



The Message of Elijah (7) Troubler of Israel?

1 Kings 18:1-19

Text: Verse 17

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In the verse that we are going to consider this morning, the word of God teaches us who the real trouble-makers are in the world. But it also teaches how those who do not follow God think of God and his message and his people. The text describes a brief interaction between King Ahab and Elijah. From the verses that come before our text we have learned that Elijah had come back into Israel to meet with King Ahab. Three years before, Elijah had appeared to King Ahab, who was a wicked king, to tell him that there would be no more rain until he said so. Those words came true. There had been no rain for three years. The land was barren. People were suffering and dying. Then Elijah reappeared and he wanted to meet with King Ahab.

The way that the story is told emphasizes the authority of the word of the LORD above the authority of King Ahab. The story is conveying something of the greatness of God in subtle ways by the authoritative way that Elijah summons King Ahab to a meeting. Normally kings summon their subjects to come to them. Here the king of Kings summons one of his estranged subjects to appear before his prophet. Verse 16 tells us “And Ahab went to meet Elijah.”

The words that Ahab says when he sees Elijah and Elijah’s response tell us something about the way in which the world looks at God’s representatives on earth and the biblical teaching about the real source of the trouble in this world. Ahab calls Elijah the “troubler of Israel.” It is understandable that Ahab would think of Elijah in that way for Elijah had been the one to announce the drought. Elijah had told Ahab that there would be no more rain except at his word. It is not surprising then

that Ahab would call Elijah the troubler of Israel, but the teaching of the passage is that Ahab was the real troubler of Israel.

There is an interesting background to this accusation and this language. Similar language is used in the story of Achan told in Joshua 7. That is part of the story of the defeat of Jericho during the early part of the conquest of Canaan. God had forbidden the people of Israel from taking any plunder from Jericho. Achan had disobeyed that command and had taken plunder. The next time Israel went into battle she lost the battle. God told Joshua that the reason they had lost that battle was that someone had disobeyed the command not to take any plunder from Jericho. Through a process of the casting of lots, the Lord revealed that Achan had been the one to disobey his prohibition. And Achan and his family were condemned to death. In Joshua 7:25, Joshua says to Achan, “‘Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today.’ And all Israel stoned him with stones.”

This is the larger context of Ahab’s accusation that Elijah was the troubler of Israel. Ahab was using the same term to refer to Elijah that Joshua had used to refer to Achan. The comparison, of course, was completely wrong. But the accusation was that Elijah was the cause of the trouble that Israel was facing in the drought and in the famine. And the language suggested that Elijah was worthy of death because of his role in bringing about the famine. Elijah will respond and declare who the real troubler of Israel was, but for now, let’s consider what we learn from Ahab’s accusation that Elijah was the troubler of Israel.

You see there is a sense in which what Ahab said was true. Not in the ultimate sense. Elijah makes it clear that the real reason for the trouble in Israel was Ahab’s sin of leading the people into idol worship. But it was true in the sense that it was the word of the Lord through the prophet that had brought the drought upon Israel. There is a very important sense in which the word of the Lord brings trouble into the lives of those who are living in defiance of God and his commands.

Things were working out quite successfully for Ahab before Elijah appeared to announce the famine. Ahab had married Jezebel to foster good relations with the Sidonians and the embrace of the Sidonian god Baal was part of that strategy. The result was trade and prosperity for

Israel. The results of worldly politics and diplomacy were working for Ahab. There was peace and prosperity. And then Elijah appears with the word of the Lord pronouncing judgment and the next thing you know the heavens are brass and the fields are barren, and the stench of death was in the air. It is not surprising that Ahab should think of Elijah as the troubler of Israel.

