



Perseverance, Providence, & Politics

1 Kings 17:1-6

A few weeks ago, I embarked upon a new series of Sunday morning studies with my congregation on the life of the biblical character Elijah. As we immersed ourselves in 1 Kings 17, we discovered that Elijah was a man with an incredible blend of dignity and discipline. He displayed remarkable courage, uncompromising strength, and self-control, though at times he would vacillate between optimism and pessimism, and flee from his crushing, unbearable responsibilities.

I suspect there are times when you feel the same. Perhaps in this past year, you have lost your job. Perhaps you continued your work in medicine or education, but the unceasing demands of the last 14 months have been so burdensome that you are incredibly tired; the joy of your working environment has gone. Perhaps you retired in the last year, and you and your spouse have been planning and looking forward to spending the rest of your years together. Then you began to notice your spouse's behavior changing—forgetfulness, uncertainty, an inability to recognize family, friends, and familiar places—and now you are fearful and anxious about the future.

The story of Elijah teaches us that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to the unexpected. Elijah was not a super saint when God called him from his small village. Yet He did call him, and called him to challenge the most powerful and influential man of his day. King Ahab was a violent, brutal dictator. Elijah was an ordinary man whom God transformed, then developed within him those great character traits that also enable us to respond to life's crises today with grace and patience.

When you study the lives of great individuals, you must also study a little of their historical

context. You cannot separate people from the context of their times. Their strength of character is created then shaped on the anvil of time and forged in the context of their personal history. All great individuals experience the heat of this refining fire.

Ahab, son of Omri (16:30)

In 1 Kings 16:29-33 we read how maliciously pernicious King Ahab actually was. Bloodshed and assassinations, murder and malice, intrigue and immorality, conspiracy and deception, hatred and idolatry had prevailed for six dark decades in Israel. This reign of evil began in the heart of the one on the throne and it infected everyone around him. It was a time of deep darkness. The chasm between God and His people had reached its widest point. Into this context Elijah comes.

Elijah the Tishbite (17:1)

Chapter 17 begins in a surprising manner as it introduces Elijah the Tishbite from Gilead. Scholars are not entirely sure of the location of Tishbe, but they are reasonably certain that it is a small, insignificant town.

This simple, unknown spokesman from nowhere stands before the most powerful man in the land and states unequivocally, "There will be a drought in the land for the next three years. There will be neither dew nor rain except by my word." Elijah is telling Ahab, *You are not the most powerful person in the land. You cannot control the forces of nature or influence the weather that affects the crops and the agricultural production of the nation.* Then a stark and surprising development takes place. God removes Elijah from Ahab's palace where he was just beginning to make an impact.

"Leave here..." (17:3)

As the chapter develops, we are tempted to ask why God would instruct Elijah to leave the palace and go and live in an arid desert, no longer having access to the royal court, no longer having the opportunity to influence the king or impact an entire nation.

God had other plans for Elijah. In order to mold and prepare him for what was to come, God removed Elijah from the public forum to

a private retreat, from the sunlight of national prominence to the shadows of obscurity.

God was teaching Elijah one of the fundamental lessons of the Christian life—He is always more interested in who you are than in what you do for Him. God wanted to know if Elijah was trustworthy in the menial, insignificant, routine, unexciting tasks of daily life. It is worth asking: Are you? Are you faithful in following Christ each day in the quiet places of the soul which no one else can see, when you are out of the spotlight and no one else is around? What about your thought process, your career, your ambition, your marriage—the places you look to for meaning and significance?

There are moments when God uses surprising, unexpected changes in our lives to slow us down and remind us of where our priorities should be. Over the last 12 months as we have endured quarantine, we have had a little more time to think and pray and look inwardly. "There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm, however, for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what is called holiness" (*Eugene Peterson*).

If you are ever to be the person God wants you to be, you need to learn two lessons: First, who you are is always more important to God than what you do for Him; and second, solitude, isolation, and periods of preparation are not signs of God's displeasure. The opposite is true.

The patience needed to cultivate character takes time. Quiet-spoken wisdom and seasoned maturity do not come instantly. The insightful perspective that adds depth to your discussions and decisions comes with integrity, generosity, determination, and humility. Such maturity only comes as a direct result of time alone with God.

At the beginning of chapter 17, Elijah is described as someone from an insignificant town somewhere in Gilead. But by the end of the chapter in verse 24, he is described as a man of God. What would it take for you to be described in a similar manner?