

"Elijah, Man of Faith"  
Series, Part 3

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of James it says, "Elijah was a human being like us" (James 5:17). Yet he had an incredible impact for his God in a time when most of God's people had been pulled in by the paganism of the surrounding culture.

I've tried to show that his ability to impact his generation was because of the quality of his relationship with God: he was devoted solely to the one true God, rather than living with divided loyalties, and he sensed his calling to represent God to the people around him. In last week's message I said his prayer life also empowered him for his public ministry: his expectant, earnest praying.

One more thing that stands out about Elijah, and helps explain why he made such an impact for God is this: *Elijah was a man of faith*. There's no one Scripture verse we can quote that says this, but *we can see it in what he does!* It's one thing just to *talk about* having faith and how important that is. But when we study the life of Elijah we can see faith exhibited in *specific, tangible actions!*

For instance, Elijah shows us that ***faith in God involves doing what God tells you to do! (That's called obedience)!*** In my first message in this series we've already looked at 1 Kings 17:1, "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.'" Now look at the next couple of verses: "The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there'" (1 Kings 17:2-4). God gives Elijah specific instructions: he's to leave that place and go to the brook Cherith. There's no indication that God told him *why* he was to go there. God just said go, and drink the water and that God would send ravens to feed him. (Now if you got instructions like that, would you just lightly chirp, "Okay!")? But Elijah trusted God enough to obey: "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" (1 Kings 17:5).

One aside here: I don't know exactly *how* the word of the Lord came to Elijah, whether it was actually a voice he heard, or a strong inner sense that this is what God was telling him to do. Sometimes God speaks to people today in a way that they actually hear a voice (although I believe this is rare). Sometimes it's a strong inward urging us to do something, or not do something. But most of the time I believe the word of the Lord comes to us not through some strange vision or mystical revelation, but *through the Bible – God's Word to us*. I don't know of anyone influencing others today for Christ whose motivation and sense of direction doesn't come from Scripture – getting into the Bible. The Bible is the Wifi connection that gets us online to get God's directions for our life!

*Faith is always expressed in obedience.*

One of the most interesting characters of our generation has been Garrison Keillor, known for

for his Saturday night radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" and the number of books he's written about Lake Wobegon. Keillor grew up in a small town in Minnesota.

He talks a lot about religion and church. He tells of the time when he was 4 years old and stole a dollar from the kitchen counter, went to a nearby restaurant and bought a cheeseburger. His dad caught up with him just as the waitress was putting the cheeseburger down. Boy, did he get it! When they got home his dad scolded, "Don't you know it's wrong to steal?" Of course I knew, Keillor admits. In the Bible, he says, people who innovated tended to get smote – and that happened in a time when God smote hard!

He went on to mention about the Sunday School teacher who illustrated Bible events on a flannelboard. There was Pharaoh – though decent in some ways – when he didn't obey God, God made a mess of Egypt. The Sunday School teacher took down that figure of Pharaoh and replaced it with a figure of Pharaoh with his hands over his face in shame. Then Keillor reflects: "It made us think twice about striking out in new directions. But knowing right from wrong is the easy part. Knowing is not the problem!"

***Faith means being obedient – not just knowing what's right, but doing it!*** Read John, chapter 15, sometime. Jesus says He is the vine, and His followers are branches. He wants us to bear fruit – to impact others for Christ. To do that, we have to stay close to Him, abide in Him, and also *obey His commands*. He said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14). He said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Most of us pretty much know what Christians *ought to do*. But it's when we *do what's right and stop doing what's wrong* that we can begin to make a difference for Christ in our neighborhood, our family, our job, our social circle, our church.

*Elijah was a man of faith – he did what the Lord told him to do!* But Elijah's faith was also demonstrated in another way: ***Elijah trusted God when things went wrong.*** 1 Kings 17:5-6 tells us: "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. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the wadi." But then look at what happens: "But after a while the wadi dried up because there was no rain in the land" (1 Kings 17:7). Now wait a minute, Lord! You sent me here to live, and drink the water from the brook. Now the brook's all dried up!

That kind of thing ever happen to you? You did what you thought God wanted you to do. You did what you figured was the right thing to do, the honest thing to do. Then everything dried up.

I still remember my first day of seminary in Washington, D.C. I had graduated from college with a B.A. in math. School wasn't my thing, but I made it through those 4 years, driven by a sense of call to the ordained ministry. My first day of seminary, as I got my course schedule, bought textbooks, got moved into the dorm room I was staying in through the week, it really hit me that here I was starting all over again on another 3-4 years of study. I walked the campus that evening with a sinking heart, feeling the brook of my resources had dried up. (That whole year,

actually, was not a very positive experience).

Elijah wanted to make a difference for God. He was committed to God, he obeyed God, and now the brook's all dried up. How many people have honestly wanted to make a difference for God in the world! They're committed to the Lord. Maybe God has led them out of their comfort zone – to do some ministry, something for the Lord. Then, all of a sudden, things don't seem to work out as they had hoped. The Sunday School teacher who takes on a class (perhaps with some trepidation), with high hopes of making a difference in the spiritual lives of those in the class, but after a while, begins to wonder if all the effort is making any difference at all. The person with a heart of compassionate for the poor and needy who gets involved serving at a soup kitchen or clothing bank, only to discover that those whom they help can sometimes be rude, ungrateful, and dishonest. The brook has dried up. Can we trust God when the brook has dried up?

