



The Message of Elijah

(5) Famine, Rain and Ahab

1 Kings 17:1

1 Kings 18:1-6

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We are hearing the word of the Lord to us from the stories in 1 Kings in which Elijah is a principle character. One of the things that we have to understand about all of the stories in the Bible is that God is always the main character because the concern of the biblical stories always has to do with God, his plans and his relationship to people.

In the stories in which Elijah plays a role, King Ahab is a king in Israel, and he is a wicked king. He is a king over the 10 tribes that had separated from what began to be called the kingdom of Judah. He led the people to worship the pagan God, Baal, and so God was angry with both Ahab and the people who followed him. So God sent a famine. That was a covenant curse. Israel was in a covenant relationship with the true God of the Bible and that covenant relationship stipulated that if Israel turned away from the Lord and followed other gods, the true God would send curses upon his people and one of those curses was famine. The rains were withheld. The crops did not grow. The food supplies ran out. The people and animals grew hungry and many people died.

The God of the Bible is a sin-punishing God. That is not a popular notion today, but it is something that the Bible teaches with clarity and without apology. The Bible is one of the principle ways that God has revealed himself to us and one of the truths about himself that he makes very clear is that he upholds his authority and his honor and one of the ways that he does that is by punishing sin. The Bible also makes it clear that God is compassionate and merciful, and its main message is a message of salvation for those who repent and receive forgiveness, but that

salvation only has meaning against the background of the justice of God which means that he punishes sin.

So King Ahab was a sinful king. He led the people into the worship of Baal. And God responded by sending a drought. That is the setting for the part of the story that we will consider this morning. Verses 1-2, "After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.' So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria."

It is important to notice the relationship between the natural conditions and the word of the Lord. This was not the only famine in the history of the world. Famines happen regularly, especially in some places in the world. When they are the result of drought, they are usually just the result of natural weather patterns. God is in control of all the weather, but mostly he just works through the laws that he has set in place and so usually we do not know whether a particular drought us just part of God's usual way of ordering the weather or whether there is a specific reason for the drought.

But in the case of this story we know the reason for this particular drought, because God had sent Elijah to King Ahab to tell him that the drought was coming and because now God was sending Elijah back to Ahab to tell him that the drought was going to come to an end. Most of the time we do not know precisely the reason for certain weather patterns, but in this case we have the word of God telling us that this particular drought was a sign of God's displeasure on Ahab and the people who followed. Him.

God made sure that Ahab knew that this drought had come from the Lord and he was demonstrating that Baal was a false god and that Baal was powerless to control the weather.

Now what we learn about God from a story like this is a big part of its message to us, but we do not get prophets coming to us to tell us the meaning of any of the weather events that we experience. In the Old Testament period and especially concerning Israel there was a fairly direct relationship between Israel's obedience or disobedience and the

weather and prosperity. We live in a different period in God's dealings with the world and in our time God no longer speaks with new revelation interpreting meaning or this or that natural calamity.

Instead what we have is everything that God has recorded in the Bible. Once we had a complete Bible, God stopped giving us new revelation through people. God still speaks to us, but he speaks through nature in a general way, but other than that, he speaks to us through the Bible. And so we don't get a prophet coming to us and telling us that this or that natural disaster is a punishment from God. Instead we have the record of these stories in the Bible and we learn from them what God is like and how he wants us to live.

And so from this story, we learn that God is greatly displeased with our sins and that he is a God who punishes sin. We do not know the exact meaning of any specific natural disaster, but we do know that God is a sin-hating God, that he requires obedience from all people and that he will punish the sins of those who will not repent and turn to him for salvation.

And the great warning, as the Bible proceeds, is not that God will punish your sins in this life, but that those who are not saved through Jesus will be punished forever in hell. That is the key lesson of this story for us. It is ... this is what God is like and if we do not turn to him and serve him, the consequences for that will be much worse than some suffering or hardship in this life. Those who never turn to God will suffer eternally in hell. But at the same time we must see indications of God's grace and mercy in this story because it is part of the story that leads to Jesus Christ and the good news that is sent out to all the world that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.

So now God was going to send rain. He was going to bring the drought to an end. That is interesting because there had been no hint of repentance on the part of Ahab or anyone else. You would think that God would keep the drought going until the people repented and that then he would send the rain. But we read nothing of that here. God just sends Elijah back to Ahab to tell him that he was going to bring the drought to an end.

One of the things that this shows us that God can pursue his purposes using different means. Actually this shows us that God's punishment in this story was not a matter of strict justice. God was certainly showing his displeasure at Ahab and the people of Israel through this drought, but he was also being merciful to them because the drought was a call to the people to repentance. If God simply gave his people what they deserved he would destroy them all once and for all. But he does not do that. He sends the drought to demonstrate that he is the true God and that Baal is a false god. And now even though the Ahab and the people had not repented, God was going to send rain announcing ahead of time that he would do so for the same reason that he had sent the drought – to show that he was the true God and that Baal was a false god – so that the people might see the error of their ways and return to the Lord.

