



In 1859 Charles Dickens began his book, *The Tale of Two Cities* about the years leading up to the French Revolution, with these famous words: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

This morning we’re beginning a new series of messages called, The Crown and the Fire. The historical context isn’t the French Revolution but the nation Israel in the ninth century B.C. under the leadership of King Ahab. Ahab wore the **crown** and led his nation into unprecedented sin and idolatry. It **was** the worst of times. But in the midst of this, God raised up a man named Elijah, a very unlikely choice to be a prophet. God’s word in his mouth was like **fire**. He stood in the gap for God and his truth. Sometimes the worst of times set the stage for the best of times. It’s only against the backdrop of a King Ahab that an Elijah can come to the fore.

Elijah was the greatest of Old Testament prophets. His fame surpassed the best of Israel’s leaders. Malachi could find no better symbol of the coming forerunner of the Messiah than Elijah. He said, *“I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes”* (Malachi 4:5). Four hundred years later, Gabriel said of John the Baptist, *“He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah”* (Luke 1:17). When John’s movement was stirring the land and the people were thinking Malachi’s Elijah had come back to earth, a deputation was sent to ask him, *“Are you Elijah?”* (John 1:21). And even when Jesus appeared some said, *“He is Elijah”* (Mark 6:15).

All of this speaks to Elijah’s greatness. In a sense he was completely unique. But my prayer, as we study his life, is that we might become more like him; that God would put his spirit and power on us; that we might become the source by which the fullness of God can be poured out to weary and empty people in our culture. If it could be shown Elijah’s place in history was the result of some unusual talent or inherent quality he had, then his story means nothing to us. But in the New Testament James tells us, *“Elijah was a man . . . just like us”* (James 5:17). That means he was no different from us, and his accomplishments

were based on sources of strength and qualities of life that we can acquire. His story can be ours.

Turn in your Bible to 1 Kings 16. Before we’re introduced to Elijah, we get a close look at the times in which he lived.

### **The Worst of Times, the Best of Times**

We learn in what way these were the worst of times in verses 29–34.

**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 (v. 29).**

Notice two kings are mentioned here—one over Judah and the other over Israel. These were the days of the divided kingdom. After Solomon’s reign, the nation Israel was thrust into a civil war. Eventually God’s people were divided into the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. This division remained for over 200 years until both kingdoms were taken captive. The northern kingdom had 19 kings, all of them *“did evil in the sight of the Lord.”* Finally, they were taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah, on the other hand, was under the leadership of 17 kings, eight of which *“followed the Lord their God.”* Asa, mentioned here, was a good king. Nevertheless, the southern kingdom ended in 586 B.C. with the destruction of Jerusalem and the 70-year Babylonian captivity. The southern kingdom was later revived when a remnant of Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple.

Notice Ahab ruled over Israel for 22 years. During his reign, Israel plunged into unprecedented sin and idolatry.

**Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. 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. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him (verses 30–33).**

The writer tells us several things about Ahab’s reign. He says Jeroboam’s sins were “trivial” compared to Ahab’s sin. That’s saying a lot! Jeroboam was the first king of Israel after the divided kingdom. He promoted idolatry and even created a whole

new center for worship in Samaria to replace Jerusalem. But Ahab made Jeroboam look like a Boy Scout! The first thing he did was marry a young lady named Jezebel. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. This was a marriage of political convenience. The Sidonians lived in Phoenicia, Israel's neighbor to the west. Phoenicia enjoyed wealth and luxury like few other countries. Her colonies dotted the Mediterranean, her navies ruled the seas.

Ahab wanted a piece of the action, but with her came her gods. God had warned his people against intermarriage with other nations, not because of race, but because of faith. Jezebel was a devoted follower of the Canaanite god, Baal. Baal worship was awash in violence and sexual perversion that involved ritual prostitution where male and female prostitutes mated to induce rain and promote fertility. Jezebel's father's name means, "I'm with Baal." So when her moving van backed into Ahab's palace in Samaria she brought both her baggage and her Baals. And she wore the pants in the relationship. Ahab was dominated by this wicked woman. Under her influence, he began to worship Baal. He built a temple and altar where the whole nation could worship him. Baal worship became the state religion! Jezebel started systematically killing off the Lord's prophets and instead supported 450 priests of Baal out of her own purse. The writer is careful to tell us that all of this angered the Lord more than anything that any king had done before.

There's one more thing that happened during this time of note. Look at verse 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.**

Why this is significant? Do you recall how Joshua and the Israelites destroyed Jericho when they entered the land of Canaan years earlier? It was there Joshua made them take an oath that said, "*Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates*" (Joshua 6:26). And that's exactly what happened to Hiel of Bethel. The rebuilding of Jericho symbolized that the nation Israel had strayed far from God's word and would pay the consequences. Philip Keller once said, "One does not break God's laws. Rather, God laws break those who transgress them."

