

A Nobody From Nowhere

I Kings 16:29-17:1

Introduction

The following is from the United States Government Peace Corps Manual for its volunteers who work in the Amazon Jungle. It tells what to do if you are attacked by an anaconda.

I looked up “anaconda” in my encyclopedia to find that it happens to be one of the two largest snakes in the world. It can grow to thirty feet in length and can weigh between two and three hundred pounds at the maximum.

The Peace Corps manual included ten points in its instructions on how to survive if you become the next potential meal for an anaconda. I read that typically, the anaconda feeds on young crocodiles and pigs, but you never know, member of the Peace Corps. The ten points are:

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Immediately lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight against one another.
3. Tuck your chin in.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and climb over your body.
5. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet end – always from the feet end. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles.
6. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. This will take a long time.
7. Do not panic.

8. When the snake has swallowed you to your knees, slowly, and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife and very gently slide it into the side of the snake’s mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg. Then suddenly, rip upwards, cutting the snake’s head and ending its life. (These last two points were the ones that got me!)

9. Be sure you have your knife.

10. Be sure your knife is sharp.

This is not a very good recruiting tool for the Peace Corps. In fact, who among us would volunteer?! No one!

Today, I invite your attention to the life of an ordinary volunteer. He was a man who knowingly stepped into the path of a huge, menacing, dangerous snake; two of them, in fact. These twin serpents had crushed the spiritual life out of Israel. Their names were Ahab and Jezebel. Those who stood for God were paralyzed with fear, with the exception, it seems, of one man. He was a rather ordinary man, named Elijah.

I want to introduce Elijah to you, not by first turning to the Old Testament, but to the New Testament. Look at the book of James, chapter 5, verses 17 and 18.

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

Other versions of the Bible translate the first phrase to read:

- “Elijah was a human being with a nature such as we have – with feelings, affections and constitution as ourselves.” – the amplified Bible;
- “Elias [Elijah] was a man subject to like passions as we are . . .” – the King James Version;
- “Elijah was a man just like us.” – the New International Version.

Elijah was an ordinary human being. In our study through his biography, we will observe him on the mountaintop of spiritual victory and in the valley of spiritual and physical depression and exhaustion.

My friend, if you were to interview Elijah on the porch of his rustic mountain cabin, you might ask him, “Elijah, how would you like to become a model of faith and an example of courage for millions of people for thousands of years?”

I am convinced that he would immediately respond, “Not on your life.”

Yet, Elijah is that very thing. Why? Because he was an ordinary man, totally surrendered to God, who then used him in an extraordinary way.

You need to understand that a common, run-of-the-mill Christian who is in an ungodly culture, shines with uncommon brilliance. And, in our culture, when the church seems paralyzed before the serpents of our age; when the saints are stumbling as if in a fog; when the Christian community has dissolved into the liquid of society, we need a flesh and blood model.

Ladies and gentlemen, God never challenges us to become something, without giving us someone as an example. James makes it crystal clear that Elijah is an example of power, reflected in his prayer. But, guess what? Elijah was nothing special or unusual; Elijah was a man just like us.

Elijah and His Troubled Times

Now, with that understood, turn to I Kings and let us gain a better understanding of what Elijah was up against. We will begin in chapter 16.

You may remember the fact that the northern kingdom of Israel was ruled by one evil king after another. Finally, a man named Zimri assassinated the king and assumed the throne. The northern army heard this news and declared their general, whose

name was Omri, to be the king. They immediately began to march back to the north. The assassin knew his short reign was about to end, and in fact, it lasted only seven days. He went into the royal palace and, in an act of suicide, set the palace on fire and burned it down around him.

This act by Zimri, sparked a civil war. Omri became king, but half of the people did not like him. So, they chose a man named Tibni to be king, thus causing the north to be ruled by two kings. Now, the Bible does not give all of the details, but it does say in chapter 16, verse 22,

But the people who followed Omri prevailed over the people who followed Tibni . . . And Tibni died and Omri became king.

