



The Message of Elijah

(14) Persecution and Elijah's Fear

1 Kings 19:1-3

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Life as a Christian has its pleasantness and it has its unpleasantness. There is a lot about the Christian message that is enjoyable to talk about. Love, peace, joy, and hope are important biblical words that are pleasant to think about and even more pleasant to experience. The word "gospel" means good news and it promises that those who respond to it in faith receive the forgiveness of their sins, release from the slavery of sin, the Fatherly love of God and a whole host of other wonderful realities. But alongside all of these welcome truths there are aspects to the biblical teaching on the Christian life that are not so welcome. Suffering remains a fact of life for believers as long as we are this side of eternity. And since we are not yet completely free from the power of sin in our lives, the Christian life requires constant effort in the fight against sin. We experience wonderful joys in our relationships with one another, but there is also the other side that we can also experience terrible pain when relationships go south.

This morning our subject is another one of the biblical themes that is not pleasant but an inescapable reality for believers this side of the return of Jesus and that is the conflict between those who love God and those who reject God's claims over them. This is really the most fundamental way of dividing up human beings. One the one hand there are those who love God and submit to him. One the other hand there are those who reject God's rule and those two ways of relating to God result in opposition and conflict and persecution.

And from the Christian perspective, we might to be tempted to say that the cause of the conflict is all on the side of those who hate God and his people. After all Christians are saved to love others and to be

peacemakers. But even though it is true that Christians are called to be loving and to be peacemakers, it is not true to say that the conflict between Christians and the world is all the fault of worldly people and their hatred of Christians.

One important factor in the conflict is the nature of the Christian message. It is a wonderful message of hope, but at the same time it is confrontational. It is confrontational in the sense that it includes the claim of God to be the Lord of everyone's lives. It is confrontational in the sense that at its heart is a call to repentance. It is confrontational in that it is a message of conquest of the kingdom of evil.

There would be little hatred of Christians if our message was "You do your thing and let us do our thing." No one would hate us if we would just be postmodern and say, "We all have our own truth and everyone's truth is as valid as everyone else's." But that is exactly what Christians cannot say. Our message is there is only one truth because there is only one God and everyone in the whole world must either submit to the one God or go to hell. Of course, we must say it more winsomely than that, but at the end of the day God confronts every single human being, who hears his word at least, with the message, "Turn to me and be saved or continue in your rebellion and you will perish." This is why there is persecution. This is why Christians are so hated by the world. The Christian message confronts the world with a God who offers salvation, but who also requires that people submit to his rule or perish. And that does not sit well with people who are not inclined to give up their freedom to submit to the demands of God.

That is what these verses of our text this morning are about. "Verse 1 says, "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword." Ahab is presented as such a weak man. He had stood by and watched as Elijah and the people executed the prophets of Baal. And now he goes home and tells Jezebel what Elijah had done. He did not stand up for the false prophets at Mount Carmel. And now he does not come home and tell Jezebel how God had revealed himself by fire and insist that they now rule the land according to the will of God. He just tells his wife what Elijah had done and how Elijah had killed the prophets of Baal. Ahab was a wishy washy man and

that is never attractive even in an enemy. Jezebel was not a wishy washy woman. She was evil, but at least she had a backbone. And when she hears what Elijah had done to her friends, the prophets of Baal, she acts decisively, at least as decisively as she could in the circumstances. Verse 2 says, “Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.’”

Now this was persecution on her part. But notice that this persecution was really a response to the word of the Lord. Elijah had done all that he had done by the word of the Lord. God had sent the famine. God had sent Elijah to confront Ahab. God was calling the people to turn away from Baal and worship him alone. It was in obedience to the word of God that Elijah and the people of Israel had executed the prophets of Baal. God was just not leaving things alone. Jezebel had been working at her plan to introduce Baal worship into Israel, but God had been resisting that plan. This is not to say that Jezebel had been working peacefully towards her goals. She had killed many of the prophets of God. But what happens in these verses is a response to what God had been doing to win back his people from the pagan god Baal.

You see the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil is one of conflict. These two kingdoms can never live together at peace. And the reason is that the devil is out to destroy God’s kingdom and God’s whole plan of salvation involves destroying the devil’s kingdom. Thankfully for us, God has gone and is going to great lengths to deliver people from Satan’s tyranny. That is the meaning of salvation in Christ. But we have to understand that the foundational reality is this conflict between God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom. And the meaning of God’s purposes in history is a conquest of Satan’s kingdom. So conflict is a fundamental characteristic of the nature of things – conflict between God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom.

And in this case we see how Jezebel is responding to the moves that God had made in order to release her grip, as Baal’s chief promoter, over the people he had claimed for himself. And so while there is a right and a wrong side in the conflict, God is an aggressor in this war. He is on a conquest to regain control over his world. And we see in Jezebel’s

response to the news of what Elijah had done, a response to this move on God's part to win back his people.

