



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

GOD'S AMBASSADOR

1 Kings 16:29-17:24

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October 7, 2018

Access to power. K Street firms trade in it, but when you think about it, so do we all. Difficult problems won't solve themselves. To find solutions and get things done, we need connections—in the government, in the media, among the wealthy, in the academy, and so on. We all need *ambassadors*, people with access to power.

Elijah was *God's ambassador*. He had access to real power, and he used it for the glory of God to get things done in service to God's kingdom. It's tempting to read Elijah's story and say, "Wow! What an amazing, one-of-a-kind, superhuman guy! They don't make them like that any more!" But that's not the way to think about Elijah. Believe it or not, we are all called to the same line of work as Elijah. St. James said, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours," and God answered his prayers (James 5:17). Elijah wasn't made of different material; he was just like us. We are called to be God's ambassadors just like Elijah.

As we meditate on the four vignettes in 1 Kings 16:29-17:24, we'll see four responsibilities of those whom God calls to serve as his ambassadors: proclaiming God's Word, obeying God's Word, welcoming others, and praying for others. Let's look at each of these individually.

1. GOD'S AMBASSADORS PROCLAIM GOD'S WORD (1 Kings 16:29-17:1)

This first vignette sets the stage for Elijah's ministry as God's Ambassador. It's primarily a summary of Israel's decline into hedonism under King Ahab. We encounter Elijah for the first time in the last verse of the vignette (17:1). Elijah suddenly appears center stage as God's Ambassador to proclaim God's Word that there will be no more rain. Then the lights go out, the curtain drops, and the first vignette is over.

To make sense of Elijah's dramatic entrance, it helps to review the back story. After the Twelve Tribes of Israel settled in the Promised Land, they united under the monarchy of Saul, then of David, and then of Solomon. King Solomon rejected God's Word and led the nation into idolatry. The ten northern tribes then rebelled against the tyranny of Solomon's son Rehoboam. The kingdom was divided in two: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. For the next fifty years, the northern kingdom of Israel descended into chaos and civil war, as each king rejected God's Word and went his own way. Rebellion begat rebellion, and three out of Israel's five kings

were murdered by their successors. Everybody was suffering, so the northern tribes pulled together and chose Omri, then commander of their army, to be their king. Omri ushered in a golden age of prosperity and expansion, yet it was a lot like the Tower of Babel in that it was built in defiance to God's Word. One of Omri's greatest accomplishments was building a new mountaintop capital in Samaria. Every city in the Promised Land up to this point had pre-existed when the Israelites arrived from Egypt. But when Omri became King, he purchased a mountain right in the middle of the country and built a magnificent new city. From this point on, the whole northern kingdom would be known as Samaria, after the name of her grand, new capital.

The first vignette begins in 1 Kings 16:29 with King Omri being succeeded by Ahab, his son, who "did evil in the sight of the LORD (i.e. Yahweh), more than all who were before him" (16:30). Here's how Ahab did it: he made an alliance with Sidon to the north, taking the princess Jezebel to be his wife. Just as King Solomon's many wives led him into idolatry, so it was also for King Ahab, who brought Jezebel's Sidonian gods to Samaria. "He erected an altar for Baal in the House of Baal, which he built in Samaria" (16:32). Baal, by the way, means "Lord" or "husband"; when Ahab married Jezebel, he built a temple for her god "husband". Then "Ahab made an Asherah" (16:33), a cultic pillar for the mother goddess of Sidon, who was introduced to Israel as the wife of Yahweh, i.e. "the Queen of Heaven." So, to summarize: Ahab married Jezebel, Jezebel brought her god Baal to be Israel's "husband," and she brought Asherah to be Yahweh's wife. It was one big, unhappy, dysfunctional family. In all of this, "Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (16:33). What a terrible way to be remembered.

At the time, however, Ahab's legacy looked great. The economy was booming, with lots of new construction. He was presiding over a golden age in Israel. Yet all that glitters is not gold. Here in Washington our current golden age of expansion comes at a tremendous cost to our city's most vulnerable. Ps 127:1 says, "unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Washington's current building frenzy will be in vain unless our city comes to know and love the Lord. Apart from the Lord, Washington will eventually go the way of Samaria, which is now an overgrown wasteland of crumbling ruins. Ahab thought that he was building his legacy as the king of good times and happy days; instead, because the Word of the Lord stands forever, Ahab will be eternally remembered for his wickedness and apostasy.