We have every reason to believe that Omri helped Tibni die earlier than expected. Perhaps he spiked his punch with poison. We are not specifically told.

So, what is this new king like? Look at verse 25.

Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, and acted more wickedly than all who were before him.

The Diabolical Duo

Now, verse 29 introduces the diabolical duo of Elijah’s day.

Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years.

Ahab

Ahab’s name can be literally translated, “like his father”. However, he was worse, according to verse 30.

Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.

Do not miss this. There is an incredible digression occurring in the land. Omri does more evil than any other king before him and Ahab tops Omri by being even more wicked! Continue to verse 31.

It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the

Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him.

Jezebel

The Sidonians or Phoenicians were Israel's rich and powerful neighbors to the west. They enjoyed wealth and luxury on a scale known by few in the ancient world. Phoenician colonies dotted the Mediterranean and her navies ruled the sea. Phoenicia or Sidon was a byword for affluence and influence. Ahab wanted "a piece of the action," so he married into it by taking their king's daughter as his wife.

Solomon had earlier, set the stage for political alliances through marriage. Ahab, however, took this practice one large step further. Solomon's foreign wives brought their gods with them, but they never forced their idolatry on the people of Israel. Jezebel will force Israel to accept the worship of Baal as the state religion.

Verse 31 reveals that Jezebel was the princess daughter of Ethbaal. The Jewish historian, Josephus, who lived in the first century, informs us that Ethbaal, at the age of thirty-six, assassinated his own brother and assumed the throne. He then reigned for thirty-two years. Frankly, his name "Ethbaal," says it all – it means, "with Baal".

Now, the name "Jezebel" is interesting. It was closely associated with the worship of Baal. In fact, it was taken from a popular expression of Phoenician poetry that archeologists have uncovered. The saying is, "Where is Baal, the overcomer? Where is the prince, the lord of the earth?"

The phrase, "Where is the prince," in Phoenician, is "izebel". Jezebel's father was such an adamant follower of Baal that he named his little girl with a name that was in answer to that question – she was the princess of Baal!

Ahab thinks he is just marrying some king's eligible daughter, but he gets more than he bargained for. The truth is, as other scripture makes clear, he will be utterly dominated by this demonized, idolatrous woman, who was named after the prince of the earth.

An interesting fact is that the Bible mentions their marriage. It is the first time that a marriage is mentioned in the entire northern kingdom. And, there is little doubt as to who is wearing the royal pants in this family. In fact, according to verse 31, of all the

terrible things that Ahab did, marrying Jezebel topped them all!

Now, continue to verse 32, and note what Ahab does.

So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria.

The book of II Kings tells us that this great temple to Baal was large enough to hold every Baal worshipper in the land at one time. It must have been a magnificent, awe-inspiring temple. Temples for false religions usually are.

Now look at verse 33.

Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

You need to understand that Baal was the chief Canaanite god. He was a god with several faces; that included: the wind, the sun, etc. Baal had three mistresses and, the belief was that, every spring, if the people were good to him, he would co-habit with his mistresses and produce results of rain, bumper crops, and nice weather all around.

Also, understand that Asherah was supposedly one of Baal's three wives. Her name "Asherah," means "earth mother". The worship of "mother earth" is certainly not new; it tracks all the way back to Canaan.

Recently, my children's public elementary school chorus performed a concert and sang,

The earth is our mother, the earth is our mother, the earth is our mother and our best friend too.

The great provider for me and you; the earth is our mother and our best friend too.

There is an ancient Hebrew word for that; which is, "garbage". And, it is old garbage that goes all the way back to people like Ahab and Jezebel.

Now, one of the popular nicknames for Baal was, "rider of the clouds". It was thought that, if you worshiped Baal, you would get rain, and rain brings crops and crops sustain life. You may already be way ahead of me in realizing that this thought makes it incredibly significant that Elijah will pray that it does not rain. That is a direct attack on the worship of Baal!

Let me give you one more piece of background information. You are probably thinking, “Stephen, when are we going to get to Elijah?”