And though the situation was very different, the same principle was at work in the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders of his day. Jesus was a troubler for them. Jesus' words and his teaching, were very disturbing for the scribes and Pharisees and they were a threat to their positions of honor in the community and even to the political stability and so peace and prosperity. Clearly he was a big troubler from their perspective; which is why they had him killed. They accuse Jesus of "misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ, a king," in Luke 23:2. And in verse 5 of the same chapter they say, "He stirs up the people...."

The fact is that from the perspective of the world – that is mankind living apart from God – the word of the Lord and therefore also the bearers of that word are trouble-makers. In the case of Ahab - from his perspective, all was going well until Elijah appeared and announced the judgment of God.

But the word of God always does that in one way or another as it addresses the world. The world has its own vision of peace and prosperity and wholeness and the word of God speaks into that vision and says that it is the way of death and futility. The word of the Lord pronounces judgment upon much of what the world holds dear. And the people of God as bearers of the word of God are often hindrances to progress from a worldly perspective.

We see this very clearly in our time and place. The world has a vision for justice and peace and harmony. This vision includes the affirmation of homosexuality and transgenderism. It includes the acceptance of abortion and euthanasia. It includes the acceptance of its understanding of pluralism in which every religion and every viewpoint is affirmed except of course the Christian religion. The word of God speaks against all of that in no uncertain terms and so those who resist the agenda of

the world and who declare the word of God over against the worldly vision of the good life are seen to be troublers in society. Those who seek to hold faithfully to the word of God are considered to be obstructers of justice and harmony and bigots, “holders-up” of progress and all manner of uncomplimentary labels.

We have to understand that the word of God is a troublesome word for those who reject God, his authority and his salvation. It is so absolutely opposed to the agenda of people who refuse God that it is very offensive to them.

Now in the case of Ahab calling Elijah the “troubler of Israel,” the most obvious reason that Ahab thought of Elijah in this way is his pronouncement concerning the drought. Elijah was the troubler of Israel because the drought had begun with his word and he had said that it would only end according to his word. As far as Ahab was concerned, Elijah was the cause of the drought. But we know that Elijah was nothing more than a spokesman for God and so what Ahab was really objecting to, was the judgment of God upon his sin.

This is one of the key reasons that the world considers the people of God to be troublers. The people of God are called to bring the word of God to the world and an important part of the message is the law of God and the judgment of God against breaking that law. A huge part of the message of God’s word is the holiness of God and the fact that God holds all human beings accountable for their defiance of his laws and warns them that they must repent and believe in Jesus or they will perish.

So the world is going its merry way, following its own heart as it seeks happiness and fulfillment in life, and the word of God speaks to the world and tells it that the way that it is living is the way of death and that unless they repent and submit to the God of the Bible, they will perish. There is good news in that message in that there is a way of salvation in Jesus proclaimed, but that way of salvation includes repentance and submission to the one true God. That is a disturbing word for the world and those who bring it are considered troublers in the land. They bring God’s word of judgment on the status quo. We are not Old Testament prophets whom God uses to announce specific

judgments for sin, but we, the church, have a prophetic calling to announce the judgment of God upon human sin and rebellion and that message is a troublesome message for all who are refusing to submit to the God of Scripture.

The word of the Lord is a profoundly disturbing word to those who are unwilling to submit to the authority of God. The word of God promises peace and fulness of life to those who believe in Jesus and submit to him as Lord, but that is always on the far side of submission to the authority of God, repentance for sin and dying to self. And the call to repentance is offensive to those who think they have nothing to repent of. And so there will always be something about the message of God's word that is troublesome for sinners.

Another thing that is troublesome about the word of God to those who are living in rebellion against God is God's insistence that he is the only true God and his requirement that all people worship and serve him alone. The problem in Israel was not a complete rejection of the true God. It was worshipping other gods alongside the true God. In the next few verses in 1 Kings 18, Elijah will accuse the people of Israel of "limping between two different opinions." They were worshipping both Yahweh and Baal. The problem was pluralism. The problem was the conviction that it was possible to worship both Yahweh and Baal. And the troublesome thing about Elijah was his insistence that Yahweh alone be worshipped and served. The problem with Elijah from Ahab's perspective was his rejection of the kind of pluralism that affirmed the legitimacy of worshipping more than one God/god.