1 Kings 16:34 adds a note about the rebuilding of Jericho. When the Israelites destroyed Jericho many generations before, they were forbidden from rebuilding it as a fortified city. Joshua foretold of a curse upon the one who would do so. That curse came to pass under Ahab's expansionist regime, and it fell upon the family of Hiel. Somehow rebuilding Jericho's walls and gates cost Hiel the lives of his oldest and youngest children. We're not told how they died, but it's clear that they would not have died if their father had not ignored God's Word.

All that glitters is not gold. Material prosperity often masks the rotten center of a self-indulgent culture, *but look to their children and you'll see the true cost*. Think of the horrible stories of abuse that came during the confirmation process for Justice Kavanaugh. Reports of drunken teenagers running wild at unsupervised house parties are a window into the normal trajectory of material prosperity apart from the Lord. We shouldn't be surprised to find abandoned children living like animals inside the temples to hedonism built by their parents. They have access to power, but they're taught from infancy to use it selfishly. They need God's ambassadors to bring them God's Word and rescue them from destruction!

God sent Elijah to Israel for this very reason. Despite Israel's material prosperity, their center was rotten and their children were dying. They had rejected the Lord and entrusted themselves to Baal, the so-called god of fertility and life, whom the Sidonians believed controlled the clouds, the rain and the dew. It was into this decadent culture that Elijah suddenly appeared as God's Ambassador to proclaim God's Word. Elijah, whose name means "My God is Yah(weh)," came to King Ahab and said: "As the LORD (Yahweh), the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1).

Elijah is making four important declarations in this message:

- 1. *It is Yahweh who lives.*** The gods of the Sidonians were dead carvings of wood and stone. They had no life, and the worship of them gave no life. In the previous verse, Hiel, which means "Life of God," brought death in rebuilding Jericho. In this verse, Elijah brought life, proclaiming "As the LORD (Yahweh) lives."
- 2. *Yahweh is Israel's God.*** Elijah called him "the LORD (Yahweh), the God of Israel." Their prosperity didn't come by their own hand, nor did it come from the lifeless gods of the Sidonians. All that they had was gift from the LORD Yahweh.
- 3. *Elijah is Yahweh's ambassador.*** Elijah physically stood before King Ahab, but he came on behalf of Yahweh, to speak the word of the Lord. So Elijah said that it is Yahweh "before whom I stand."
- 4. *It is Yahweh who controls the weather, not Baal.*** Therefore, "there shall be neither dew nor rain these years" except by the word of God's Ambassador Elijah.

The next chapter of 1 Kings tells of the famous showdown at high noon between Yahweh and Baal at the top of Mt. Carmel. In that story, Elijah's God will demonstrate his victory over Baal and then pour out rain upon Israel. Mt. Carmel is the decisive battle, yet the initial skirmish between Yahweh and Baal begins in 1 Kings 17:1 through Elijah's proclamation of God's Word. Elijah must have been frightened when he went before the king. It must have felt like an unnecessary and dangerous mission. But this is how God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven: through the proclamation of God's word.

We're all called to proclamation, just like Elijah. Whenever we proclaim God's Word as God's ambassadors, we simultaneously reveal God's glorious kingdom while also exposing the emptiness of idolatry. Our friends and coworkers need to hear this good news from us. Though it may feel unnecessary and dangerous, they need to hear, for example, God's Word offering them a very different party scene, in which being filled with the Holy Spirit replaces debauchery. After all, what is true prosperity? Is it self-indulgence? Or is true prosperity the rich, meaningful, and eternal life that comes through a relationship with the living God? By proclaiming God's word, God's ambassadors are a light in the darkness, exposing the emptiness of life without him, and pointing people to abundant life with him.

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). God has entrusted us with his living word. Don't hide it away. Use it for his glory, in service to his kingdom.

2. GOD'S AMBASSADORS OBEY GOD'S WORD (17:2-6)

After delivering a word of judgment to Ahab, Elijah went on a camping trip. It is on this trip where we begin to see the real magic of Elijah. It's not in what one might call Elijah's "powers," but rather in *Elijah's faith in God's power*. In vv 2-6, Elijah's faith was put to the test, to see whether he would practice what he preached. After having proclaimed God's Word to Ahab, now let's see whether he obeyed God's Word on his own.

