

THE MAKING OF A MAN

By David H. Roper

SERIES: ELIJAH

I would like to begin this morning a new series on the life of Elijah. Elijah is a great prophet, and I think he has a great deal to say to our age today. As a matter of fact, he is a prophet for our time; what he has to say, in terms of his life and his words, are as relevant today as when they were first spoken.

I am sure you have noticed that in the New Testament both Jesus and the apostles will frequently quote from the Old Testament, using the present tense. That is, they will say, "Isaiah SAYS so-and-so." They were aware of how relevant these prophets were. Though Isaiah was writing eight hundred years before Christ's time, they knew that what he had to say was relevant for his age as well as theirs. We could say the same thing today. These passages are perennially relevant--as much so as the morning paper. People have not changed very much; society is as it was in Elijah's day. When we talk about original sin, we do not mean that people sin in any original way--we all sin in pretty much the same way. And, the Word of God has something to say to us, as it did to its original hearers. So, with these thoughts in the back of our minds, let's look at the story of Elijah.

Elijah was the most notable prophet in the Old Testament, and is treated that way in the Scriptures. He is allied with the most notorious king in Israel's history, Ahab, and his wife, Jezebel. It is often the case that great men come out of particularly wicked periods of history, times of crisis, because these times create great men. We have often quoted Paul's words that we are to redeem the time because the days are evil. Paul doesn't say to redeem the time because the days are short, but because they are evil. That is, the more evil the days become, the more opportunities there are for men and women to be God's people. Hearts are prepared, people are ready to listen.

Evil days are days of opportunity, and so they proved for Elijah. Elijah's day was a period in Israel's history when there probably was more wickedness in the nation than at any other time, and yet it was a time when God raised up a prophet of unusual impact and significance--not only in his time, but on all subsequent history. Elijah is a strange man, a very unorthodox sort of prophet, sort of a charismatic being.

We do not know much about Elijah's origins. We are not told who his mother and father were, which is unusual for a prophet. In that day a prophet's credentials, his pedigree, were established by who his family was. We know nothing about his parents. Just like Melchizedek, he appears on the scene without mother or father. We could assume that his parents were godly Israelites because his name means *Yahweh*, or Jehovah is God; however, it appears that these names were often given more by custom than as an illustration of real faith. As an example, Ahab and Jezebel named one of their daughters Athaliah, which means "Yahweh is strength", although they had no use for the Lord in their lives. We give similar names without much thought as to their meaning today, such as the name Christopher, which means "Christ-bearer". So we can't really assume anything about Elijah's parents, for we don't know who they are.

We are told in 1 Kings 17 that Elijah came from Gilead, which was a wild, unsettled region of Palestine, east of the river Jordan. He is described as a "sojourner" there, a word indicating a sort of nomadic individual, a rootless person who travels from place to place and never settles down. When a king of Israel once asked what sort of man Elijah was, the prophet was described in terms of dress. The question the king actually asked was, "What is the judgment of the man? What is the ruling principle of his life?" He was told that Elijah was a hairy man. Literally, he is described as "lord of hair", i.e., he had a great deal of hair. Perhaps he had a long, flowing beard and long hair, a goat skin coat with hair on the outside, and, for all I know, hairy legs. He just bristled with hair. He was

also described as having a leather belt, indicating that he was very simply and modestly dressed.

In those days people put their money into clothing. Wealthy people today have cars and property, but in those days the wealthy put their money into clothing--particularly into their belts. Belts were usually made of some sort of fine woven fabric, linen perhaps, and were indicative of the person's social position. So Elijah was described, in terms of his dress, as a very simple man, which was really an expression of the inner character of the man. As a matter of fact, for most of his life he was in protest against the ease and affluence of his age. The way he dressed indicated the spirit of the man, as it did with John the Baptist.

Elijah ministered during the reigns of two wicked kings of Israel, Ahab and his son. He outlived them both. As a matter of fact, he outlived us all, because he never died. He is one of two men in the Old Testament who did not die--Enoch and Elijah. He was translated, taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. We will see later on why that is so significant. There are three things about Elijah that I think are significant. This morning I want to talk mainly about introductory things, and then we will go deeper into his life and his deeds in the following weeks.

The first thing I want you to note about Elijah is that he was a man who was set apart by the truth. He was a very unconventional man, but the reason he was different was because he walked according to the Word of God. He described himself as a man who stood before the Lord. He was subject to his Word, and that is what made him different. It is "in" today to be unconventional. The freakier you are, the more you are "in". I am not talking about that kind of distinctiveness. That is not Christian. It may be counter-cultural, but it is not Christian.

Christian distinctiveness is the result of walking according to the Word. If you walk according to the Word, you are going to be different. You are going to be in conflict with much of your age, as Elijah was. He was always at cross-purposes with everyone. He was difficult to get along with. In many cases, he was a hard man. He was genuinely unique. There is hardly anyone like Elijah. The thing that characterizes his life is that he was subject to the Word of God. When you are subject to the Word of God you will be different--you will be unconventional.

