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1 Kings 16:29–17:7

First Message

John Hanneman

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A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

In 1966 the movie that won the Academy Award for “Best Picture” was a movie entitled *A Man For All Seasons* based on a play by the same name. The movie portrays the confrontation and struggle between Sir Thomas More and King Henry VIII in 16th century England. Henry desired to divorce Catherine of Aragon, his first wife, because she had grown old and not produced a male heir to the throne, and to marry Anne Boleyn. In order to circumvent the opposition of the pope in Rome, Henry declared himself to be the head of the Church of England. Sir Thomas More was a man of conscience and principle and refused to submit to the king’s newly claimed authority or the validity of the divorce and remarriage. He resigned his post as Lord Chancellor of England and sought to remain silent, but Henry would not have it. He needed More to verbalize his allegiance. Even though everyone in the realm submitted to Henry’s wishes, More stood his ground and it ended up costing him his head. Sir Thomas More was a man for all seasons, a phrase given to More by Robert Whittington in 1520.

Over two thousand years earlier there was another man for all seasons who confronted his king and refused to submit to his evil ways. His name was Elijah, one of the great prophets of Israel, and the king he confronted was Ahab who had married the devilish Jezebel.

We don’t know a great deal about Elijah. We are told that he is a Tishbite, from the town of Tishbe, the tribe of Gilead. This means that he grew up in the Transjordan in an area that is wild and forested. He is an obscure and solitary figure in the stories we read of him. He only appears in six chapters and figures in a mere nine stories. And yet his name is prominent not only in Christianity but in Jewish writings and celebrations, Islam, Mormonism, the Baha’i faith, and folklore religions. When we look at the whole of the Bible the similarities to Moses are unmistakable. He foreshadows the ministry of John the Baptist, as prophesied by Malachi. He anoints his successor, the prophet Elisha, in the way that Jesus sends the disciples into the world baptized with the Spirit. Moses and Elijah stand with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and on the cross some people who were standing there thought that Jesus might be calling out for Elijah. Elijah is called a “man of God” eight times.

Alexander Whyte, the Scottish preacher, stated “the consensus of the church: “The prophet Elijah towers up like a mountain in Gilead above all the other prophets. There is a solitary grandeur about Elijah that is all his own ... He was a Mount Sinai of a man, with a heart like a thunderstorm.”¹ In other words, he was a man for all seasons.

Backdrop to a Prophet

The Elijah narrative begins in 1 Kings 17, but before we get into the first Elijah story we need to understand the backdrop for his entrance. And so we turn to the last few verses in chapter 16:

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 the son of

Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. 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. So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. 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. (1 Kgs 16:29-33 NASB)

The books of first and second Kings, which are actually one book divided due to length, are basically about the slow demise of Israel from the height of her glory under David and Solomon until her exile to Babylon four centuries later. When Solomon became king after David’s death things went well for a while. Solomon was the wisest and most powerful king. But he was double-minded. This is manifest by the way the building of his palace complex interrupted the building of the temple in Jerusalem. His wisdom became self-serving, he lusted after foreign women, and he began to oppress the people.

Solomon’s son Rehoboam succeeded him as king. But he refused to listen to the people or the advice of his elders and increased his father’s oppressive methods to serve self. Rehoboam was rejected by the people and the kingdom divided. As prophesied by a Judahite prophet, Jeroboam became king over ten tribes in the north. Thus Israel in the north became separate from Judah in the south (1 Kgs 11:29-36).

Jeroboam feared that the people would not continue under his rule if they went to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. And so Jeroboam made golden calves and installed false worship centers in Bethel and Dan, the southern and northern extremes of Israel. His disobedience to God’s word affected himself, his house, and his land.

Jeroboam’s son Nadab succeeded him. He was killed by Baasha, whose rule was followed by his son Elah. Elah was killed by Zimri, one of his officials, but Zimri reigned for only seven days. When his army deserted him for Omri, he committed suicide.

Twenty-five years after Jeroboam, the Omride dynasty began, the worst dynasty in Israel’s history. Omri reigned for twelve years and was followed by his son Ahab. Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, a marriage arranged by Omri for political reasons. Jezebel introduced the worship of Baal into Israel and it became the state religion. Omri had built the king’s palace in Samaria and it was there that Ahab built a house and altar to Baal.