"The word of the LORD (Yahweh) came to him" (17:2) telling him to cross the Jordan river and live in a wilderness ravine where he would find running water, and would be fed by the ravens. So, Elijah "went and did according to the word of the LORD (Yahweh)" (17:5). He went just where he was told. He drank from the brook in the ravine just as he was told. And sure enough the ravens—those notoriously selfish scavengers—brought Elijah food, demonstrating that God was unequivocally behind the miracle provision.

How did Elijah have the faith to trust God at his word and risk his life in the Jordanian wilderness? By meditating on God's Word. After all, this wasn't the first time that God provided water and bread and meat to his people in the wilderness. He did it before—during Israel's exodus from Egypt. Elijah knew the Exodus story. He had hidden it in his heart, and that's what empowered him to make his own way through the waters of the Jordan and then out into the wilderness. By knowing God's word, Elijah could walk by faith and not by sight on an adventure with the Lord.

We're an adventurous people. We dream of wandering the streets of Paris, or sailing the Galapagos, or free climbing El Capitan. But the greatest adventure of all is to obey God's word. It's often harder than the other adventures we undertake, yet it's also much more satisfying.

Think of Elijah, who could have remained in Samaria, enjoying its luxurious comforts, and where his prosperity was virtually certain. Yet he “went and did according to the word of the LORD” (17:5). It was difficult, but it was also deeply satisfying, as the Lord provided for him and sustained him in the wilderness. Meanwhile, back in Samaria, things started to deteriorate almost immediately. Ahab had grown accustomed to the gushing rivers of material prosperity, apparently flowing from the hand of Baal. But then the faucet went dry, and no amount of sacrificing to Baal would restore the flow. If Elijah had stayed back on Samaria’s luxurious mountaintop during that epic drought, he would have been miserable. What a gift for Elijah to be able to take a retreat with the Lord, who supplied all his needs.

God is calling us to the greatest adventure of all: obedience to his word. We have to preach it to ourselves as we proclaim it to others. It’s counterintuitive, yet by submitting to God’s authority we find access to real power. The only way to succeed as an ambassador is through integrity and faithfulness of life, practicing what we preach.

3. GOD’S AMBASSADORS WELCOME OTHERS (17:7-16)

Throughout the Bible, the covenant between God and his people is pictured as a marriage relationship. God is the husband, and his people are his bride. When King Ahab married Jezebel and brought her gods to Samaria, he led God’s people into spiritual adultery. Jezebel brought her god Baal to be Israel’s “husband” in the place of the Lord. Jezebel also brought the goddess Asherah to be the wife of the Lord. Yet the Lord had no interest in another wife. He wanted his people back. So the Lord instituted a drought, to show his people that it was he and not Baal who controlled the weather. And the Lord sent his ambassador right into the heart of Baal’s territory, to save a Sidonian widow whose god was just as lifeless as her husband. Elijah went as God’s ambassador *to welcome her in*.

When Elijah arrived in Zarephath, he asked the widow for a drink and for some bread (17:10-11). It was the Lord who had provided Elijah’s food and drink back in the wilderness. Now that he was in Baal’s country, he wanted to see how Baal’s people were faring under their god. The widow’s response was telling: “As Yahweh your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die” (17:12). The drought was severe there too. The widow knew that Baal was no more alive than her husband. But Yahweh, the God of Israel, was said to be “the living God,” and Elijah was his ambassador. Perhaps Elijah’s living God might be of help to her and her son in a time of desperation. What did she have to lose?

Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says Yahweh the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that Yahweh sends rain upon the earth’” (17:13-14). Just as he had spoken God’s Word to King Ahab, God’s ambassador spoke God’s Word also to the Sidonian widow.

Because the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It's powerful, for both Jews and Gentiles, for both men and women, for both Kings and peasant widows. It's powerful, that is, for all those who hear it and obey.

King Ahab, of course, had a long track-record of disobeying God's word, as evidenced by the situation throughout his kingdom. Ahab's disobedience would ultimately destroy him and all Israel, but there in Sidon, in the home of the widow, salvation was coming. It began with her faithful response to God's word: "she went and did as Elijah said," (17:15) just as Elijah had gone and done according to the word of the Lord (17:5). The widow's obedience bore the same fruit as Elijah's did in the prior vignette, as the Lord provided and sustained her entire household.