So God uses both hard times and good times as incentives for people to turn to him in repentance. In Romans 2 Paul is addressing covenant people who were not living in obedience to God. In verses 3-4 he says, “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” One of the things that God’s gifts to us in this life is meant to do is lead us to repentance. But the same is true of the hard times that God sends into our lives. God’s reasons for sending hard times into our lives are not always known. If we are believers God assures us that hard times do not separate us from the love of Christ. But God also tells us that sometimes he uses hard times to discipline us. Hebrews 12:3-11 discusses that subject. Verse 6 tells us that “the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every don whom he receives.” And verse 11 says, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

My point is that God uses both hardship and health and prosperity for the same purpose. He uses these things for other purposes as well, but in the story that is before us we see God first using a famine to show his displeasure at the sins of his people and to call them to repentance, but then he sends rain again and he does that before the people had repented. The purpose of the rain was the same as the drought: to

demonstrate that not Baal but he was the true God and the one who controlled the weather and to call the people to forsake the false god and to return to him and worship and serve him alone.

And all of this demonstrates God's patience with his wayward people. The people had turned away from God, but God was still speaking to them through the drought and through the rain and through his word in the mouth of Elijah. This history of God's dealings with king Ahab and the wayward people of Israel, showed that God does not tolerate sin, but it also showed God's love for his people even when they were not being faithful to him. He could have just destroyed them in his wrath, but he continues to engage them through the weather and through his word calling them to repentance – seeking reconciliation – seeking their true wellbeing.

This is a wonderful characteristic of our God. He is a God who punishes sin. He maintains his rule and authority. In the end people will not get away with defying his authority. But at the same time he goes to great lengths to seek the salvation of his people. Jesus shows us how it was this characteristic of God that led to God sending his son. In Mark 12 we read of a parable that Jesus told about a man who planted a vineyard, installed some tenants to work it for him and then went to another country. From time to time he would send a servant to collect some of the fruit from his vineyard and the tenants abused those servants instead of giving them what the owner of the vineyard as requiring of them. The owner sent many servants and they were all treated shamefully, and some were even killed. Finally the owner decided to send his beloved son thinking that they would at least respect his son.

One of the points of the parable is the patience and longsuffering of God in his relationship with the people of Israel. God sent prophet after prophet to encourage the people to give him the honor that they owed him. The prophets were all ignored. Some of them were killed. And then instead giving those ungrateful people what they deserved, he sent his own son. And we know what happened to him.

It is this characteristic of God that we see in the story that is before us this morning. First God sends a drought. Then God sends rain. Along with both he sends his word making sure the people know the message

of the drought and the message of the rain. And God does not give up on his people, year after year, generation after generation. He will eventually remove them from the land. He will bring them back to the land after a time. He will continue to send his servants to call them to repentance. And then he will send his son. This is a huge part of the meaning of the story that leads to Jesus Christ.

Peter expresses this idea in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is now slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” For those of you who are believing and following Jesus, this is reason for humble adoration for you know that God has and continues to show this kind of patience towards you. For any who are not following Jesus but serving the gods of this world, this is a powerful incentive to turn to the Lord in humble repentance. God’s patience is remarkable, but it is not endless. There does come a time when God says – enough - and then the judgment will fall. And so may the goodness and patience of God lead you to repentance.

Now in the rest of this little section that we are looking at this morning we see how the drought had not caused Ahab to repent. What we see instead is Ahab showing a callous disregard for the people of the land and doing everything possible to save his horses and mules instead of people. We are introduced to Obadiah who is a high ranking official in Ahab’s government. Ahab divides the land between himself and Obadiah that they may search the whole land to see if they might find some places where there were springs of water around which they might find grass for Ahab’s horses. People were starving and Ahab was concerned about his horses.

Ahab here points us to Jesus Christ, not by way of foreshadowing some aspect of Jesus’ goodness, but by way of contrast. Ahab was doing exactly the opposite of what a good king would do. The kings of Israel were to be shepherds of the people. Psalm 78:72 says of David, “With upright heart he shepherded them...” And the messianic expectation was of a king who would be a better shepherd than even David had been. Ezekiel 34:23, “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my

servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd."

This is exactly what Ahab was not doing. He was more concerned about his horses than he was about his people. And he can function for us as a foil for our Lord Jesus Christ who is the son of David who would be the perfect shepherd of his people. In John 10, Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd. Verse 11, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Verse 28, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Ahab did not care for the sheep that had been entrusted to his care. They were perishing because of his stubborn sinfulness, and Ahab was more concerned about his horses. But Jesus was and is the opposite. He leads his sheep in paths of righteousness. He gives his life for his sheep and he is committed to see to it that not one of his sheep will perish. See the great contrast between King Ahab and parched and barren land under his rule, and King Jesus and the kingdom of life and flourishing under his rule. And order your life accordingly.

