Wanted: Dead or Alive

A man dreamed about Peter handing out rewards at the gates of heaven. One man in line is a minister in a suit and tie. In front of him is a man dressed in cool, casual attire. While they are standing in line, the second man informs the minister that he drove a cab in New York City. When the cab driver receives a crown with many stars, the minister is stunned that his crown is smaller with fewer stars. The preacher protests, “I’ve been a faithful evangelist for fifty years. Why does this cab driver receive a greater reward than I do?” Peter responds, “Well, your rewards reflect the impact of the work you both have done. While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed.”

When you talk about lives that impacted those around them, few measure up to the lifework of Elijah. Laboring with few creature comforts, practically no human support or appreciation, and brutal opposition from his enemies, Elijah stands a mountain apart and above his peers. His devotion and bravado under pressure show the difference one man or woman can make for good. Wanted: Dead or Alive, after our song…

After flying under the radar, preserved by God’s protective hand during lean times in the wild and in Zarephath, Elijah’s time in obscurity finally comes to a close. God informs Elijah of his move to prime time: “I’m ready for you to confront Ahab.” 1 Kings 18:2, “‘Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth.’ So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab; and there was a severe famine in Samaria.”

Pardon the anachronism, but you could see Elijah’s photo at the post office in Samaria. Ahab and Jezebel unleashed bounty hunters to scour the countryside with the likely directive – Wanted: Dead or Alive. Through the providential protection of God, Elijah eluded capture. Ahab and Jezebel relieved the frustration of their failed hunt by killing the prophets of Jehovah they could find. Faithful prophets in Israel were now on the endangered list. The simple plan: destroy the Jehovah’s prophets and you drive Jehovah out of the country. I’m thankful I live in the US. If folks get mad about the truth I preach they may cancel the gospel meeting; in Elijah’s day, they cancelled the preacher!

By this time the drought Elijah promised should have brought King Ahab to his knees in sackcloth and ashes. Ahab should have been ready to obey the Lord, but he hardened his heart. God had Obadiah on to facilitate Elijah’s meeting with Ahab. Obadiah: don’t you love that name! Incidentally, Obadiah means servant of Jehovah. Ahab declared open season on the prophets of Jehovah, so we know Obadiah was no prophet, but, in addition to a highly responsible place in the kingdom, the Bible says, “Obadiah feared the LORD greatly.”

As a man who knew Ahab intimately, Obadiah provides insight into the seething rage over Elijah. Even though Obadiah served the king as a trusted aide, he knew his life hung by a thread. Obadiah greeted Elijah with profound respect, but vigorously resisted Elijah’s request to bring Ahab to him. “Wait a minute! I’m one of the good guys! Don’t do that to me. That’s a suicide mission.” Obadiah knew God protected Elijah from Ahab and could transport him away from trouble, if necessary. Obadiah also knew, though, that if he failed to present Elijah after claiming to find him that his blood would moisten the sword of one of Ahab’s men. Obadiah played his “avoid execution card,” informing Elijah he rescued one hundred prophets. Elijah quieted Obadiah’s concern, saying in essence: “Look in my eyes. Do I look like I’m running?”

When he sees Elijah, instead of confessing his sins, Ahab plays the blame game. 1 Kings 18:17, “Is that you, O troubler of Israel?” You have made a mess, Elijah! Listen, don’t blame the preacher. Don’t get mad at the messenger. Don’t kick the commode when you fail to pay the water bill. Take your medicine. Receive reproof and make any necessary corrections when you err.
Incidentally, Christian, feel no guilt when loved ones reject your godly counsel and suffer as a result; it’s out of your hands. Can’t smoke and get mad at the radiologist when you develop lung cancer; can’t sleep around and blame the Dr. when you get an STD; can’t cheat on your spouse and blame the preacher when she puts you away. The Lord wills, of course, that we walk the strait and narrow. He’d rather we stay out of sin completely. Unfortunately, as the Bible teaches in 1 John 1:10, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”

When I sin as a child of God, however, I must guard my attitude towards my sin. I must take responsibility. 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” To confess means to “say the same” about my sin as God. Ahab, regrettably, sinks deeper in a morass of his own making, brazenly ignoring the sin that is up to his eyeballs, blaming the preacher who merely delivers God’s message. This. Will. Not. Fly! Elijah rebukes Ahab in 1 Kings 18:18, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and have followed the Baals.” Ahab’s disobedience, idolatry, and failed leadership have drained the nation dry; the famine is his fault.

Don’t think you can escape the consequences of your sins! The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” You may delay but you will not delete the law of the harvest! You will reap what you sow.