Remember what was going to happen if Elijah had not come? The widow and her son were preparing to die. She had come to the end of her provisions, the end of her faith in her "husband" Baal, and the end of hope. She was hungry for more than bread; she was hungry for the Lord. It was into this need and hunger that the Lord sent his ambassador in order to welcome her in.

Within our congregation week after week, year after year, the Lord feeds and sustains us by the power of his word and the grace of his table. It's so comfortable to be among friends that we can almost forget that our neighbors are hungry. They're everywhere—people who are preparing to die because they've come to the end of faith in their gods, and the end of hope. It is into this need and hunger that the Lord sends us as his ambassadors, to welcome them in. Don't wait any longer to tell them about our community and to invite them in. Don't wait any longer to give them an answer for the hope that is within you. You're God's ambassadors. They're dying to hear from you.

4. GOD'S AMBASSADORS PRAY FOR OTHERS (17:17-24)

The fourth and final vignette is about the responsibility of prayer. *Not only should we as God's ambassadors speak to men and women about God, but we should also speak to God about men and women.* This is what we find Elijah doing in this last story after the widow's son mysteriously died.

The widow said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son?" (17:18). This is the way people outside the church often feel when Christians come around, as if having us there shines God's spotlight on them, and then God is so repulsed by them that he wants to squash them. That's why it's so important for us to be praying for them, and for them to know that we're praying for them. Besides the Word of God, prayer is the other way that God's ambassadors have access to his power. Not that God automatically does whatever we tell him to do in prayer. But he does delight in our prayers, as we draw near to him and pour our hearts out to him. He loves to answer our prayers in alignment with his kingdom. We make no promises

regarding *what* the King will do, but we do promise to do our job as his ambassadors and *ask the King for his help*.

Elijah did this with the widow's son. Elijah said, "Give him to me" (17:19) and then he carried the boy up to his own room, and to his own bed, and laid him out on the bed. Then "he cried out to Yahweh, 'O LORD Yahweh my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?'" (17:20). In other words, is it always bad news with you wherever I go to proclaim your word? Can there be any other outcome?. Then Elijah "measured himself" out over the boy three times as a kind of visual prayer, demonstrating the kind of substitution he was hoping God would bring about. Elijah wanted the life that God continued to bestow upon him, that still ran through his body as he lay stretched out in that bed, to also flow into the boy as well. And he spoke his prayer as well: "O LORD (Yahweh) my God, let this child's life come into him again" (17:21). Then Alleluia, the child came back to life!

The resurrection of the widow's son is often said to be Elijah's greatest miracle. But what was miraculous about it? That Elijah the spiritual superhero had the power to raise the dead? No. It was, rather, to paraphrase the language of obedience already used in vv 5 and 15, that the Lord went and did according to his ambassador's word. Almighty God was not compelled to obey Elijah's word; but he listened to his ambassador and chose to grant Elijah's request.

As God's ambassadors, we have been given access to the same power, yet we often fail to use it. St. James says as much in his letter, when he says that we have not because we ask not (James 4:2). Then he goes on to say that Elijah was a man just like us, and God answered his prayers (James 5:17). Therefore, we ought to pray with the same faith.

Elijah presented the boy to his mother saying (23), "See, your son lives." Then she replied (24), "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The provision of food alone had not been enough to bring the widow to faith. She needed to see a resurrection. Because God's ambassador prayed for her and her son, the boy came to life and she too came to faith in the Lord and his Word.

CONCLUSION

God is calling us to be his ambassadors, just like Elijah. We are to proclaim God's word and to obey it. We are to welcome others in and to pray for them.

None of this would be possible if it weren't for the Lord Jesus, the greatest ambassador our world has ever known. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus "reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). Jesus is the living word of God, who redeemed us by his faithful obedience to God's word. Jesus is the one who welcomed us in, so that we might make disciples of all nations. Jesus is the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father and prays for us even now.

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus made this promise to his disciples: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). Through the Spirit of the Lord, we have access to real power. Let us go forth into the world—as God’s ambassadors—rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.