*Most worthwhile ministries have been forged out of the fires of struggle and difficulty! Very few people impacting our generation for the gospel have had smooth sailing in what they are doing for the Lord. Why is that? Well, for one thing, when the gospel is proclaimed or Christian ministry takes place, it always will meet up with some apathy, or resistance. That's the way it is in a fallen, unbelieving world.*

*But it also can be God's way of testing our faith, firming up our resolve, sharpening our skills, preparing us for the next stage of our service for the Lord! Elijah's usefulness to God didn't end when the brook Cherith dried up. If you read further, God led Elijah to another place where food and water were miraculously provided. Trust God, even when things don't seem to be working out!*

***Another way Elijah's faith was demonstrated is this: Elijah showed his faith by trusting God, even when the odds were against him.*** Here we need to turn to the episode on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). It's a showdown, to see which is the true God: Baal (the pagan deity), or Yahweh (Israel's God). On one side, representing Baal, are 450 of Baal's prophets (and also 400 additional prophets of Asherah, a similar pagan goddess). On the other side is Elijah – just him. You remember the story?

Each is to take a bull, cut it up in pieces, put in on the wood on the altar, then call on their god to consume the sacrifice with fire. The prophets of Baal go first. They prepare the bull, and this is what happens: "Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud, and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer,

and no response. Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come closer to me,' and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down" (1 Kings 18:25-29).

Elijah is next. He first repairs the Israelite altar that had been torn down. He digs a trench around the altar and fills it with water. He puts down the wood, cuts up the bull, covers it all with more water – three times! (Kind of hard to start a fire in a swimming pool!). He prays to the Lord: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have turned their hearts back.’ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God'" (1 Kings 18:36b-39).

*Elijah trusted God to act even when he was woefully outnumbered! 450 prophets of Baal. 400 more prophets who weren't exactly on his side. Verses 1! Who's right? Certainly the majority! Right? 450 (plus another 400) can't be wrong! Right? No – wrong! The majority is often wrong, particularly when it comes to matters of the spirit.*

*For any of us who want to impact others for Jesus Christ, we simply cannot worry about the odds! Often when God has something to be done, it is a handful of people, a few with a capacity for commitment and faith, maybe even one, whom God uses to get the job done!*

*Faith means believing the resources of God are available to us! In this series of messages I've been quoting what James says, that Elijah was a human being *just like us*, but he had faith in an extraordinary God! What can limit us from impacting our society for Christ is not that *we* are too small, but that *our God* is too small! More of us are needed who have a vision of what the mighty God can do through ordinary people like us!*

I have often referred to Howard Hendricks in this series of messages. I'm indebted to him for some of my thoughts and illustrations. He used to say that as a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary he enjoyed wonderful opportunities to work with students and see some of their visions and dreams of impacting their world with the gospel message. (He said he always wanted to keep them from older Christians who would throw a wet blanket on what God was leading them to do!). He said he would occasionally remind a student that there was not a work of God that was not a result of a miracle working God behind it!

He told the story of Dallas Seminary. Shortly after the seminary was founded in 1924, it almost folded. It came to the point of bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at twelve noon on a particular day. That morning the founders of the school met in the president's office to pray that God would provide. Harry Ironside was in that meeting. When it was his turn to pray, he prayed with his usual honest and refreshing manner: "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money."

While they were praying a tall Texan in boots and an open-collar shirt came into the business office. "I just sold two carloads of cattle in Forth Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal go through and it won't work, and I feel God is compelling me to give this money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not."

A secretary took the check, and knowing of the critical situation, went to the door of the prayer meeting and timidly tapped. The president of the seminary finally opened the door, took the check out of her hand, and it was for the *exact amount* of the debt. When he looked at the signature on the check, he recognize the name of the cattleman from Forth Worth. Turning to Dr. Ironside, he said, "Harry, God sold the cattle."

Faith...in a mighty God!

When we have faith in a mighty God, we don't have to worry so much about numbers – whether we're outnumbered and out-muscled in our wanting to do something for God and the gospel. *God doesn't depend on His people being the majority when He wants something done!*

Dr. Hendricks comments in his book on the life of Elijah that he recently did something he hopes he'll never have to do again. He walked out of a prayer meeting of clergy because of the *unbelief* that permeated that group. And he comments on how often this atmosphere of pessimism, and unbelief, can pervade our churches. He says he walked out of that meeting, went to his room, got the Scriptures, filled himself with the living God until he realized anew that all the resources of God were available to *any of us* through faith.

*What is God calling you to do – us to do – to influence others for Christ?*

Dr. Hendricks comments: "Oh, for the capacity to stretch ourselves out upon an infinite God and to believe Him to do what he specializes in: the impossible!"

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