Now the humble prophet takes over. He doesn’t ask Ahab, he tells him, “We’re gonna have a showdown and set this straight before all.” And nearly the whole nation follows his orders. 1 Kings 18:19, “Now … gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.” We have no headcount but JewishHistory.org says hundreds of thousands of Jews came to Mount Carmel to witness this intense religious contest. This was a big deal! What kind of odds would Vegas have given Elijah against Jezebel’s 850 prophets? The deck seems stacked against him. How could he hope to overpower and outmaneuver her 850 prophets?

Oftentimes, those on the side of truth and right will be in the minority and sometimes even as scant a minority as we find in Elijah’s day. No worries. No panic.

Might makes right if by might you mean the Almighty and not the might of human majorities. As Martin Luther put it, “God plus one is a majority.” The Bible says in Exodus 23:2, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil…” The majority even among those who profess to be God’s people frequently err. Corruption so permeated the people of God in Elijah’s day that he thought he alone faithfully served Jehovah. God informed him that 7,000 others stood for truth and right. The 850 prophets may have taken comfort in their numbers, but it was false security. The Spirit teaches in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Sometime later when the King of Syria made war against Israel (2 Kings 6), horses, chariots, and a great army surrounded Elisha and the people of God. Elisha’s calmed his servant when he began to panic amidst the seemingly hopeless situation, ““Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed, and said, ‘LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:16-17). God’s got more going on than these eyes can see!
1 Kings 18:20, “So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel.”

Keil and Delitzsch tell us that **Carmel** was “a mountain ridge ‘with many peaks, intersected by hundreds of larger and smaller ravines,’ which stands out as a promontory [or peninsula] running in a north-westerly direction into the Mediterranean…, and some of the loftiest peaks of which rise to the height of 1800 feet above the level of the sea, when seen from the northern or outer side shows only ‘bald, monotonous rocky ridges, scantily covered with short and thorny bushes;’….The scene of Elijah’s sacrifice is…on one of the southeastern heights of Carmel….with great probability in the ruins of el Mohraka, i.e. ‘the burned place,’ ‘a rocky level space … covered with old gnarled trees with a dense entangled undergrowth of bushes.’ … The rock shoots up in an almost perpendicular wall of more than 200 feet in height….this wall made it visible over the whole plain, and from all the surrounding heights, so that even those left behind, who had not ascended Carmel, would still have been able to witness at no great distance the fire from heaven that descended upon the altar….’ This site was near both the brook Kishon and the Mediterranean sea.

Edmund Burke rightly said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Part of the problem in Elijah’s day: the most wicked people were also the most energetic and the most active. The people who could have made a difference said nothing and did nothing.

1 Kings 18:21, “And Elijah came to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ But the people answered him not a word.”

Elijah arranged an unusual religious debate. Yes, Elijah sought to establish the truth and expose religious error, but perhaps the greater objective – to see that God received the glory due Him from His people.

God needs more Eliejs! Sixteenth century Germany had an Elijah named Martin Luther. This Roman Catholic priest found his Mount Carmel at Wittenberg 500 years ago, nailing his Ninety-five Theses on the church door challenging the sale of indulgences. In the process, he inadvertently put the pope and Catholic hierarchy on the hot seat. His protests led many to recognize the ultimate authority in Christianity is Scripture not the pope. Luther ignited the protestant reformation.

While Luther and Calvin rightfully resisted the papacy’s unbiblical power grab, the denominations they spawned also elevated human concepts over Scripture. America’s 19th century Elijah, Alexander Campbell, abandoned
Presbyterianism in protest of the unbiblical practice of infant baptism and adopted the maxim, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." This paraphrased the Spirit’s words in 1 Peter 4:11, “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.” This same conviction later led him to leave the Baptist church, sickened by the divisive allegiance to the paper popes of creeds and confessions of faith that mandated man-made doctrines and practices over Scripture. A pillar in the restoration movement as Luther was in the reformation movement, Campbell’s numerous debates emblazoned biblical truth across the American landscape moving men and women to leave denominations to call themselves Christians only and become members of the church of Christ.

We still need Elijah’s today; we need men and women who will stand up for God and the truth of Scripture no matter how numerous the opposition nor how extreme the persecution.

Israel robbed God of the honor He deserved. They knew Jehovah delivered Joseph from bondage, Moses from Pharaoh, David from Goliath, etcetera, but now, acting like they don’t know any better, they straddle the fence between Baal and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What a disgrace!

God had enough and voiced His frustration through Elijah! “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” Wishy-washy. Lukewarm. Double-minded. Indecisive. Uncommitted. Compromising. One foot in, one foot out. Take a stand!