See also the stubbornness and irrationality of sin in Ahab's actions in this story. Ahab knew what he had to do. He knew the reason for the drought because Elijah had made the clear to him. The word of the Lord had made that clear to him. But instead of humbling himself before the Lord and repenting of his Baal worship, Ahab is desperately seeking to save his animals through scouring the land to find some feed for them. What Ahab is doing here is seeking to maintain his power. Horse and mules were used for fighting wars. Ahab's concern for his horses was not a concern for them as pets, but as part of his war machine. Ahab was concerned about his position. He was concerned about his power. He was concerned that losing his horse and mules would weaken his position and make him vulnerable to his enemies.

Ahab knew what the problem was but instead of turning to the Lord he continues to desperately seek his life apart from God. He is an illustration of the stubbornness and irrationality of our sinful natures. We see this tendency in our own hearts and lives when we seek for wellness and satisfaction in life apart from God. We also see it in our society in which people live on the basis of irrationality and foolishness

instead of heeding the word of God which is so obviously the truth. Think of the absurdity of so much of what is going on in our world – the manifest irrationality of the theory of evolution, the denial of the obvious truth about sexual wholeness and the relationship between biology and gender. The fact is that our society is destroying itself because people will believe the most ridiculous things instead of submitting to the obvious truth of the word of God. Ahab is pictured here desperately seeking life and wellbeing apart from God even as the truth that living apart from God is the way of death was obvious all around him. That is what we are seeing in our time as well as the destructive results of rejecting God are more than obvious. People believe anything, no matter how ridiculous, rather than submit themselves to the word of God.

The lesson for us is to take note of the irrationality and desperation of sin and seek to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Finally we consider what these verses tell us in the verses that describe Obadiah. Verses 3-4, “Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.”

There are two things that we see in these verses. We see persecution. Jezebel was seeking to silence the word of God by killing the prophets. We see here a fundamental principle of reality in the period between the fall of mankind into sin and the final victory of the kingdom of God – the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan and the murderous hatred of the followers of Satan against God and his word. This is why there is persecution. The Psalms are full of accounts of the righteous suffering at the hands of the wicked. Jesus speaks of how Israel consistently killed the prophets. Jesus himself was the victim of persecution although he was not ultimately a victim. And while God’s people are never promised this-worldly prosperity, they are told repeatedly that they can expect to be persecuted. Matthew 5:11-12, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for

your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

That is what was going on in Israel under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. They blamed the bearers of the word of the Lord for the famine and so they engaged on a program of extermination of the servants of God. This is not surprising. This is the working out of the warfare that is human history – a struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. These are the spiritual principles at work in the world. And we see that today in the intolerance of Christianity in the world.

But then there is Obadiah. A man who feared the LORD greatly - in a position of power and influence in Ahab's kingdom. There is no word of explanation of how he got that position. The obvious answer is that this was the Lord's doing and through this high placed government official, God preserved the lives of 100 prophets. He preserved them from Jezebel's enmity, and he preserved them from the famine by bringing them bread and water.

The significance of this is the same as the significance of God preserving Elijah through the ravens bringing him food and through the miracle in Zarephath. God was preserving prophets – the bearers of the word of God. God was preserving his word in the midst of persecution and in the midst of the famine.

And that meant that he was not yet finished speaking to Israel. And that is another manifestation of the mercy of God towards a sinful people. The Lord had sent a famine as a sign of his displeasure with the idolatry of his people, but that famine was not a complete rejection of his people. God was preserving his word among his people. God was not yet finished speaking to his people – calling them to repentance, seeking reconciliation, desiring their obedience and wanting to bless them.

This is the significance of the word of God. Right after Adam and Eve sinned, God sought them out and spoke to them and he has been speaking ever since. The word of the Lord teaches us of the seriousness of our sins and of God's wrath because of our sins but all of that is

motivated by God's love and mercy. God speaks to us in his word because he is seeking sinners. His message is not a bare word of condemnation, but a warning with a call to repentance and an offer of salvation.

This is the meaning of the Word of God which is Jesus. The apostle John refers to Jesus as the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God and the message is consistent. There is warning. Jesus was very clear about what God thinks of sin and the consequences of sin. But both his words and his mission were very clear about the grace of God providing a way of salvation. All of that comes to fulfillment in Jesus himself who brought God's message, but also provided the way for the salvation of sinners.

Jesus took upon himself the guilt of our sin. Jesus opened the way for us to be forgiven and delivered from our sins by living the life that we are required to live and dying the death that we deserve to die so that we might be reconciled to God and enter into life which is life with and for God. The fact that God made sure that the prophets survived in the time of Jezebel showed that he was not finished speaking to his people. And he is still not finished. He has spoken in Jesus and Jesus has sent his church into all the world with the same message that the word of the Lord has always conveyed.

God is not to be trifled with. God is holy. God will punish sin. But that is the background for the good news of salvation. God has provided a saviour in Jesus. There is good news for sinners. Through faith in Jesus there is forgiveness and renewal of life. The message is always a stark contrast. Continue in sin and you will be condemned to eternal suffering. Turn to Jesus, trust in him and follow him and you will be reconciled with God and in relationship with God you will increasingly experience life as it was meant to be lived until you experience it in perfection at the consummation – at the renewal of all things.