We are on the trail, so hold on to your hound dogs a little longer! One of the reasons we have not appreciated the ministry of Elijah is because we have not understood his times. The darker the times, the brighter the light.

Elijah lived in a time when the prophets of God seemed “down for the count”. Chapter 18, of I Kings, tells us that Jezebel finally begins to systematically kill the prophets. Wickedness reigned in the palace; idolatry was the language of people; the God of Israel was forgotten, ignored, and blasphemed.

We can miss the point of history, or “His-Story”. Ladies and gentlemen, the reason we panic in our times is because we have a shallow understanding of Elijah’s times. If we learn anything from our study today, we should learn that, “*When times are at their worst, God is at work.*”

So, notice one more insight into Elijah’s times, in verse 34.

In his days . . .

(under the direction of Ahab),

. . . Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his first-born, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

If you are thinking that we have enough material to know just how bad it was, then notice this sideline note that Jeremiah inserts telling us that Ahab was directly disobeying God’s word. When Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down, Joshua then uttered a “curse,” so to speak, and pronounced that no one should ever again rebuild this city. To do so would, in fact, cost that builder the lives of two of his sons.

That was prophetic and it happened to Hiel. *However*, while we would assume that his sons would die from a disease or an accident, that may not have been the case.

Archeologists have uncovered evidence from this period, of a practice called “foundation sacrifices”. In this sacrifice, children were buried, perhaps alive, in the foundations of building projects in hopes of ensuring the pleasure of Baal.

We already know that the worship of Baal involved child sacrifice, so it is very likely that the “foundation sacrifice” may explain this mysterious verse about Hiel’s sons. This Baal worshiper probably sacrificed his first-born son when the Jericho project began, by killing and burying him. Notice the middle of verse 34 again,

. . . he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his first-born . . .

Then, at the end of project, as they complete it by hanging the gates, he, according to verse 34,

. . . set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub . . .

In other words, he probably buried his youngest son underneath the massive gates.

Have you heard enough?! Are you ready now, to understand why Elijah was a shining light?

David Roper wrote,

Perilous times are times of unparalleled opportunity. Those who know the true God must not fear them, but rather buy them up.

The apostle Paul put it best, under inspiration, in his letter to the Ephesians. He tells them and us, in chapter 5, verse 16, to be,

making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

He did not say, “making the most of your time,” *before* the days *become* evil, but, “*because* the days are evil.”

Evil epochs are custom made for godly examples to shine. God did not wipe anxious sweat from his brow when Jezebel moved her bags, and Baal’s, into Samaria’s palace. He did not welcome his martyred prophets into paradise with the words, “Oh, I wish there had been something I could have done.”

He was not then, and He is not now, at a loss as to what to do, whether it is among the persecuted Christians in northern India or in the hushed voices of underground house church worshipers in China. He is not confounded by the bedrock of unbelief in the land of France, nor by the ancestral worshipers in Korea. He is not confused by the animists in Africa, nor by our post-Christian American culture. He is not shooting off memos to the angels saying, “Hang on fellas, we’re loosing ground!”

For sixty years, the northern kingdom, called Israel, has fallen into debauchery and immorality.

Even now, the princess of hell has ascended the throne of Samaria. The prophets of God will either die or hide in caves. The people will be forced, lured, exposed, and then, plunged into the worship of Baal. It could not get any worse!

Yet, God was not at a loss for words or plans. In fact, at the very moment when Zimri was plunging his dagger into the heart of a drunken Baasha, somewhere in the rocky hills of Gilead a young man was herding some sheep. And when the moving van from Phoenicia pulled up in front of Ahab's palace twelve years later, a middle-aged man was already praying for God's word to be heard.

God does not make plans, He has always had plans. Has it ever occurred to you, that *you* are His plan; that *you* are His solution?

Elijah and His Transforming Testimony

What does it take to transform our times? Turn to I Kings, chapter 17, and notice, in verse 1, that God's solution had already been prepared for some time. He is simply introduced, in verse 1a, as,

. . . Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead . . .

F. B. Meyer writes that the inhabitants of Gilead took on the character of their country – wild and unkempt. They lived in crude, stone huts in villages and subsisted by keeping flocks of sheep. Elijah grew up like the other lads of his age. In his early years, he probably did the work of a shepherd on those wild hills. As he grew to manhood, his erect figure, his shaggy locks, his cloak of camel's hair, his girdle of leather made him a crude standout among the palace surroundings of Ahab.

The only good physical description of Elijah occurs in II Kings, chapter 1, verse 8, where we are told,

. . . He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins. . . .

The words "hairy man," literally meant, "lord of hair". It suggests he had long hair and a long beard.

Elijah was an unlettered, uncultured, unkempt man from an unimpressive village in the Tishbite region. Tishbite sounds like a nutritional cracker, the kind that tastes like sawdust but is good for us.

Tishbe, Elijah's village, was a rather tasteless, plain place; a place of solitude and hard work. There

was little culture and little diplomacy in Tishbe. It was insignificant politically and religiously, in the scheme of Israel's affairs. Even today, no one is certain where Elijah's home village was located in the mountainous region of Gilead.

Frankly, *Elijah was a nobody from nowhere*. It could not have been a greater shock to his king and queen that, once God chose to speak, He would speak through Elijah; that once God decided to send fire from heaven, it would follow the prayers of this rough, unkempt, unlettered man. Elijah was a nobody who came out of nowhere. God delights in using nobodies.

Messenger after messenger had arrived in Gilead, bringing the latest news of Baal's inroads and Ahab's and Jezebel's idolatry. No one, however, had the courage to do anything but hide, or hope, or bend their knees to Baal.

As you hear the story of Elijah, maybe you would volunteer to step forward, but admittedly, it is because you and I know the rest of the story; we know it will all work out. It does not take courage to read history; it takes courage to make history.

I reread a funny fable that I remembered as I began my study of Elijah. It is a story that involves a certain kind of courage. Even if you have heard it, you will enjoy the reminder.

It seems that a well-known billionaire bought a huge ranch in Arizona. He invited some of his closest associates to see it. After taking them on a tour of some of the 1,500 acres of mountains, rivers, and grasslands, he took everyone to the house. The house was as spectacular as the scenery, and behind it was a huge swimming pool.

This gigantic swimming pool, however, was filled with alligators. The rich owner explained, "I value courage more than anything else. Courage is what made me a billionaire. In fact, I think courage is such a powerful virtue that if anyone is courageous enough to jump in that pool, swim through those alligators, and make it to the other side, I'll give them anything they want – anything!"

Of course, everyone laughed at the absurd challenge and proceeded to follow the owner into the house for lunch. Then, suddenly, they heard a splash. Turning around, they saw a guy swimming across the pool, thrashing at the water, as the alligators swarmed after him. Under the water, then thrown into the air, the man never stopped courageously swimming his

way to the other side. After several death defying moments, he made it to the other side unharmed and exhausted.

The billionaire host was absolutely amazed, but stuck to his promise. He said, "You are indeed a man of courage and I will stick to my word. What do you want? You can have anything. You name it – houses, money, land . . . Just tell me what you want and it is yours."

The swimmer, breathing heavily, looked up at the host and said, "I just want to know one thing. Who pushed me into that pool?"

Three things needed to transform the times

Elijah, however, was never pushed – he jumped. He jumped into the swirling waters of unbelief and immorality; into waters that churned with Satanic powers, and he faced the forces of hell. He came armed with three things, three things that every ordinary believer needs today, if he or she ever hopes to transform his or her times.

A conviction that God is alive

1. First, Elijah stood before Ahab and Jezebel, totally convinced that God was alive.

Look at I Kings, chapter 17, the middle of verse 1.

. . . Elijah . . . said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives . . ."

He is, in effect, declaring, "Ahab, your gods are stumps of wood; Jezebel, you're named after a dead tree, but my God, the God of Israel, is alive!"

Elijah was the one lone voice that dared to say, "The emperor has no clothes."

