaven before his death (2 Kings 2). Elijah is one of the figures who appears with Moses and Jesus at the Transfiguration – the moment in the New Testament story when Jesus gives Peter, James and John a glimpse of his divine glory. (Mat 17:1-13). A pretty impressive small group! Both John the Baptizer and Jesus himself (Mat 16:14) are mistaken by some as Elijah reincarnated. This is how

great Elijah was thought to be by the people of Israel. Like Peter in the New Testament, Elijah is also a compelling figure, in part, because he is so human. He is so subject to the troubles that trouble us and we'll learn from that later in this series.

But as we move toward a close today, let me briefly underline THREE important convictions that mark the life of Elijah, drive him forward, and which I hope you and I will take more deeply into ourselves. Let's go back to the first verse of Kings chapter 17, where Elijah first speaks to Ahab. He begins his address by saying: **As the Lord, the God of Israel, LIVES... (1 Kgs 17:1)** Elijah's life was shaped by the conviction that the Lord, the God of Israel, truly LIVES. He's not a wish or a myth. He's not a character in a book to be opened and shut. God is the beginning and end of all we see and can't yet see. He's the one in whom we live and move and have our being right now. He is the final assessor of the way we live our life. He's not a Resource he is THE source. He is the one redeemer and hope of the world. And every moment, therefore, is conditioned by the fact, He LIVES. Do you share that conviction?

This belief of Elijah's is foundational to how the prophet then thinks about his own life. He says: **As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I SERVE... (1 Kgs 17:1)** In spite of all I've said about him, Elijah doesn't think of himself as special. He thinks of himself as God's servant. It is interesting to me that the two greatest disciples in the New Testament think the same way. Mary the mother of Jesus says, **"I am the Lord's servant" (Luke 1:38)**. And the Apostle Paul introduces himself by saying, I am **"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus" (Romans 1:1)**. Is that my primary self-definition? Is that yours? When we get up in the morning and enter our day... when we go to school or work... when we enter difficult situations, or make decisions about how to handle our resources, or decide whether to talk to that person and about what, do we do so conscious of the living God, **whom I serve**? Where have you already served God today? How can you serve his purposes further as this day unfolds? There will be no greater identity we can claim at the end of our lives than being able to say with confidence and joy: *"I have served the King."*

Then listen to this final clause that tells us how Elijah thought about life. **As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be NEITHER DEW NOR RAIN... except at my word. (1 Kgs 17:1)** It is clear that Elijah is speaking here of a drought that God was now bringing upon Ahab's land in order to move the king to change his behavior. The message is similar to the one Moses gave Pharaoh of God's plan to bring plagues upon Egypt until the king repented of his cruelty toward the children of Israel.

In every age, people (especially powerful ones) have a tendency to assume that the common graces that have enabled them to get where they are in life were of their own doing or will just naturally continue. Ahab and Jezebel likely assumed that needed blessings like the morning dew and afternoon rain would always continue. But GOD is in charge of ALL these graces. It is his nature to keep blessing people. As Jesus would

later say: **Your Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45).** But we are foolish if we think God HAS to keep doing this. If someone takes his grace for granted for too long, God CAN choose to suspend it.

Elijah understood that there are life-draining consequences to worshipping (or giving the throne to) less than God. Even if God does not actively punish us by suspending the grace of water or gravity or air that keeps us SURVIVING, when we don't put him first, we lose the grace we need for truly THRIVING. And sometimes, only great calamities awaken us to this and drive us back toward our true Source.

The great British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, put it this way and with this I'll close: *"Let us then... rejoice that we see around us at every hand the decay of the institutions and instruments of power, see intimations of empires [fading], money in total disarray, dictators and parliamentarians alike nonplussed by the confusion and conflicts which encompass them." **Does this sound familiar?** "For it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting... when every recourse this world offers -- has been explored to no effect... and in the gathering darkness every glimmer of light has finally flickered out, it is then that Christ's hand reaches out, sure and firm. Then Christ's words bring their inexpressible comfort, then His light shines brightest, abolishing the darkness forever. So finding in everything only deception and nothingness, the soul is constrained to [turn] to God himself."*²

That's the hope we'll return to next week in another story from the BOOK OF KINGS.

Please pray with me...

Great and living God, we confess how easily and often we turn to idols, hoping to find in them the satisfaction and supply of grace we can only find in You. We acknowledge, Lord, that we are not seeing the thriving that all of us want. At times it feels like we're in danger of not even surviving. We need a new kind of health at the center of our souls and society and to learn again what it means to live life as your servants. So, God, we repent and humbly ask you: Please take Your rightful place on the throne of our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

¹ <https://www.chesterton.org/ceases-to-worship/>

² Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom*, p.56