

I Kings 16:21-17:1 The Call of Elijah

Introduction

Do you ever feel alone or lonely in your witness for God? Have you felt it is hopeless trying to influence the people around you at school or in your workplace or neighbourhood? After all it would be a generous estimate if we imagined that as many as 5% of the population attended an evangelical Church with any degree of regularity for Sunday worship. When a few parts of the country have a much higher attendance rate such as London or the Western Isles in Scotland this naturally implies that there are other places with significantly less than 5% of local people hearing a credible presentation of the Gospel week by week. For many Christian children their experience is of one or two Christians at most in their high school classes; or being the sole Christian in their small place of employment or one of a handful in a larger workplace; or the only Christian household in that part of our street. Instead of thinking what a privilege God has given me to be His witness in this environment our natural thoughts can be –at times – this is so hard Lord please send me another Christian friend, neighbour or colleague! Yet God’s power is not determined by the quantity of His followers in a particular location. His Holy Spirit can work just as effectively through one person committed to Him as through a group of Christians equally in the place where He has planned them to be. So often the impact for God is determined by the quality of the lives of His people that is witnessed by others who may be searching for a meaning and purpose to their lives. There is an element of mystery as to how God uses our prayers and our spoken words and the lives that we live to bring others to Christ. However, we must always remember that God is on the throne, nothing is too hard for Him and nothing too insignificant that escapes His attention.

The life of Elijah the Tishbite from the Old Testament is one that has inspired countless believers over the centuries both before and after the time of Jesus. Here was a man who felt terribly alone and under pressure at one of the darkest times in his nation’s spiritual history. He had watched his nation decline from an era of spiritual and economic and political greatness under David and Solomon until, in His own day, it was greatly diminished, even if still punching above its weight in the Middle East of that time. This is remarkably similar to the position of the United Kingdom in the early years of the twenty-first century. Politically, as our current Prime Minister David Cameron has admitted, as a country we owe our current status to our willingness to act as a junior partner following the USA in its foreign policy around the world. On his recent trip to India in July 2010, he told his hosts that he was coming with ‘humility’ and most senior members of his cabinet to seek friendship with the Indian government who were underwhelmed by, though appreciative of, his visit. Indian journalists openly admitted that Britain was nowhere near as significant to their country as the USA or China. At a spiritual level a hundred years ago Britain sent out more Christian missionaries per head of population than any other nation on earth, with Scotland topping the lists within the UK. Scottish Baptist Churches as recently as the mid-1920s were sending out on average two full-time missionaries per congregation. The United States took over that mantle for the vast majority of the twentieth century, but now in proportion to numbers South Korea and Brazil catching up if not leading the way in the twenty-first century. How do we view this situation? Hopefully as a great opportunity to be alive and as witnesses to our Lord and Saviour! The devil wants us to focus on the bad news –and there is plenty of it- and be

depressed, yet God wants us to focus on His greatness and almighty power to work in extraordinary ways through a people wholly committed to Him. That means you and me, just as it meant Elijah all those centuries ago. James 5:17 states: *Elijah was a man just like us.* The people He uses are just like ‘you and me’ –and available to Him. I trust that this includes each one of us here in this meeting.

1. Israel’s Awful Predicament (I Kings 16:21-34)

²¹ Then the people of Israel were split into two factions; half supported Tibni son of Ginath for king, and the other half supported Omri. ²² But Omri's followers proved stronger than those of Tibni son of Ginath. So Tibni died and Omri became king.²³ In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned twelve years, six of them in Tirzah. ²⁴ He bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer for two talent of silver and built a city on the hill, calling it Samaria, after Shemer, the name of the former owner of the hill. ²⁵ But Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. ²⁶ He walked in all the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit, so that they provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their worthless idols. ²⁷ As for the other events of Omri's reign, what he did and the things he achieved, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel? ²⁸ Omri rested with his fathers and was buried in Samaria. And Ahab his son succeeded him as king ²⁹ In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. ³⁰ Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. ³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.³⁴ In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun

(a) The Root Problem-unbelief in God and His Word

The decline in Israel’s history had begun in the reign of Jereboam I whose actions had led to the division of the country into two, a larger northern kingdom of Israel and a small southern rump of the state called Judah, largely around the territory of that tribe and Benjamin. As he feared that the people might want the country reunited –at least for religious reasons – Jereboam set up golden calves as symbols of Yahweh at Dan and Bethel with the declared intention that these locations would serve as places where citizens of the northern kingdom could worship the God of Israel without having to make the long trip for services to the temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 12:26-30). However, once he had got a taste for making up the rules about where God should be worshipped, it was not long before he took further steps departing from the biblical guidelines. He appointed whomever he wished to serve as priests despite the biblical regulation that they ought to be from the tribe of Levi (I Kings 12:31). Later he would create new festivals as occasions for worship and even take the place of a priest at Bethel offering a sacrifice on the altar (I Kings 12: 32-33). This was the religious context which was the backdrop to further spiritual declension in the times of his successors as kings of Israel. At this stage in Israel’s history, outwardly, all looked well, like the Christian Churches in Britain in the last couple of decades of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century when theological colleges staffed by liberal theologians shared their unbelief with the majority of ministerial students who entered pastorates holding the views of their mentors –no wonder serious decline set in a hundred years ago. The very temptation Satan put before

Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:1: *Did God really say...* is put to God's people in each and every generation. Once we decline to give God His place and trust what He has said we risk going down a slippery slope of unbelief as Israel did all those centuries ago. The damaging consequences were not apparent at the time, otherwise the error would have been corrected. It was in latter generations that the folly of accepting the sins of Jereboam was revealed. The sinful actions of an Omri or an Ahab in Elijah's day would not have been contemplated without the wrong foundations laid by their predecessor Jereboam. The choices we make do not merely affect us, but our children and grandchildren and their generations for good or for bad. The majority of believers in Jereboam's day must have said well its not ideal but we'll go along with it for peace sake someone else will correct it later. They did, but only after the pain of an exile of both Israel and Judah and most ominously little was ever heard of again of exiles from the northern kingdom.

(b) **The Recent Problem Omri, Ahab and Jezebel** (I Kings 16:21-34) Civil war between two factions in the army between two commanders Tibni and Omri (I Kings 16:21-22), led to the latter's successful taking of the throne. The country had been sliding into if not anarchy, at least an unpleasant and unsafe place to live. Omri was a military strongman and dictator. He was also a very effective administrator who built a new capital city in Samaria. His reign may only have been twelve years but from a political and military point of view it was a great success. In neighbouring countries he was highly respected, even in the superpower Assyria where Israel was still being called 'the house of Omri' a century and a half later. Omri had no interest whatsoever in religion of any kind. Power and the strengthening of his position were his sole priorities. He would have been at home with many of secular dictators of the twentieth century. A decision he took early in his reign was to marry his son Ahab to Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, King of Phoenicia (Lebannon). Ethbaal had won power in a coup overthrowing his moderate predecessor Pheles, a moderate man who had respect for the God of Israel, like his own predecessor Hiram who had worked so closely with David and Solomon. Ethbaal was leader of the cults of Astarte and (Baal) Melquart, sex and nature Caananite religions. The media today would have undoubtedly described him as a religious fundamentalist! His religion meant everything to him and his family followed suit (incidentally his grand-daughter Dido founded Carthage in North Africa (modern day Tunisia). As part of the marriage settlement Jezebel demanded the erection of a massive temple for Baal worship in Samaria ready for her use when she married Omri's son Ahab. There had been a massive religious vacuum in Omri's time in Israel. But if the God of the Bible is not proclaimed there is not an absence of religion in a country. In the 1970s the late militant atheist philosopher A.J. Ayer, who had been rejoicing at the apparent decline in Christianity in the UK, wrote of his despair that all kinds of superstitions and in his words more primitive and ridiculous religious beliefs were taking their place. The new reign of Ahab was characterised by a mass promotion of Baal worship in the land and the erection of many places of worship to make that a practical reality. Morally things got worse and worse from a Jewish /Christian perspective. The culmination of that was stated in I Kings 16:34: *In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun.* To understand this statement we need to go back to the book of Joshua and the time when Israel entered the promised land. God had given the land to the Israelites removing from the land Caananite tribes whose wickedness and religious depravity had led to such a judgement. After the conquest of the Caananite stronghold of Jericho