There is a kind of Christianity that is conventional. You can be a Christian and believe the Scriptures and be very much like the society you are in. All of us sort of slide in and out of that position. I have some friends who are very scholarly in their approach to the Bible. They know more about the Bible than many of us will ever know. They spend their whole lives studying the language and the history of the Bible. But they are no different than their age because they are not really subject to the truth. When you become subject to the Word, you are going to be different. That is when people will not understand you. You will be acting legitimately in ways that are contrary to your society. So, first, Elijah was the man that he was because he was subject to the Word. He obeyed it.

The second thing I want you to note as we look at these accounts is the enormous impact that Elijah had on his society. He didn't save the nation--it was too far gone. Within 125 years the nation collapsed. He didn't save the leadership of the nation--it was decadent beyond hope of recovery--but he saved many individuals in the nation. He was on a rescue operation, and many people responded to his message. He set the standard for the prophetic ministry in Israel for years to come. He had tremendous impact on his time. The New Testament always looks at Elijah as the outstanding example of a prophet. For instance, Malachi predicts that Messiah would be like Elijah, not Isaiah. He would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. And when Jesus began to teach and to minister, the question on everyone's lips was "Is this Elijah?"

The third thing that I want you to note is that Elijah was just like us. In fact, the Bible says he was. "He was a man of like passions," James 5 tells us. He was not a Six Million Dollar Man, not Superman; he was a man, just as we are, subject to the same sort of passions, the same sort of limitations, the same sort of weaknesses. If there were a hallmark of his life, it would be not only that he was a man of great power and influence, but that he was a man who was inconsistent. One minute he is challenging the four hundred prophets of Baal--the most awesome representatives of that time, the segment of society that was most to be feared--taking them all on single-handedly and defeating them. The next moment he is running for his life because of the voice of a woman. You know, it is a great encouragement to me to discover that Elijah was that kind of man. He is like I am, and like you are. He is inconsistent. He doesn't always pull it off.

Periodically I vow great vows that I am going to have great influence on my family, or my neighborhood, or whatever. Believing that you ought to start at home, I determine that I am going to spend a certain amount of time teaching my children, I'm going to be the high priest and the head of my home. As I look back on my track record, I see that I am good for about two days of consistent production, then I begin to tail off, and then I have to gear up again for another run at it. I'm the world's most inconsistent man, and it frustrates me.

So when I see a man like Elijah, I understand. He is just like me. And yet he was a man of great impact on his society because, basically, his heart was the heart of submission to the Word of God. When I look at his life, he encourages me. I know that by God's grace, any one of us can be like Elijah. But at the same time I understand that God is very comfortable with failure. He understands; he knows our hearts. He isn't down on us, he does not turn away because we fail. There is hope.

I want to give you a bit of background to the study of Elijah in 1 Kings, beginning with chapter 17. In the Hebrew Bible, the chapter division is made between verses 28 and 29 of Chapter 16, and this is right. There should not be a chapter division after verse 34. The chapter actually begins with the story of Ahab, because everything that Elijah does is played out against the backdrop of the history of Ahab (1 Kings 16:29-34):

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. In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, 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.

We are told some interesting things about life in Ahab's time. Ahab's father was Omri. From a purely historical standpoint, Omri was the greatest king who ever sat on the throne of Israel. He was a greater king politically than Solomon. For about one hundred fifty years after Omri was on the throne, the literature of that area refers to Israel as the land of Omri, or Omri's land. He had a great political influence on his time.

In the Bible, Omri is given six verses, and, apart from the formula that occurs very frequently in these historical accounts, the only significant thing that is said about him is that he was the most wicked man who sat on the throne of Israel up to his time. That is God's estimate of Omri. I am sure that Omri must have appeared frequently at royal occasions and was introduced as the king of the four corners of the earth, the savior of the world, the greatest king who ever reigned in Israel, and so on. But God's estimate of this man is that he was the most wicked king in Israel's history.

That says something about God's assessment of us, and also about where we place our values. What is important to us? What do you want? What do I want? Do I really want to be accepted by society and gain its approval and appreciation and praise? What may be said about you when you retire from your place of business, or what may be said about you in your neighborhood is really irrelevant. The important thing is what God says about us. What is his estimate of our life? Where should we invest our time and energy and money and thoughts. What is important?