Now the word pluralism is used in a number of different ways in our time. There is a kind of pluralism that is necessary in order for people from different religions to live together without killing each other. The Bible certainly does not call us as Christians to try to force people to be Christians in the way that many Islamic countries and groups try to do. But there is a kind of pluralism that the Bible does reject and that is the conviction that all religions and worldviews are equally valid and that no one religion should claim to be the one and only truth. The heart of the message of the Bible is that there is only one true God and that all other gods are idols. The heart of the message of the Bible is that all people

are accountable to the God of the Bible and that there is only one way of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus summed up this claim when he said in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

This claim has always been offensive to the world. And this claim has always been one of the reasons that Christians are considered to be troublesome in the eyes of the world. If you can just affirm everyone, it is so much easier to fit in and to get along with others. And it seems arrogant and condescending to claim that Christianity is true and that all other religions are false. When you view this whole matter from a worldly perspective it is understandable that Christians who proclaim the biblical message faithfully are considered to be a problem, but when you think about it from within the biblical worldview it is the only way of thinking about reality that is coherent and rational.

It's a lot easier to hold to the position that everyone's truth is equally valid, but that way of looking at truth is actually impossible and irrational because the various worldviews contradict one another. The biblical account of the world and truth, which is rooted in the one true God, is true and knowable because God has spoken to us in his word. The word of God is a revelation that claims to come from God himself who is above his creation and speaks into the creation to reveal himself and his truth to humanity. As Christians we do not claim to be smarter and more insightful than others so that we have discovered truth when so many other have not. We claim to be recipients of a word from the creator himself that gives us a knowledge of the truth.

But the Bible also makes it clear that that revelation from God will be offensive to human beings until their eyes are opened by a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

So the word of God addresses us with what is a very offensive and troubling message to those who are living in rebellion against God. It includes a word of judgment on everything that it defines as sin against God. It claims to be the revelation of the only God who requires the

submission of all people to him. It is an offer of salvation –of forgiveness and acceptance in Christ, but the way of salvation involves receiving the Bible as the word of the Lord and submitting to all that it teaches. It requires humbling ourselves before God and receiving his offer of reconciliation in Christ as a gift. For those who are renewed by that word, it is the most glorious truth possible. But for those who remain in their sins it is a troublesome word and the Bible is showing us that dynamic in this verse that is before us this morning. From Ahab's perspective, Elijah was the troubler of Israel. And that is always the perspective of the world towards the message of God's word and thus also those who are called to bring that word to the world.

Now this principle also operates in the lives of God's people. It is important to consider this subject in the light of the reality that some people by God's grace have submitted to God and accepted the truth of his word and other have not. This is very important for us who are the people of God so that we understand that it is part of the nature of things that the world will look upon us as troublemakers as we hold forth the word of God that condemns the agenda of the world in rebellion against God.

But it is also fruitful for us to think of this truth in light of the fact that we are not yet perfected this side of eternity. The Bible teaches that believers are being renewed through the operation of the Holy Spirit within us, but that we still have sinful natures within us. In 1 Peter 2:11, Peter urges Christians "to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." The term "flesh" here refers to the sinful nature which remains in believers as long as they are in this life.

What that means in the light of our subject is that there is a part of us which finds the word of God to be disturbing and there is the temptation for us sometimes to think of those who address us with a message from God's word that is disturbing as troublemakers. Not to the same extent that Ahab saw Elijah as the troubler of Israel, but nevertheless, in a weaker sense this is part of the dynamic of the Christian life.

The word of God has an edge to it, also for we who are Christians, because the word of God speaks to us of judgment and of warning. The

word of God exposes our sins and calls us to repentance. For instance in Hebrews 4:12-13 we read, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account."

