

9-20-09 1 Kings 16:29-33, 17:1 “Elijah: Against the Tide” by Richard Boatman

²⁹ In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. ³⁰ Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. ³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him...¹ Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

I've been reading a series entitled *The American Presidents*. Twenty-first President Chester Arthur is my current focus. One thing that is striking is the level of political animosity that has almost always existed. No question that there has been heroism and greatness woven throughout the fabric of our prolific republic. But also contributing to the threads of our governmental tapestry has been a fair share of mediocrity, corruption and even a few stitches of evil. But the evil done has often been systemic. Policies were made that seemed logical, economically productive and politically prudent. But the impact on certain groups was systemic evil. Under Andrew Jackson treaties with Native Americans were broken in order to allow for what was considered necessary expansion because of our growing immigrant population and economy. The tragic *Trail of Tears* would be the end result. Policy ending formal reconstruction of the South in post Civil War years was probably a compromise allowing Rutherford Hayes to be elected. In effect, it removed a military presence from southern states, thus allowing white supremacy to undermine what the Emancipation had granted. Nineteenth century moralist Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Enter King Ahab, a personification of evil in the Old Testament narratives. It was through him and his queen Jezebel that a tide of evil saturated Israel. Only a little more than fifty years had transpired since the young nation had been at the pinnacle of its power under David and Solomon. But soon after Solomon's death, over nine hundred years before Jesus' birth, the nation was divided. The southern kingdom of Judah was more stable, enjoying a long rule by King Asa. But the larger northern kingdom called Israel had been riddled with violence and division, King Ahab being its seventh ruler during the one reign of Judah's King. Ahab's biographical sketch is succinct and sobering: ³⁰ "Ahab son of Omri did

more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.” Here we have a classic “the nut doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Omri was an evil king. Ahab watched his father, learning his priorities, watching his behaviors and internalizing his blatant disregard for the God of Israel. According to scholar Russell Dilday, the name Ahab can be translated “brother of the father” or “resembling the father.”

We’ve all seen the exceptions—abused or neglected kids who grew up with no privilege becoming great people or kids with all the opportunities in the world becoming thugs. But generally speaking, children are products of their parents. Proverbs 22:6 asserts, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” This verse is actually kind of tricky to translate because of the nuances of Hebrew. I’m familiar with three ways of interpreting it. **First**, raise your children in biblical principles and, though they may “sow some wild oats,” they’ll come back to this standard. This has probably been the most widely held view. **Second**, to “train up a child in the *way he should go*” means to find the bent of your children, their positive penchants, learning styles and interests and move them in that direction with biblical principles reinforcing their inherent giftedness and tendencies. The **third** way approaches it from a negative and is perhaps best grasped in paraphrase form: “If you train children by allowing them free reign, they become wild and undisciplined, and that pattern stays with them all their lives.” This may best explain King Ahab who, given free reign by his father Omri, “did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.”

I’m amazed at people who take a hands-off view of Christian education for their youth. “Well, I want them to decide for themselves about religion.” And yet teaching by example that God is irrelevant to daily living is as powerful an indoctrination to young minds as any thing else. “Well pastor, I don’t think you need to go to church to worship God and to be a good Christian.” Oh, I think that’s true. But it’s true in the same way that one could say, “I don’t think you need to go to football or basketball practice to be a good player.” There are those exceptional people, I suppose, who are just such superior athletes that they don’t need what everyone else needs to sharpen their skills. But most do. There may be some “super” Christians who don’t need what Peter or Paul or John needed: a community of faith. There may be those who don’t need the assembled church that Jesus initiated within which the entire New Testament is written. Make sure you’re truly a “super” Christian to make such a stand and not just deceived or arrogant.

Ahab’s arrogance would help lead an entire nation into spiritual ruin. Verse 31 continues: “He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and

began to serve Baal and worship him.” Marrying Jezebel was politically astute. Sidonians were Phoenicians and both they and Israel had been threatened by Syria. So Ahab and Jezebel’s marriage united the two nations against a common enemy. But what is smart politics or economics may be spiritually destructive. Jezebel’s father, Ethbaal (meaning “with Baal”) had murdered his own brother who had been king in order to usurp his power. Jezebel was her father’s daughter.

