

Elijah: Following God Ain't Easy I Kings 16-19 (selected verses)

When I was growing up, I remember singing a gospel song at church with the refrain, "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before."

Along with other songs and testimonies, we learned that being a follower of Jesus is a fulfilling, stress-free way to live. Unfortunately, many of us have discovered that it doesn't always work out that way! And, if we pay attention to the lives of biblical heroes, we would see that it often doesn't work out that way!

Elijah is one of the biggest heroes of the Old Testament, right up there with Abraham and Moses. He came on the scene during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who began to rule in 873 B.C., following a whole list of kings who led Israel astray into the worship of Baal and other gods. Listen to how the writer of I Kings introduces them.

³⁰Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. ³¹And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. ³²He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him. (I Kings 16:29-33)

The people of Israel were constantly tempted to worship Baal, a local rain and fertility god whose images could be seen everywhere in pictures and idols, unlike the Hebrew God who forbade making images of himself. Sadly, the worship of Baal inevitably led to sexual promiscuity and the neglect and exploitation of the poor. God hated that. But King Ahab not only permitted the worship of Baal in Israel, he encouraged it by building Baal a temple and an altar! Into this context, Elijah emerges. *Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."*² *The word of the LORD came to him, saying,*³ *"Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan."*⁴ *You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."*⁵ *So he went and did according to the word of the LORD; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan."*⁶ *The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi."*⁷ *But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land. (I Kings 17:1-7)*

Elijah brings word of God's judgment to Ahab. Because Ahab had turned Israel to Baal, there would be a great drought in the land. It was as if Elijah was saying, "You want to follow Baal? OK. Let him bring rain for

your crops! Let's see how that goes!" Now it is always dangerous to confront those in power, especially tyrants. So God instructs Elijah to go and hide, where God provides sustenance for him. Instead of living a quiet, comfortable life in his hometown, he becomes a man on the run, reduced to hiding, and dependent on God to give him what he needs. I'm not sure he would have said that each day with the Lord is "sweeter than the day before."

Here we find a pattern repeated several times in Elijah's life. God instructs him to do something dangerous. Elijah obeys, but then goes into hiding where God protects and provides for him, in this case using the birds of the air to do so! The final part of the pattern is that God then gives Elijah a new instruction. That happens here when the wadi dries up and God tells Elijah to flee to a foreign land where God will provide for him in another way.

I wonder if Elijah's life is what the life of a disciple looks like for many people. If we're following Jesus, we live lives guided by values that are very different from those of the surrounding world. And that inevitably brings us into conflict with others- family, friends, neighbors, employers, government officials, etc. It was the same for Elijah! In fact, the next time Ahab met Elijah, here's what he said about him, ¹⁷*When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"* (I Kings 18:17) "You

troubler of Israel!" I'm guessing Elijah didn't need that assessment on his resume!

When my daughter graduated from the College of William and Mary, one of the commencement speakers was John Lewis, an African American congressman from Georgia, who was a leader in the civil rights movement. He felt it was important for young people to be engaged in what he called "good trouble" in order to achieve change, in order to make our country better. That's exactly what Elijah did. And it got him in trouble. You see, when you challenge the status quo, be that the acceptance of racism, the toleration of gossip, corporate and personal greed, the normalization and celebration of lust, the demonization of immigrants, or rampant lying by public officials- when you challenge those norms, people will become angry and will come after you!

Being a follower of Jesus, with all his priorities and values, inevitably leads to conflict with the wider world. Our temptation is to try to have it both ways- to please those in the world who are living by a different set of standards, and to also please the Lord. That's exactly what the people of Israel were doing during Elijah's time. But he wouldn't have it. He called them out, saying *"...How long will you go limping with two different opinions. If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."* (1 Kings 18:21) And Jesus said exactly the same thing.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he emphasizes our distinctiveness from the world, comparing us to light and salt. He warns us specifically against the dangers of wealth and greed, saying, ²⁴*“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt. 6:24)*

And, following God may cost you dearly. Listen again to Jesus’ words.

²³*Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? (Luke 9:23-25)*

A stern warning about the cost of following Jesus, isn’t it? And that raises the question, “If it’s so hard and costly to follow Jesus, then why do it?” That’s a fair question! Here are a couple answers. The verse we just read reminds us that in following Jesus, we become our true selves! We don’t lose our souls, squandering our lives on things that don’t matter. Instead, we become the people God created us to be, which is very satisfying.

On July 9, 1838, the seventh president of the United States, Andrew Jackson, informed his minister, Rev. Dr. John Edgar, that he wanted to become a member of the Presbyterian Church and receive communion.

Dr. Edgar asked the president about his faith, and was pleased with the Jackson's answer. Then, knowing something of Jackson's life, he probed further. "I must ask you one more question. Can you forgive all your enemies?"

Jackson was stunned by the question, because he had a lot of enemies! He stared at the minister for a moment and then replied, "My political enemies, I can freely forgive. But as for those who abused me when I was serving my country...that is a different case." It was an honest answer, but Dr. Edgar knew that following Jesus required more. He said that Jesus insisted that Christians must forgive everyone. After a considerable pause, Jackson spoke again. Upon reflection, he said he thought he could forgive all who had injured him, even those who reviled him for his service to his country. One week later, former president Andrew Jackson was admitted into the Presbyterian Church at the age of 70. As he knelt to receive communion for the first time, tears of penitence and joy trickled down his cheeks. Following Jesus will cost us- our pride and anger and grudges. But it will free our souls! That's one reason why following Jesus is worth it.

Another is that, like Elijah, we trust that God will care for us in the hard times. And God will do that, though perhaps not in the way we hoped he would. Finally, we believe that right will prevail in the end, and that

gives us hope! Pastor Tim Keller used a climactic moment from J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* to illustrate this hope. "Enemies and dread weapons pummel the walls of the city of Gondor. As the city gates begin to give way, death, doom, and the bitterness of defeat take hold. The evil dark lord grimly claims the city for himself. But in that moment of bleak despair, the Riders of Rohan come charging, their horns blowing. At that moment, Pippin, a mere Hobbit, 'rose to his feet,... and as he stood listening to the horns, it seemed to him that they would break his heart with joy. And never in later years could he hear a horn blown in the distance without tears starting in his eyes.'"

Sometimes, when things look the darkest, God intervenes. God did that when Jesus died on the cross, by raising him from the dead. And, one day, God will intervene and set all things right here on earth, bringing justice and peace to all. God has graciously left us reminders of these facts, sort of like those horns that Pippin heard throughout his life. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is one of those reminders! And perhaps it will cause tears to start in your eyes as you remember what God has done for you and will do in the future. So, in hope, let's celebrate the sacrament together as we prepare to do God's work in the world this week!