We see that the beginning of the ten tribes in the north had a rather checkered start. All in all there were some nineteen kings and all of them were evil. As the king goes, so does the nation. Ahab and Jezebel were quite a pair. Ahab did evil, a repeated phrase in Kings that describes the character of the kings. Twice the narrator states that Ahab was worse than any king before him. Herman Melville for

whatever reason was so obsessed with Ahab that he gave that name to the sea captain in his classic book *Moby Dick*. In fact, there is a character in the book by the name of Elijah that warns Ishmael of impending doom.

And who does not know the name Jezebel. The name itself oozes with sinister wickedness. She infects the whole nation with the false worship of her gods. As we will see in the narrative, it is Jezebel who rules over the passive Ahab and commands the royal power. In the book of Revelation a deceitful woman in Thyatira, who is leading the church into idolatry, is given the name Jezebel by the Lord. Jezebel is a symbol for the cancer of false worship and idolatry.

Here is the important part. The account of the Omride dynasty coincides with the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. It occupies the center of Kings and spans 15 chapters, or about a third of the total narrative. When we consider that the Omride dynasty lasted for forty years while the book of Kings spans 400 years we can understand its significance.

There are ten prophets or prophetesses who are named in the book of Kings. The narrator deals with the kings tersely. But the action slows down when focused on the prophets. It is the prophet, the spokesman of God, who dominates the action, not the king. The stories of Elijah and Elisha are the pivot of the book. In these stories we see the pattern of ministry that foreshadows the ministry of John and Jesus. While the gospel stories might be too familiar, these pre-gospel stories come at us fresh and help us grasp the Jesus way for our own life.

The Problem in Israel

Against this backdrop, Elijah explodes into the picture:

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” (1 Kgs 17:1)

Elijah makes quite an entrance. He gives his first sermon, a mere 17 words in Hebrew. He pronounces to Ahab the king that there will be no rain. James tells us that Elijah was a man just like us and he prayed and it did not rain for three and half years.

What is happening here? God is merely doing what he had promised in Deuteronomy 28. God told Israel that if they obeyed him when they entered the land, then the land would be fruitful and they would be blessed. However, if they did not heed his word, then the land would become barren and unfruitful and instead of blessing they would experience a curse.

Israel had been seduced into false worship by Jeroboam, but Ahab and Jezebel had done him one better. They brought in the worship of Baal and his female consort Asherah. Baal was the god of rain and fertility. According to Leila Bronner the worshippers of Baal thought that he was the power source behind “fire, rain, oil and corn, child giving, healing, resurrection, ascent, and defeating the River god.”² And as we shall see, the worship of Baal was horrific—both sensual and violent. Baal worshipers would work themselves into a frenzy in their attempts to motivate the gods for their blessing.

Yahweh would have none of this. If Israel sought to gain fertility through Baal, then he would make the land infertile through drought. God was out to prove his sovereignty through the polemical words and actions of Elijah. Elijah’s name means “Yahweh is God,” and that was the thrust of his ministry—Yahweh is God and

not Baal. With verse 1 of chapter 17 the battle lines are drawn. Let the games begin.

When things look most dark and dangerous, when evil men and women have done their best, then God can begin. And he usually begins in a very small place by preparing a very obscure person.³

Idols. We love them and God hates them.

Whether we realize it or not the same problem that infected Israel infects the church today. We don’t worship Baal by name or the gods of Greece and Rome. We might think how absurd for Israel to fall for this Baal worship. And yet the landscape of our life and our world is saturated with Baal gods that deceive and tempt us. Idolatry is seeking life, fertility, and blessing from anything or anyone other than God. These things and people become what we worship, what we place at the center of our heart and our thoughts. We want gods that we can see; gods that we think we can control and manipulate. We love and obsess over trying to get life from Baal gods that are not gods.

Almost anything can qualify to be an idol. There are the easy to recognize idols—careers, power, fame, sex, possessions and pleasure. But there are also the not so easy to recognize—our spouse, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, our children, our parents, being a successful student. We can even make church and ministry an idol if we expect to get life from being a good Christian and doing the right Christian things. We so easily become addicted to bad things and to good things. We are infatuated with idols.