If we’re tempted to think that who we hang with doesn’t affect us or what we give our thought life and time to won’t impact us, look at Ahab and think again. He married Jezebel and in the very next breath the verse says, “and [he] began to serve Baal and worship him.” Author Phillip Keller describes the slide: “Without a qualm [Ahab] had plunged headlong into the appalling rituals and sexual orgies of Baal and Ashteroth. These were pagan deities dedicated to licentiousness, sexual perversion, violence and unbridled greed.” Beloved, when we have rejected the Lord God as our anchor, when we have nothing godly filling our souls, then we are open to the seductive powers at work all around us. We were created to worship. If our object of worship is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we will worship something, and it will likely be some form of money, sex or power.

The seductive practices, the greed and power that swept like a tsunami across Israel were not at first seen as evil by the masses. Their senses were arrested and intoxicated with a lust for pleasure. Their drunken souls were unaware that they were drifting into the throes of darkness. But God had not forgotten his people. Isaiah 59:19 says, “When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him.” Elijah was God’s standard bearer. This powerful prophet of God stood against the tide of evil.

We have a pastor friend that we got started in ministry and have mentored the last several years. Todd is a macho kind of guy. Wearing liturgical robes is really not his thing. But his church bought him a nice black robe in honor of his recent graduation from seminary. Feeling duty bound, he wore it the following Sunday. While leaving the sanctuary after giving the benediction, he leaned over to one of his friends in the congregation and said, “Do I look like a girl in this robe?” But Todd forgot that his microphone was still on. Everyone heard. I had a colleague a number of years ago who concluded the service and then went to the rest room. He, too, forgot that his microphone was still on and the soundman was asleep at the helm. Yes, it was as you might imagine...an interesting way to end a service. Fittingly, the Southwest Airlines commercial asks, “Do you wanna get away?”

Most of us don't want to live with a microphone announcing everything we say...or do. But bursting onto the scene of this 1 King's drama is the great prophet. He seemingly comes from no where, the author capturing for the reader the abruptness of Elijah's entrance onto the stage: "Now Elijah the Tishbite...said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Elijah's name means *Yahweh is God*. It is a glorious thing when not only our names but our lives give testimony to the living God. King Ahab had political power. Elijah had godly power. The two forces met and Elijah confronted the king—and the tide of evil he had loosed—with three things: **1) *The God of Israel lives***; **2) *I serve him***; and **3) *There will be neither dew nor rain...except at my word***. Israel was serving false gods. They needed reminded that the God who had been their source and strength and identity was still alive. He lives. But it is one thing to announce God is alive by wearing T-shirts that proclaim him or bumper stickers that declare him, but it's quite another to actually serve him. To say "I serve him" in Bible times didn't just mean serving on committees or helping with local clean-up crews. Paul often used the term calling himself a bond-servant of the Lord. This was someone who could choose to be free but who rather chose to give himself to a family for a life of service. For such a servant, everything revolved around the master's desire and will. The servant's complete identity was surrendered to and discovered in service for the master that, out of love, he indentured himself to.

"There will be neither dew nor rain..." From March to October the rains came to Israel. In the hot season heavy dews would form. Baal was believed to be "the god of fertility [and] the god of the storm, present in the dew and rain" (Dilday). So Elijah's words were a direct challenge "to this alien deity." The ensuing three year drought would be a symbol of the spiritual drought plaguing Israel. As the people would cry out for water, so they would cry out for the living God.

Like Elijah, the Christian's call is to **announce** that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is alive, to **serve** him by daily attentiveness to his will, and to **challenge** the false gods of our times. Then as now, false gods offer unbridled pleasure with unchecked avarice wrapped in a rhetoric of tolerance. And then as now, adherence to such intoxicates the spirit with darkness and depletes the soul of its life-giving source. Beloved, we as a community of faith declare that "Yahweh is God." We are in the spirit of Elijah if we reclaim the name of the Lord in our lives, embracing righteousness and standing against the tide of evil. For "the name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are saved." Hallelujah!