Joshua made this prophetic declaration in Joshua 6:26: At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: "*Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: "At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates."* This man, Hiel of Bethel, unknown to us defied the God of Israel and rebuilt Jericho –but at the cost of the deaths of his oldest and youngest sons. A culture in decay reduces then removes the protection of its most vulnerable citizens. We have seen it in Britain in the last fifty years. It was no accident that it was the 1960s when the strong attacks on Christian values began in the public square, that we saw the passing of the Abortion Act and more recently the attempts to get a Euthanasia bill through Parliament. God is not mocked. A nation will reap in time what it sows. It appeared in Israel then as if God was absent or silent. Several decades had passed and there appeared to be no action being taken by God in response to the prayers of His people, who appeared to be declining in numbers at a rapid rate in Israel. This verse in an understated way reminds us that God in the mystery of His will appears to allow our prayers to go apparently unanswered, sometimes for years, yet this is not the total picture of what is going on. God had not forgotten His people then or now. In His time He would act in a most unlikely way.

2. **God's Appointed Messenger** (I Kings 17:1)

Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead... In the period immediately prior to the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, John the Baptist, in one of his remarkable sermons recorded in Luke 3, pointed to a pile of stones and declared: *out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham* (Luke 3:8). In other words if there are no people willing to serve God and do what He has planned then if necessary He can create others to do His bidding. God is not restricted by human sinfulness, though He is saddened at the consequences for His creation when sinful behaviour causes such pain and heartache and devastation in the world He created. In the time of the Persian Empire the Old Testament contains the remarkable story of Esther, an ordinary girl who became queen of that empire. At a critical moment when a holocaust of the Jewish people appeared likely, her uncle Mordecai reminded her that she could be God's agent to save her nation. Esther 4:14 states: *And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?* God delights to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things for Him. Or even further back in the time of Abraham there was the mysterious figure Melchizedek, priest of Salem (later called Jerusalem), to whom the father of the Jewish nation paid a tithe and honoured Him sharing bread and wine together (Genesis 14:17-20). Who was this man Elijah? He came from a small rural backwater, almost certainly a subsistence farmer in the rugged hills of Gilead. Its rough terrain home to a fair number of wild animals and a small number of people eking out a living with a Spartan lifestyle; You could not get further from the comfortable urban lifestyle of Ahab and Jezebel than in the community where Elijah lived. His rough basic clothing would have shocked the trendy palace elite wearing what passed for designer clothes of that day. However, what mattered was that Elijah was brought up in a godly home brought up to fear the Lord and honour Him in daily life. In one of the few comments he made about his own lifestyle I Kings 19:10 (and 19:14) recorded Elijah stating: *I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.* He had been deeply grieved by the departure from God's ways in his nation and the recent rampant growth of idolatry with the Baal worship promoted so enthusiastically by Jezebel. The only Bible he is likely to have been familiar with was Genesis to Deuteronomy. What could he do about the state of his nation? What can we do about

the state of Britain today? James 5:17 records that: *He prayed earnestly that it would not rain.* Why did he do that? And why did he think this was an appropriate request to pray so that God might be truly honoured in the land? Deuteronomy 11:13-17 provides the answer. *So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul—¹⁴ then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil.¹⁵ I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them.¹⁷ Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.* God had promised that if the nation followed His ways that its basic needs would be provided. However, if they turned their backs on Him then all sorts of disasters would follow. The absence of rain would be evidence of His great displeasure. Solomon in his prayer of dedication of the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, approximately a hundred years earlier, had referred to this conditional blessing from God. I Kings 8:35-36 appears as a kind of predictive prophecy that Israel would behave in this way in the future: *When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because Your people have sinned against You, and when they pray toward this place and confess Your name and turn from their sin because You have afflicted them,³⁶ then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land You gave Your people for an inheritance.* Earnest and persistent prayer commended as the appropriate means of effective communion with God. The same principles apply in every generation because God has not changed, though His people do - and not always for the best. David, Solomon's father, recognised this principle in his prayers. In 2 Samuel 7:25-26 he uttered these words: *And now, Lord God, **keep forever the promise You have made concerning Your servant and his house. Do as You promised,**²⁶ so that your name will be great forever. Then men will say, 'The Lord Almighty is God over Israel!'* God will not tolerate forever the actions of wicked people without passing judgement upon them. His love and mercy is too often viewed as an acceptance of wickedness when the opposite is true. We can be certain that Elijah had spent a great deal of time over probably an extended period of time asking God to act. I suspect many other believers had also been praying but had they given up? We may never know. Too often we give up praying for things that are God's will, because the answers do not come quickly enough from our perspective. However, prayer is a dangerous activity because sometimes God wants us to be in some measure the answer to our prayers. It was certainly the case here with Elijah!