Omri, from a political standpoint, was the greatest king in Israel's history. But from God's standpoint, he was a total, abject failure. The most wicked man God ever knew. He passed on to his son Ahab not only a stable kingdom, but a wicked one. He also gave Jezebel to Ahab, to be his wife. Omri made a political alliance with the Sidonians and, as a result of this alliance, gained a princess for his son Ahab. That was the infamous Jezebel. We know from history that her father was the king/priest of the Phoenicians. He murdered his own brother to come to the throne. He was a cruel and vicious man. He was the high priest of Baal in Phoenicia, and his daughter, Jezebel,

was the patroness of the temple. She was the supervisor of the cultic prostitution that was carried out in the temple of Baal at Tyre, in Sidon.

When Jezebel came into Israel she brought along all of her gods, bag and baggage--the whole pantheon of Canaanite gods, with all of the awfulness and the degrading aspects of that religion. The world has never seen anything quite like Canaanite religion--unless you want to compare it with the Bay Area religions. Their sacred prostitution, ritual bestiality, all of the things that are associated with Baal worship, came into Israel with Jezebel. Ahab began to worship Baal and erected a temple to his honor and worshiped the Asherah, and all that was associated with it.

Verse 34, which tells of the rebuilding of Jericho, appears to be almost an irrelevant historical side note here, but as you read the Old Testament, you find that things that appear to be out of place are often very helpful in understanding what is going on. This event is referred to here because it gives us some idea of the spiritual climate of that age. Jericho, as you know, was a city that was destroyed by Joshua and the Israelites when they conquered the land. It was the first walled city that they encountered, and it was destroyed not only because it was a Canaanite fortress, but also because it was a city dedicated to one of the most degrading forms of worship in Canaanite circles, the worship of the moon god. So God put Jericho under the ban. The Israelites destroyed it, burned it to the ground, and scattered the city.

Furthermore, the Lord told Israel that if anyone ever built the city again, he would do so at the cost of his eldest son and his youngest son. At this time the favored sons of any family would be the firstborn, because he would inherit the headship of the family, and the last son, who would be the child of the patriarch's old age. So the Israelites were told that Jericho would be rebuilt only at this great cost. God did not want it in the land because of all its past associations.

Here, five hundred years later, this man Hiel, who is described as a Bethelite, one who worshiped the house of El, that is, all the pantheon of Canaanite gods, went back to Jericho and rebuilt it, as an act of deliberate rebellion. He was flaunting his rebellion. Not only had the Israelites turned away from God, but now they were flaunting their rebellion. That is why this incident is recorded here. It is an explanation of the moral climate of the age. People were not interested in the Lord; Baal worship was now the state religion. No one gave the true God the time of day. It is in the midst of this climate that Elijah appears, as described in verse 1 of chapter 17:

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." 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.

I would love to have been at Ahab's court when Elijah made his appearance. He seems to show up without a formal announcement, dressed in his moth-eaten fur coat, in the midst of all the pomp and affluence of Ahab's court.

Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom at this time. It was a beautiful place, particularly in Ahab's time, with the mountains covered with trees, and with lush valleys. This was Ahab's winter home, the seat of the government. He had built a beautiful palace there and he and Jezebel lived amidst pomp and wealth. Into this scene Elijah walks and makes this announcement: "It ain't goin' to rain no more, no more!" Then he turns around and walks out. I would love to have been there to see the look on Ahab's face, and to see Jezebel's reaction. But Elijah is unscathed. He is able to walk in, deliver his utterance, and disappear. He is hidden for a period of about one year by the brook Cherith.

Now, it would appear that what Elijah is doing is hitting people where it hurts the worst--in their pocketbooks. In an agrarian society like Israel's, rain is one of the basic necessities of life. If it doesn't rain, they're in big trouble. Their economy would collapse in a year or so. Israel has a climate much like ours here on the West Coast. There is a wet season during the winter, and a dry season during the summer. It starts to rain in October and it rains through the winter until March. Then it stops, and it doesn't rain all summer and the crops dry up. So it is absolutely essential that there be adequate rain during the rainy season. If it doesn't rain, the economy falls apart. They were not able to use the sort of irrigation techniques that we use today, so they suffered greatly if it didn't rain. So it appears at first reading that this is what has happened. By striking at their economy, Elijah is trying to get their attention.

But there is actually something much more significant going on. What Elijah is doing is challenging the very foundation of their lives, because in Canaanite worship, it was Baal who brought the rain. Baal was the rain-giver. He is always depicted as the god of the rain and the storm. He has a club in one hand to symbolize thunder, and a lightning bolt in his other hand. In the Canaanite myths, he is called "the rider of the clouds," driving the clouds ahead of his chariot as though they were horses, driving the clouds from the Mediterranean Sea to Canaan so it would rain at the appropriate time.

In Canaanite mythology, when the dry season comes, Baal dies and goes down into the nether world, and Mot, the king of death, becomes king and sterility reigns. In the fall of the year, through various incantations, the enactment of rituals and much weeping and lamenting, Baal would be brought out of the nether world and would defeat Mot and reign again. The point is that all depended on Baal. If Baal wasn't there, all was sterility. When Baal was there, all was fertility. He was a nature god, a fertility god, and all those associated with him were fertility deities.