I don't think we have to work hard to see the parallels between what was happening in Israel under the leadership of Ahab and Jezebel and what's happening today. Let's face it, we're a society that's broken from our moral and spiritual past. There's a growing notion that nothing is true and everything is permitted. Psalm 12:8 describes our culture well, "*The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men.*" Just watch

carefully the commercials during today's football game. Evaluate their message and you'll see what I mean. Our society is awash in the senseless notion of tolerance that says we must accept everyone's version of truth. There's no final standard; truth changes like the weather. Who has the right to say certain sexual preferences are right or wrong? Is it good for Julie to have two mommies? Is Daddy's new roommate okay? Once we believed in civility and courtesy and compassion; now we live in an age of cold brutality where anything goes. Raunch and violence proliferate. Degraded images are pumped into our homes at an astonishing rate. Foul-mouthed "gangsta" rappers talk about dismembering women and "offing" cops. As the *Washington Post* said, "We've reached a state where common decency is no longer common."

We live in a post-Christian era. That doesn't mean there aren't many Christians around; there are more than ever before. But it means the Christian faith no longer plays a role in shaping public opinion and policy. When was the last time you saw a blockbuster movie where the dialogue was informed by biblical truth, or you read a bestselling novel that even remotely reflected the idea we were created in the image of God? Spend a day in the classroom at Stanford or Cal and tell me if God and his truth competes in the war of ideas in those arenas. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky wrote, "If God doesn't exist, everything is permissible," which is exactly where we're at today. When God is gone, anything goes, and when anything goes, there's no meaning and nothing to live for.

But, do you know what's great? God is never at a loss. When things are most dark and dangerous, God begins to work. And he usually begins in a very small place by preparing a very small person. Elijah was that person. In chapter 17, Elijah comes out of nowhere and steps on the scene with a word from God and ignites a fire.

### **Standing in the Gap**

**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" (v. 1).**

Elijah plunges full force onto the scene. The writer tells us a few things about him. First, his name means "My God is Jehovah" or "The Lord is my God." His parents were most likely part of that minority within Israel who hadn't caved into the prevailing culture. Ahab and Jezebel were in control in the land, and Baal was the god they worshipped. But when Elijah bursts onto the scene, his very name proclaimed, "I have one God. His name is Jehovah. He's alive and He's the one I serve." It's like there's this huge chasm between God and his people, and Elijah comes along and says, "I'll stand in that gap."

The writer also tells us where he was from. He was from a town called Tishbe, which is why he's called a Tishbite. We don't know anything about Tishbe. When I think of Tishbe, I think

of Winifred, Montana. When I was researching the life of Ray Stedman, I visited Winifred where he was raised. It's a town in northern Montana, not the pretty part of Montana where you go on vacation, but the flat and desolate part. Last I checked the population of Winifred was 208 and after being there that seems like an exaggeration! It defines the middle of nowhere. Tishbe was like that. All we know is it was in Gilead, which is in northern Israel, east of the Jordan River. Like Winifred, this was a wild, austere piece of real estate. It wasn't a place of polish, sophistication or diplomacy. People there were rugged, scorched and leathery.

Finally, the writer tells us Elijah's message. He points his long, boney finger at Ahab. Everything he says here is meant as a direct challenge to Baal. He says, "***As the Lord, the God of Israel lives...***" In other words, "Baal doesn't live; he's a construct of your own minds and your own hands. My God, Yahweh, lives!" He also reminds Ahab that Yahweh (not Baal) is "the God of Israel." Baal didn't deliver them from bondage in Egypt or make a covenant with them at Sinai. Finally, he announces a drought—no dew or rain in the next few years except by Elijah's word. You see, Ahab and Jezebel believed Baal controlled the elements. He was a rainmaking, fertility God. So this is a direct challenge to who really controls the weather. Rain and fertility come not by manipulating Baal but by obedience to God's word, and that's what God is trying to teach his people through Elijah. Don't forget, this was a time when people were completely dependent on rain for their very existence. I tried to think of an analogy to this today, and I think it would be like someone announcing that the stock market will crash and it will continue to bottom out for years to come. That would get our attention!

By the way, Elijah didn't just come up with this on his own. He must have been reading God's word, because in Deuteronomy, Moses says, "***Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut up 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***" (Deut. 11:16-17). His confidence came from God's word.

So in the midst of unprecedented evil, Elijah courageously stands in the gap for God and delivers the goods. Just one man. There's no question that by human standards, he didn't stand a chance of living past sundown, but as we'll see next week God took care of his prophet.

I'd like for us to just take a few moments and reflect on this part of the story and what it might mean for us. There are three points of application I want to make from this story.

*First, In the worst of times, we mustn't lose hope because God has a plan.* As I said before, God is never at a loss. We live in dark times indeed, but sometimes things must get very bad before God

steps in. It's almost like we have to reach our collective "bottom" as a society before he begins to work. And sometimes that takes awhile. Our society has been on a slide for a long time and we want God to act **now**. But don't confuse God's long term planning for his unwillingness to act. God's seeming inactivity is his patience in disguise. Listen to what one writer says, "For to see Elijah appear so suddenly reminds us that we need not despair when we see great movements of evil achieving spectacular success on this earth, for we may be sure that God, in unexpected places, has already secretly prepared His counter-movement. God has always His ways of working underground to undermine the stability of evil. God can raise men for His service from nowhere... Therefore the situation is never hopeless where God is concerned. Whenever evil flourishes, it is always a superficial flourish, for at the height of the triumph of evil God will be there, ready with His man and His movement and His plans to ensure that His own cause will never fail" (Ronald Wallace).