This is why there is so much persecution of Christians in the world. Our mission is to take over the world. The Christian mission is a conquest of the world. Not by force of arms. Our goal is not to conquer specific nations and their rulers, but nevertheless our goal is to convert the whole world to Christ. Our goal is that the kingdom of God will take over all the world. And our message is an aggressive one. All people everywhere must bow the knee to Christ. Life under Christ is wonderful and glorious, but it is life **under** Christ and in the end all resistance that does not submit to Christ will be destroyed in the fire of hell. Christ's conquest is a righteous conquest. There is nothing evil about it. He is overcoming an unrighteous rebellion. But make no mistake about it. One of the reasons that persecution is so common and so hateful and cruel is that the persecutors understand at some level that they are threatened by Christians and their goals.

I want to make it very clear that this language of conquest does not mean violence. The message is a message of love. It is an offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. But the Bible does use the imagery of war and conquest. And one of the reasons that Christians are so hated and persecuted in the world has to do with the totalizing claims of the Christian message. We are on a mission to take over the world. A key part of our message is that every single person in the world will one day submit to Jesus Christ, either willingly or by force when Jesus returns. And that does not sit well with those who reject the biblical claims of the supremacy of God. And so there is persecution.

And we must live with that awareness. So far we have been spared the worst of persecution. We are hated and despised by many people, but most of us have suffered very little as a result of persecution. But that may well change. And we must live with the awareness that the Bible has an awful lot to say about persecution and it considers it to be quite normal for Christians to suffer because of the hatred of the world against God and God's program. I've been reading and thinking about the book of Revelation lately and the main goal of the book of Revelation is to comfort Christians who are being persecuted. And so it

is important for us to think of persecution as a very real possibility for us and to examine our spiritual condition to see if the comforts that the Bible offers to persecuted Christians are enough for us – comforts such as the love of God for his people and his promise to work everything together for our good and the promise of unending joy in the presence of God beyond this earthly life.

I know that this is disturbing, and we would rather not think about it, but the truth is that one thing that God in his word does not promise to us is the kind of peace and prosperity to which we are accustomed. We may continue to experience it for many more years. I have no idea what the future of religious freedom in our culture is. There are some ominous signs. But there are also signs of push back against the radical and intolerant progressivism that has so much power and influence in our society. We do not know what the future will bring, but we do know what the Bible says about persecution. And so we must live with the sober awareness that living as Christians may well become costly for us in ways that it has not been costly thus far. This is part of what Jesus means when it tells us to count the cost.

So when Jezebel heard that Elijah had killed the prophets of Baal, she sent a messenger to Elijah threatening to have him killed within 24 hours. That certainly expressed her hatred for Elijah and her total rejection of what God had done on Mount Carmel to demonstrate that he was the true God and that Baal was not.

This is a clear example of the willful blindness of sinful human beings to the truth of God. You would think that the failure of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and God's spectacular revelation of his power and reality would be enough to convince anyone of the truth of God and of the truth of the message of Elijah. But all of this made no impression on Jezebel. It did not change her spiritual condition one bit. Her blindness was such that she continued to refuse to submit to God and she continued to be loyal to Baal even though he had been thoroughly discredited.

She is a clear illustration of all of us in our natural condition. She is an illustration of what Paul writes 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.” Paul gives a slightly different slant on this truth in Romans 1 where he teaches that at some deep level everyone knows that God exists and that they are accountable to him, but apart from God’s grace they suppress the truth.

That is the condition of all of us by nature. And it remains the condition of everyone whose eyes have not been opened by the Spirit of God. Satan is involved in this blindness as well. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 we read that “the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” So everyone who is not a Christian is blind to the things of God. It is a willful blindness, but a blindness none the less. This means that if we are Christians, if we do acknowledge the God of the Bible and believe in Jesus, it is a result of a miracle of healing from spiritual blindness. Paul writes of this miracle in 2 Corinthians 4:6 where he is speaking about believers, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Jezebel is an example of one who had not experienced this miracle of God’s grace. She had heard the story of what had transpired on Mount Carmel. She had heard how God had sent fire from heaven in response to the prayer of Elijah. But it did not change her. She continued to reject the God of the Bible even in the light of a miracle. The light was there but she was blind to it. She insisted on believing in Baal even though he had been clearly discredited in the contest on Mount Carmel.

This helps us to see that the difference between believers and unbelievers is the grace of God. By nature we are all like Jezebel in our willful blindness to the reality and relevance of God. If we now believe in God and trust in Jesus for salvation, it is only because this miracle of grace as taken place in our lives. God has “shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” This is what Jesus came to do. One of the things that Jesus came to do according to Isaiah 42:7 is give sight to the blind. He did that physically while he was on earth, but that was, among other things, a symbol of the spiritual enlightenment that he would give to his people.

If we have the knowledge of God and of Christ and are believers, we must remember that we are no different than Jezebel by nature. We are what we are by the grace of God. But if you are not a believer in Jesus, this is what you need – and you should be crying out to God for mercy. You are blind to the most important truths of life. You are living in willful blindness to the glory of God and that is the way of life that leads to destruction.