Most of you know that I like sports very much. I don’t watch a game objectively. I am always pulling for one team to win or for another team to lose. Liz tells me that I am gambling with my moods and emotions. And she is right. But that is what we do with idols. We gamble our emotions on things and people.

God hated idolatry in Israel and he hates it in the church. The reason is because idolatry brings ruin and destruction, and keeps God’s people from being what he intends. As Paul says in Romans 1 the natural consequence of exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images and idols is the letting go of restraints to lustful passions and depraved minds. Instead of giving life, idolatry brings death. This isn’t what God wants. God is a God of life and he wants to give life. He hates it when people replace truth with lies, glory with dishonor, and life with death. He is a jealous God and does not want to be replaced. And so he confronts the worship of those things that are not gods. He sends us the prophet to speak into our hearts. The prophet jolts us to attention. “You will not experience fertility and blessing, but spiritual drought and dryness. There is only one God and one source of life. The Lord God Almighty, not Baal. Worship him.”

There is only one way to deal with idols. Like Elijah, both Paul and John are very brief: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14); “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

Silence and Solitude

Well, now that I have you feeling guilty, let’s talk about God. How do we keep ourselves centered on God? How do we keep idols from permeating our life? We can learn a great lesson from the story of Elijah as we continue in chapter 17.

The word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith,

which is east of the Jordan. “It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.” So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and lived by the brook 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 would drink from the brook. It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. (1 Kgs 17:2-7)

We might make some simple observations of this short text. First, the text highlights Elijah’s obedience. “So he went and did according to the word of the Lord.” We note that what Elijah did is an almost verbatim repetition as to what God said. Second, God promised to provide water from the brook and food by means of ravens and that is exactly what happens, again almost verbatim. Third, the first seven verses of chapter 17 form a neat little chiasmic structure that again highlights Elijah’s obedience. Ahab did evil, but Elijah did according to the God’s word.

- A The Promise: no rain
- B Drink from the brook
- C Ravens to provide
- X Elijah did it
- C’ Ravens provided
- B’ Drink from the brook
- A’ The Result: no water

After Elijah’s brief interaction with Ahab, God directs Elijah into the wilderness, back across the Jordan. We are not given the timeline of Elijah’s stay, but we assume from verse 7 that it was a rather lengthy time, long enough for the drought to make its presence fully manifest in the land: the brook dried up.

What was the purpose in God’s directions to Elijah? We might surmise that God wanted Elijah to go far away from Samaria, out of reach from any repercussions that might arise from Ahab and Jezebel. But I propose that God had something else in mind.

We can’t miss the allusion here to Moses and Israel in the wilderness when God set them free from Egypt. What happened in Exodus 16? God provided water, meat, and bread for his people supernaturally so that his people would learn to depend and trust in him. As we see in the lives of Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul the wilderness is the place where God prepares his people for his work. And this is what God intended for Elijah, for Elijah to learn that God would provide and that God would feed him supernaturally.

The brook Cherith is where God does soul work, where God does the deep work in our hearts. This is the place where we learn to be quiet, meditate, read spiritually. This is the place where we learn to listen to God’s voice and depend on him. This is the place where we let go of all our worldly attachments and put him at the center of our lives.

Dave Roper writes: “The wilderness is the place of soul-making, to use that quaint old Quaker phrase. Soul-making is essential. We do not make our mark on the world, by instinct, intellect, education, personality, humor, appearance, or charm. Influence comes from within. It is a matter of the heart. It cannot be quantified or codified—put into a two-step or ten-step process. It can’t be gained at a weekend seminar or obtained from a correspondence course. It is the result of the work God is doing in our souls. And that work is always done in secret.”⁴

The brook Cherith is the place where we spend time alone with the Alone, the place where we sit with God, talk with God, but most importantly listen to God. Cherith is where we ponder the deep questions of our relationship with God: What do I desire from God? What do I expect from God? What am I holding onto that keeps me from God? Do I really feel loved by God? Am I willing to love a God that I cannot control? Do I love God for self or do I love God for God?