Everyone else is duped into the fabrication of idolatry, while Elijah, suddenly, out of nowhere, strides into the palace of the king and queen and says, "Jezebel, you and your henpecked husband are serving dead gods. I am serving the living God."

Ladies and gentlemen, if you are going to transform your times, you must first be transformed. Stop acting like God is dead. When trouble comes and the chips are down and times are tough, you start questioning God's power; you start doubting God's presence; the accuser whispers in your listening ear, "God who?"

Elijah's times were a time when people were wondering, "Maybe we were led astray in this God of Israel stuff . . . only a few thousand still believe the old stories."

The people were silent in fear, but at that moment, Elijah arrives at the palace and says, "The God of Israel is alive."

A certainty that you are God's representative

2. Secondly, Elijah jumped into these dangerous waters, certain that he was God's representative.

Notice further in verse 1,

. . . Elijah . . . said to Ahab, As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand . . .

I love this! This is an affront. Elijah is audacious with these actions and words. There is almost a rudeness about him. He does not begin by saying, "Long live the king."

Elijah does not do a curtsy in his camel robe. In fact, he never mentions Ahab and Jezebel. He has the courage to stand in their royal presence and speak of an awareness of a royalty that exceeds that of Ahab and Jezebel!

This ordinary man was certain that, as he lived and breathed, he was in the presence of God; he was speaking for God, and that meant more than all the pageantry, pomp and circumstance of Ahab's royal palace. It is as if he said to them, "The only royalty here that's worth recognizing is God."

My friend, remember that as you enter your world. Do not be intimidated; do not cower. You happen to be a representative of Almighty God. So, walk like it; talk like it; live like it.

A commitment to seeing God's word fulfilled

3. Thirdly, Elijah was not only convinced God was alive and that he was God's representative, he was also passionately committed to seeing God's word fulfilled.

Look at the last part of verse 1.

. . . surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.

How does Elijah know that? I thought he was like us; that is, an ordinary Christian. How did Elijah

have the ability to stand before Ahab and speak like that?!

Two resources that allow us to see God's word fulfilled

Elijah could speak that way because he had the same two resources that you and I have at our disposal. Let me give them to you.

Personal contact with and confidence in the word of God

1. The first resource that Elijah had was his personal contact with and confidence in the word of God.

Turn to Deuteronomy, chapter 11, verses 13 and 14. Moses is delivering the Law to the people of Israel in these verses.

It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil.

Skip to verses 16 and 17a.

Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit . . .

Elijah, like every faithful Jew, had this passage in writing. He knew God's threats well. And Elijah was convinced that God was faithful to carry out His threats, as well as His promises.

Persistent contact and communion with God

2. The second resource that Elijah had was his persistent contact and communion with God.

Look at I Kings, chapter 19, verse 10a.

He [Elijah] said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts . . ."

God's glory was at the heart of his prayers.

James told us, as we read earlier in chapter 5, that Elijah was fervently praying that it would not rain; that God would simply carry out His word. He was not praying for the prophets to come out of hiding. He was not praying for the overthrow of Ahab. He was praying for God's glory to be revealed!

Why do we pray for this nation? Why are we so concerned about liberal legislation? Is it because our freedom might be taken away? Is it because we might be persecuted? Is it because times are becoming more wicked and violent and we are afraid? We pray, "Lord, please settle things down and make things better!"

Do not ever forget that Elijah was praying for things to get worse. He was praying for a famine. Because Elijah was a man like us in his passions, we can become like him in our prayers. However, they must be prayers for God's glory and not for our own comfort.

A Transforming Truth

What kind of person does God use – in the office, the home, the neighborhood, the classroom, the laboratory, the sales room? An ordinary person who is totally convinced that God is really alive; who is aware that he is, ultimately, His representative; who has a passion to see His word fulfilled and His glory revealed. That person will be used by God in small ways and in large ways to transform his times. *Ordinary people, yielded to God, are used to transform their times.*

"Lord, please make me a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you!"

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/17/1995 by Stephen Davey.

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