But what is going on with Elijah? Verse 3 says “Then he was afraid, and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.” Elijah afraid? This is a very different Elijah from the one who had appeared before Ahab so fearlessly in chapter 18. There Elijah had been fearless. He had ordered Ahab around with the authority of God. He had confronted Ahab and the people with their sin. He had led the people in executing the prophets of Baal. In the whole story of what happened on Mount Carmel Elijah had been fearless and strong in the Lord. And now when Jezebel threatens him, he runs away.

Now to be sure, the Bible does not forbid us from fleeing persecution. When Jesus speaks of the coming persecution in Matthew 24, he says in verse 16, “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” The apostle Paul fled from persecution a number of times and he does not apologize for doing that. When the first believers were persecuted in and around Jerusalem, we are told that they scattered, and this was one of the ways that the gospel spread throughout the area. Fleeing is a legitimate response to persecution.

But this seems so uncharacteristic of Elijah. It is true that he had gone into hiding after he had announced the coming drought to Ahab, but in that case we are told that he was following the instructions of God. So what we read in our text for this morning of Elijah being afraid and fleeing from Jezebel’s wrath is surprising. It is not what we expect from Elijah. So what are we to make of this? What is the point of the one who wrote down this part of the story by telling us that Elijah was afraid when he heard Jezebel’s threat against him and ran for his life?

One thing that we can say is that this is consistent with the practice of the biblical authors to show the weaknesses of the men that they are

writing about as well as their strengths. Think of Abraham and Jacob and Moses and David and Peter and James and John. These are all good guys in the biblical story. They are all held up for us as examples in many ways. And yet their weakness and their flaws and their sins are recorded as well as their strengths. The Bible records the good things that these men and others were enabled to do by the grace of God, but the Bible is not about glorifying human beings. There is only one human being who was without sin and flaws and that was Jesus. All the rest, even among the followers of God are shown to be weak, and flawed and sinful.

And that is a great encouragement for us. Because if we have any insight into ourselves, we will be aware of much that is lacking and much that is wrong. That is humbling and often discouraging. But what an encouragement it is to read of people who did great things for God who were just as flawed and as broken as we are. We are reminded of the fact that God uses sinful and imperfect people to accomplish great things. And we are reminded that whoever does even little things in the service of God does so only by the enabling grace and power of God. It is not that we rejoice in the weakness and failures of the significant characters in the Bible, but it is encouraging to know that even those who were did great things in the service of God were people just like us. We are encouraged when we read in James 5:17 that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...”

Now it is certain that the text is reflecting on Elijah’s behaviour here in a negative way. Back in chapter 17 when Elijah was hiding from the wrath of Ahab, and presumably of Jezebel, after he had announced the drought, we are told that he went into hiding in response to a word from God. The same is the case when he went to Zarephath where he stayed with that widow. In both of these instances, it is expressly mentioned that he did what he did because of the word of the Lord. It is significant that there is no mention of the word of the Lord in chapter 19 where we read of Elijah’s fear and flight. It is clear therefore that it was wrong for Elijah to be afraid and it was wrong in this instance for Elijah to flee. He is motivated by fear here rather than by the word of the Lord.

Now I have already mentioned the fact that it is not always wrong to flee persecution. Jesus himself counsels it and there are plenty of examples of it that meet with God's approval. But in this case, Elijah had been sent by God to confront Ahab and call him to repentance. He had done that fearlessly until this point. But here we see Elijah lose his faith in God's protection. Here we see Elijah not looking at the situation in the light of the word of God.

We examined this matter when we considered Obadiah's fear back when we considered the first part of chapter 18. Remember how Elijah met Obadiah, the faithful servant of God who was also a servant of King Ahab. Elijah told Obadiah to fetch king Ahab and Obadiah was afraid that Ahab would kill him if he summoned him to meet Elijah and Elijah disappeared. In connection with that part of the story we considered some of the passages that tell us not to fear what people can do to us.

There are many passages that tell us not to fear. There are many passages that tell us to be like Elijah was in the earlier parts of this story where he was looking at things from the perspective of the word of the Lord and because of that he was not afraid. That is the key for us as well.

It is significant that some of the passages that tell us not to fear do so in contexts which tell us that we may well have to give up our lives if we are faithful to Christ. Jesus says to his people in Revelation 2:10 "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

This is the key. While it seems way too much to ask, Jesus tells us not to fear and to be faithful unto death. This is not our natural way of responding to danger, but it is possible by the grace and power of God. There are plenty of examples of Christians who went fearlessly to their deaths. There are people who are fearlessly facing death today. They are fearless because God enables them to be fearless. They are fearless because they are looking at things in the light of the word of the Lord. As Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this

present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Elijah ran away in fear because in this instance he was not looking at things in the light of the word of the Lord. Thankfully, the Lord was not finished with him yet and he is still considered one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. But his lapse in this story goes together with the neglect of the word of the Lord and that points us to the way that God strengthens his people to face death without fear – always to view our circumstances from the perspective of the word of God.