Abraham Heschel asks: “Has anything of significance in the realm of spirit been achieved without the protection and the blessing of solitude?”⁵

The brook Cherith is a totally counter-cultural way of living, especially in our world of technology where we are connected, on-line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. While we are having coffee with someone we are checking our email, texting a friend, and surfing the Web. We have lost the art of listening, of tuning in one on one with people and with God. There are studies now that are proving that the earplugs we have attached to our ears are resulting in hearing loss. Metaphorically we are losing our ability to hear God; we can’t hear the one voice that is the most important for us to hear. If we want to regain our hearing we have to go to Cherith.

There are so many benefits to the technology of our world but even the world is beginning to understand the dangers. I have read about coffee shops that do not have Internet connections and don’t even allow computers. Just Friday, I read that Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, a school of 800 students, has put a blackout for one week on social networks while on campus. One student commented that the blackout has “freed her to concentrate on her class work instead of toggling on her laptop between social networks and the lesson at hand. She said: ‘I feel obligated to check my Facebook. I feel obligated to check my Twitter. Now I don’t. I can just solely focus’” (*San Jose Mercury News*).

Have you been to the brook Cherith and experienced God’s supernatural provision? Do you have a Cherith place, a place where you go to be with God and to listen to God—a chair in your house, a park bench in your neighborhood, a spot on the beach, or a quiet place to walk and ruminate on Scripture? Cherith is essential to spiritual formation. I know how true this is in my own life. Cherith has become one of my favorite images in the Bible because of the healing and work that God has done in my life at Cherith. That won’t happen driving down the freeway, praying as you go.

The brook Cherith is a drastic countermeasure to the onslaught of information and noise that surrounds us, and safeguards our hearts from the many Baal gods that can take us prisoner. The waters of Cherith keep us refreshed and renewed despite the circumstances of life. Cherith is a fountain of living water, not a broken cistern that holds no water. Do we hear God’s voice beckoning us to come? “Come to Cherith. I want to get to know you. I want you to get to know me.” Will we obey like Elijah?

Henri Nouwen writes: “The word *obedience* includes the word *audire*, which means listening. The obedient life is one in which we listen with great attention to God’s Spirit within and among us.”⁶

Rueben Job, a Methodist pastor and writer helps us to understand the value and significance for the brook Cherith in our own lives:

I grew up on a farm in North Dakota. I was born in the twenties and lived through the dust bowl years. If I close my eyes I can still see fence rows covered with dry earth, blown like snow into wavy

drifts four feet tall. The sight of grasshoppers like dark clouds shutting out the sun being blown across the sky by the hot and dry wind is a memory I shall never forget.

And yet, our farmstead was like a little oasis in the midst of the desolation and destruction of the dust bowl. There was only one reason for this. We had a deep well that never ran dry. Summer and winter, this deep well supplied a continuous stream of life giving water so that the garden, trees, animals and our little family received nurture and sustenance enough to survive even this great national tragedy. Spiritual disciplines help us to sink those wells into the life giving source that comes to us only from God.⁷

Elijah was a man for all seasons because of the deep well dug at the brook Cherith where he learned the secret of listening and depending on God. Elijah foreshadows “the” man for all seasons, our Lord Jesus Christ, who learned from Elijah. He would arise early, go to a quiet place alone, and listen to his Father’s voice (Mark 1:35). Jesus confronted the religious idolatry of his day and it cost him his life. But what sustained him were the waters of Cherith, an unending supply of God’s provision. And God wants us to be his man or woman for all seasons. It doesn’t matter how small we think we are or how weak we might feel. What matters is what God does in our hearts at the brook Cherith. God plants us in this world of Baal worship and false gods in order to be a signpost to the one true God who is the source of life. And through all the seasons of life, the ups and downs, the successes and failures, he wants us to know the blessings that come from being with him, hearing his voice, and entering into his rest.

*May the blessing of the Lord God Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Redeemer of humankind,
Rest upon you,
Dwell within you,
Be the song of your heart,
The word of your mouth,
The strength of your life,
Today and always.
Amen.*⁸

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 102.
2. Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 746.
3. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man Like Us* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997), 19.
4. Roper, *Elijah*, 90.
5. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 124.
6. Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 18.
7. Jeannette Bakke, *Holy Invitations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 231.
8. Bakke, *Holy Invitations*, 274.

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