You can see what the Lord was doing. He was attacking the foundation of their lives, the thing they were trusting in, the thing that they believed in above anything else. It was not merely rainfall that was the issue--it was who or what they were trusting in for that rainfall. That was the issue. It is always the issue.

That is what God wants to get at in our lives. What is the foundation of our lives? What are we counting on? What is it that fulfills us, satisfies us, makes us feel whole, gives meaning to our lives? The Lord wants to occupy that place. He wants to be the only one. The Lord *is* the only one. He will do anything to get us to come to the place where we are willing to trust him and him alone, not our husband, not our wife, not our children, not Weight Watchers, not IBM or Hewlett Packard--as good as these things may be. If that is what gives meaning to our lives, if that is what fulfills us, then we have built our lives on the wrong foundation. He will do anything to bring us back to a true and proper foundation. Only God provides an adequate basis for life. You see, the Israelites had transferred their allegiance from the Lord God of Israel to the god of the Canaanites, Baal, with all the decadence and the degrading aspects of that religion. They had turned away from the Lord. The Lord now is reaching out to bring them back. There is only one substantial basis for life, and that is the Lord himself.

Now, why does God have to take Elijah through this process? Elijah goes through the drought as well. He suffers as his people suffer. He is not immune. That is because Elijah has to learn the same lesson. It is one thing to stand before the Lord and speak; it is another thing to act in a critical situation when the chips are down. So the Lord had to take Elijah through the process, as we will see in the next couple of weeks. He himself had to learn to trust the Lord, and only the Lord, so he is taken off into the desert and is hidden away in one of these *wadis* alongside the Jordan River.

We don't know where this place is, but the name is very significant. The name Cherith is associated in Canaanite mythology with a mythical strong man--something like our Six Million Dollar Man, Clint Eastwood, or someone like that, some mythical folk hero that people look up to. Cherith was a man who could do anything--he could cope in any situation! His family was wiped out and all seven children were killed, so he gathers an army around himself, hies himself off to Edom, and defeats the Edomites and steals a princess away from them. He thumbs his nose at the gods and goddesses; they strike him with illness, but he overcomes that. He was a man who could cope with life. He was a hero, and later was deified in their mythology. My personal feeling is that this stream was

named for him because it was a stream that endured when every other stream dried up.

It is significant that the Lord put Elijah there. I believe it was because he wanted to teach him something that he could teach him only through drought. We are told that he was given two means of provision: birds and a stream. Ravens brought him food in the mornings and evenings. That is a supernatural provision because ravens don't behave that way. I assume that our term "ravenous" comes from that word. Ravens are scavengers. They don't normally feed people. But God arranged for ravens to feed Elijah twice a day, as regular as clockwork.

But God's provision for water was a natural one--the stream. For a year Elijah could drink out of that stream. Then it began to dry up, it became a trickle, and then it was gone and Elijah was drinking out of the puddles. His natural source of supply was gone. In that sort of situation the issue is always, "Who do you trust then?" Puritan ethic says "Trust God and keep your powder dry." What happens when you don't have any powder, when there is nothing but God, when the thing you have been counting on is gone?

Some of you men are in a very insecure job market, facing early retirement and other things. Your natural supply is drying up, and you wonder, "What's next?" Or many of you have been counting on some individual for strength, and he is gone. Who do you trust then? That is what matters. Who do you trust when there is no one else to trust, or nothing left to place your trust in? If our stability is based on things or people, we will always be unstable. But if it is based on God's ability, then that becomes our stability. That is what Elijah had to learn, and that is what we have to learn.

The Lord said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind. That is what it's all about. Loving God with your whole heart is the name of the game--not dividing your allegiance or your love, but loving him and depending on him and trusting him. That is what I desire for myself and for you--that we will love the Lord like that, trust him, and count on him. I am reluctant to make any vows, or any New Year's resolutions, but that is my heart.

The Lord asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter said, "Well, Lord, I'm fond of you." A few hours before, Peter would have said, "Yes, Lord, I love you." But he had just gone through the disastrous experience of having denied the Lord three times and he wasn't sure that he could love the Lord at all. Fondness was the best he could do. But the Lord saw his heart, and he sees your heart. We can say, "Lord, I want to love you with all my heart this year, with an undivided love and loyalty." He knows. And though you may fail, and though you may feel insecure about saying, "Lord, I'm going to do it," the Lord himself is the one who is going to see that process through. He is the one who, having begun a good work, will complete it until the day of Christ.

What an encouragement, Father, to look at a man like Elijah and see that he is a man of like passions, and a man that you taught to be a man of power and influence because he learned to trust you. Teach us to trust you Father. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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[Back to Dave Roper's Home Page](#)

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