Oh, how many people today need to hear this message! Get off the fence! Many compromise with other world religions, failing to rigorously defend the exclusiveness of Jesus plain teaching in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” No one!

The great compromise today, however, is between Christianity and worldliness.

- Seventy percent of Americans claim to be Christians, but only half attend weekly church services. Scripture teaches God’s people “Not to forsake the assembling of yourselves together...” (Hebrews 10:25).
- Fifty-three percent of Americans have read relatively little of the Bible and only twenty percent of Americans have read through the entire Bible. https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/

The Bible teaches in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.” Where are the Elijah’s who will stand up for the word of the Lord today?

When Elijah demanded they choose between God and Baal, the “People did not answer.” Most people today do not violently oppose those conscientiously devoted to God like Jezebel did; most people just observe in silence. Elijah raised the stakes. He called on the false prophets to cut a bull up, lay it on wood, and call on the name of their gods. Elijah said he would do the same and “call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God…. So all the people answered and said, ‘It is well spoken.’”

The false prophets did as Elijah commanded and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, with no answer. They leaped about the altar like they had ants in their pants. No answer. Elijah mocked them, “Louder! Maybe he’s meditating; perhaps he’s busy; reckon he went on a trip? Maybe he fell asleep. The false prophets got
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louder and cut themselves until they were a bloody mess. They put on quite a show like false prophets still do today, but they had no substance and God gave no response.

Finally, Elijah, exhausted by witnessing a full day of false worship, called the people in closer, repaired the altar of the Lord, cut up the bull, and laid it on the wood on the altar. He dug a large trench around the altar and had four waterpots filled with water three times, and poured on the burnt sacrifice and on the wood." Water soaked the sacrifice. Why do this? Idolaters would hide little fires under like altars and fraudulently claim their false gods devoured their offerings by fire. Elijah’s action insulated him against that accusation.

Then Elijah declared in 1 Kings 18:36, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word.” Imagine the shock and awe on Ahab’s faces when fire miraculously fell and devoured not only the sacrifice, but incinerated the wood, stones, and the dirt as well as all the water in the trench. Even this cynical crowd could not resist this compelling sight. They “fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!’” Capitalizing on the momentum of the moment, Elijah commanded them to seize all the false prophets and execute them.

God through Elijah won a great victory. The Lord followed that up with a heavy rain in answer to Elijah’s prayer to end the drought. But when Jezebel, who skipped the showdown at Mount Carmel, learned Elijah slew all her precious prophets, she shutdown the celebration. In her fury, she sent word to Elijah saying in 1 Kings 19:2, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." Not only did Jezebel not kill Elijah by the next day, but Elijah never died at all. Instead, he rode off into the sunset. Well, not exactly, but we do read in 2 Kings 2:11, “Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”

This morning, does Elijah’s question hit home with you? 1 Kings 18:21, “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him…” Are you trying to walk the line between truth and error, between living for worldly pleasure and living for the Lord? Are you trying to serve two masters? Are you straddling the fence? How long will you keep putting Jesus off? If you believe the Lord is God, follow Him and start today! Live as if your name is Elijah – the Lord is my God! Stay with us for a final word, after our song…

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The Christian readers are urged to “exhort one another” (3:13), hold “steadfast to the end” (3:14), “do not harden your hearts” (3:8, 15; 4:7), and “give diligence” (4:11, ASV) in order to enter that rest. Once one enters into God’s rest, (Hebrews 4:10), “…he … has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.” Again, Hebrews 4:3-4, “For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,' "although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all His works."

There is no rest on this earth from which Christians cease their work for God. Retire from your secular work, if you like, but God’s people, while on this earth, are to be “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor.
There is no authorized day (or days) for Christians to rest from obeying God, for even the Israelites were refused entrance into God’s rest because of their disobedience. Notice in this passage every time you find the word “today” or “daily” – every day is a day for our faith to be mixed with obedience (4:1-3), so that one day our Lord might give us His rest. 2 Thessalonians 1:7, “and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels…”

Those obsessed with this life will always, here and hereafter, be stressed, but the people of God will find God’s rest. Obtaining this rest should dominate our existence. Revelation 21:1-4, “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

Notice the contrast between the the possible ends for all men in Revelation 14:11-13, “And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, [how sad!] who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.’’” Do you have faith in Christ? Have you obeyed the gospel? Have you been added to the body of Christ? Do not delay; as we’ve read this morning in Hebrews 3:7, "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion…” You will never regret it! Stay with us for a final word, after our song…

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