The word of God is often a disturbing and troubling word for God's people. It is also a comforting and encouraging word, to be sure, but as long as there is sin in our heart and life, the word of God speaks to that sin and it is often a disturber of our peace. So too can be those who bring the word of God to us by means of exhortation and confrontation. The word of the Lord is always a troubling word as well as a comforting word for believers because it continues to address the sins in our lives and the sins deep within our hearts and it will not allow us to be complacent and at peace with the sins that remain in our lives.

And it is vital that part of our ongoing response to the word of God is submission to the God of the word and confession of sin and repentance when the word of the Lord confronts and troubles. For our sinful nature wants to suppress that word. Our sinful nature wants to resist when the word convicts and push the word aside as an unwelcome troubler of our peace and inner tranquility. It is part of the ongoing life of sanctification that we submit when God through his word, probes us and disturbs the peace in our hearts so that we acknowledge our sin before God and recommit to the battle against sin in our lives.

So this story of Ahab calling Elijah the troubler of Israel also contains a warning for us urging us to submit to the word of the Lord when it comes to us in ways that trouble us and convict us of our sins. Thankfully there is the way to true peace and rest in the way of confession, repentance and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. But that way is the opposite of the way of resisting the word of God when it probes and disturbs us. It is the way of submission and repentance rather than suppression and hardening our hearts.

What we need to understand is the principle expressed by Elijah in his response to Ahab. Verse 18, “I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.” This is one of the key themes of the Scripture.

The problem is sin – whether it is on the level of the vast problems that plague the human race, or the pain and suffering in our own lives, the ultimate problem is sin. That is not to say that there is always a discernable relationship between specific sins and specific sufferings. The reasons for specific instances of suffering are infinitely complex because God’s providence is infinitely complex, and he has not revealed to us the details of the wherefores and whys of specific instances of suffering. Nevertheless God has revealed that the reason there is suffering at all is the sinfulness of the human race. And there are many ways that we can see the principle at work in the world at large and in our own lives that sin is destructive and harmful and the cause of misery, emptiness and futility.

This is a key part of the message of the Bible. It is the story of what God has done and is doing to defeat the power of sin in the world. This is why he sent Jesus into the world. Jesus came to save us from our sins. Jesus lived, died and rose again, to deliver us and the world from the curse of sin. Sin is the problem of all problems and it is the troubler in this world. The drought that Elijah announced upon Israel was caused not by Elijah, but by the abandonment of the commandments of God and the idolatry of Ahab and the people who followed his lead.

And this is one of the principle truths of the biblical message. Sin is the problem and Jesus is the answer to the problem of sin. And what that means is that the greatest priority in our lives must be the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is through Jesus in the gospel that we are delivered from our sins and it is through the proclamation of the gospel to the world that others can be delivered from the curse of sin – the eternal punishment for refusing to repent – but also from many of the temporal results of sin as believers are gradually delivered from the power of sin in their lives.

It is hugely important that we look at life through the lens of this text. The word of the Lord causes trouble for sinners, but it does that as part of the way of delivering us from the curse and penalty of sin. Wherever there is sin, the word of the Lord is an uncomfortable and troubling word, but it is that because sin must be seen for what it is. There is something attractive about sin to our sinful natures, but it is destructive and ultimately leads to death. And the gospel is all about defeating sin and delivering us from it through what Jesus has accomplished and through the Holy Spirit whom he has sent.

We need to live in the light of this reality. The greatest problem in your life and in my life is sin and the greatest problem in the world is sin and the answer to both is the gospel and the deliverance from sin. This is at the core of the biblical message. This is at the core of the Christian life. And the flip side of that truth is that obedience to God's law is the way of life and flourishing because it is the way of living in a way that is pleasing to God. May God use his word this morning to help us to live in the light of this fundamental biblical truth. Sin is the problem. Jesus is the answer.