So, don't lose hope. Don't become negative and cynical. God is in charge. He has a plan.

*Second, in the worst of times, God raises up unlikely people to stand in the gap.* God's solution to the rising tide of evil is people—people like you and me. Though you might only be one of teeming millions on earth, and though you might believe you could hardly make a dent in the problem, God says, "You **can** make a difference." Here's the greatest thing about this: Elijah was a nobody from nowhere! So you don't have to be a major player. You don't have to be a Christian quarterback. You don't have to be a converted rock star. You can be a source of light in the dark corner of your world. Every one of us is designed to be of incalculable use to God. He planned your usefulness before the world began. "***We are his workmanship,***" Paul says, "***created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do***" (Eph. 2:10).

On the third day in Rwanda, I was scheduled to preach to university students at a rally. It was an evening meeting held at an outdoor stadium. I had no idea what to expect. I was told beforehand the meeting was sponsored by a group of Swedish Pentecostals. That seemed kind of strange to me. Here I was in Africa speaking to Swedish Pentecostals. Believe me, when I got to the meeting, there was about 2,000 students there and not one of them looked Swedish! I kept thinking, how could there be Swedish Pentecostals in Rwanda? But the answer is simple and it's been repeated all over the world since the Great Commission: In the 1980's a few passionate men and women came from Sweden to Rwanda and made a difference for Christ. They preached the gospel and taught Christians to live for God. Now they're all gone, but look at the impact they had!

You can have an impact. God wants to use you. Do you feel inadequate? Good. You **are** inadequate. Paul writes, "***Not that we are***

*competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant...*" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6a). Do you know what God fears the most? Do you know the only thing that can get in the way of him using you? It's your ability. It's your own competence. Jesus said, *"The flesh counts for nothing"* (John 6:63). God wants to use you, not because you're so talented, but because he loves to show off his treasure in earthen vessels. That's what Paul says, *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us"* (2 Corinthians 4:7). You and I are just jars of clay, cracked pots, but we have a treasure inside that makes all the difference.

*Third, in the worst of times, God's people must be steeped in the word of God and prayer.* As I mentioned before, Elijah's announcement about the drought didn't come out of no where; it came out of his study of God's word. He could speak with confidence because he knew what he said was consistent with God's stated purposes. By the way, that's why we're emphasizing the E100 so much. We really believe that having the word of God in our hearts will change us into the kind of people who will have the courage to stand in the gap for God. This week we read of how God's word spoke creation into existence, warned Adam of the consequences of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and commanded Noah to build an ark. His word is like fire.

But there's something else I learned this week about Elijah. He was a man of prayer. Listen to what James says about him, *"Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years"* (James 5:17). So get this. Elijah made this announcement, and then what did he do? Run for the hills? Take a long nap? No! He prayed. Even though he knew what he was saying came from God, he still prayed like mad that it wouldn't rain! How's your prayer life? To be that person with the strength to stand in the gap for God will require that we cast ourselves upon God in prayer.

So let me sum this all up: In the worst of times, don't lose hope. God has a plan. He'll raise up unlikely people to prayerfully stand in the gap for him, and they'll make a difference. Are you willing to do that?

Years ago, Dave Phillips and his wife, Lynn, had a talk about the callings they felt God was stirring in them. They agreed bringing relief to suffering children and reaching the next generation with the gospel were at the top of the list. The thought of starting a relief agency was considered, but Dave's response was, "But that would mean I have to talk in front of people." By nature, Dave is a quiet, behind-the-scenes man.

But after much prayer, Dave set aside his fears, and he and Lynn started Children's Hunger Fund out of their garage. Six weeks after CHF was launched, he received a phone call from the director of a cancer treatment center in Honduras asking if there was any way he could obtain a certain drug for seven children who would die without it. Dave wrote down the name of the drug and told him he had no idea how to get this type of drug. They then prayed over the phone and asked God to provide.

As Dave hung up the phone, before he even let go of the receiver, the phone rang again. It was a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey asking Dave if he would have any use for 48,000 vials of that exact drug! Not only did they offer him eight million dollars' worth of this drug, but they told him they'd airlift it any place in the world! Dave would later learn that company was one of only two that manufactured this drug. Within 48 hours, Dave had the drug sent to the treatment center in Honduras and to 20 other locations as well. It was then he believed that God was at work, validating his calling to this ministry.

Year after year, God continues to provide supernaturally. Today they have distributed more than \$950 million in food and other relief to more than ten million kids in 70 countries and 32 states. Children's Hunger Fund has distributed more than 150 million pounds of food and 110 million toys.

Just one ordinary person, standing in the gap. Are you willing to be that person?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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