3. Elijah's Amazing Prediction (I Kings 17:1)

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Picture the scene at the royal palace with its orderly routine and the hustle and bustle of life in a capital city. Unannounced, a man with unkempt hair and clothes that appeared appropriate for someone living rough on the streets enters the large hall where the king is sat on his royal throne, surrounded by his courtiers. This spectacle will be shocking to almost everyone present –except to one courtier Obadiah, the official in charge of the affairs of the palace, and almost certainly some administrative functions of government as well (I Kings 18:3-4)) Obadiah was a believer who followed the Lord. Was he alone in government and the royal circles? We will never know the answer to that. However, let us pray for the few Christians in leading

positions in our political parties and indeed in our Government that the Lord will help them to stand firm courageously for Him. When you and I take a stand for the Lord in what may be a small situation, let alone a major one, you do not know if you may be encouraging and supporting a fellow believer in that social context. I have no idea if Obadiah and Elijah had met before this occasion, but in their own way both were faithfully serving God in the place where He had put them. That is all He asks of you and me in our day also. What was Elijah's message for the government of his day? (a) **A Declaration of Sovereignty** *As the Lord God of Israel lives...* Jezebel had a mission to erase all traces of the worship of Yahweh in the land and return it to its pagan Canaanite deities that were worshipped before Joshua and Israel entered the land hundreds of years earlier. Elijah was laying down a marker here. God is not dead (as some trendy 1960s theologians also claimed!) but is at work in this land and has been fully aware of what you are doing. Part of our calling today, in our own words and actions is to ensure that our fellow citizens are aware that God is alive and well and that people today need to live their lives in accordance with His standards. (b) **A Declaration of Allegiance** *before whom I stand...* God would not be left without a witness. Although sadly the total number of Christians in Scotland today (in proportion to the population) is less than it has been for the last couple of centuries there are believers almost certainly in every village, town and city in the land. In every school, college and university likewise it is likely that there are Christians in their ranks. God has His witnesses. Do not think that we cannot make a difference for Him. Many influential thinkers in the secular world think that faith communities, especially Christian and Muslim ones will have a much greater influence on world affairs in the twentieth century than in the previous one, something they were not predicting a couple of decades ago. Books like John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge's *God is Back How the Global Rise of Faith is changing the world* are increasingly appearing from secular writers puzzled by what is going on today. Dare we have less expectations than unbelievers of God working in the world in our lifetime? (c) **A Declaration of Content** *there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word...* The various Baals were gods of fertility that supposedly guaranteed that the crops would grow, people and animals would be fruitful and multiply in numbers and the required sun and rain would be what was needed in that climate. The challenge Elijah was bringing was not only to Ahab and Jezebel but also to the gods she worshipped. The God who controls the weather and seasonal cycle is God, declares Elijah. In the 1980s the Gulf Western Oil Company in the USA was called to account at its AGM one year by Tony Campolo and eleven of his students who bought (I think) one share each, enough to attend that meeting. They were protesting about the poor treatment of its workers in the Dominican Republic. As a result of their protest the board agreed to improve their terms and conditions. similar representation to Al Gore, the vice-president resulted in Premier Oil being challenged about the injustice of its operations in Burma where an illegitimate government controls its people illegally. Nations and individuals can reap what they sow in terms of lifestyles and innocent people suffer with the guilty. However, remember that *the Lord God of Israel lives* before whom we stand, may we pray believing that He will work in our generation and even through us for His glory, Amen.