

SESSION 1

Serve with Courage



QUESTION 1:

When you think of courage, who comes to mind?

THE POINT

Serving God often calls for courage.

THE PASSAGES

1 Kings 16:29-33; 17:1-6

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In 2001, Pat Tillman was a starting football player for the Arizona Cardinals with a \$3.6 million contract. But then on 9/11, terrorists attacked our country, leading Tillman to reassess his priorities. That's when Pat Tillman made a life-changing decision—one that made headlines—he left a promising career with the NFL to enlist in the U.S. Army.

He explained, “Sports embodied many of the qualities I deem meaningful. However, these last few years, and especially after recent events, I’ve come to appreciate just how shallow and insignificant my role is ... It’s no longer important.”¹ After several tours of duty as an Army Ranger, Tillman was killed in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004. Later, investigations determined that Tillman’s death had been a tragic result of friendly fire.

We must decide whether we will serve God with such courage. John Eldredge wrote, “The world in which we live is a combat zone, a violent clash of kingdoms, a bitter struggle unto the death.”² In this world that opposes God, we must decide: *Will we have the courage to stand for Him and declare His truth?* The biblical account of Elijah gives us an example to follow.

1 Kings 16:29-33

29 And in the thirty and eighth year of Asa king of Judah began Ahab the son of Omri to reign over Israel: and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty and two years.

30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him.

31 And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

32 And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.

33 And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.

KEY WORD: **Grove** (16:33)—Monument to the fertility goddess, Asherah. Artwork from the time suggests plain and carved poles, trees, and even tree stumps as representative of sacred groves.

Under King Solomon, Israel was at the height of her glory. Fulfilling his father's vision, Solomon built a magnificent temple as a center of worship to God (1 Kings 6). But Solomon also opened the nation to the practice of idolatry by marrying women from foreign lands where idol worship flourished (11:1-8). His failure paved the way for religious decay and Israel's decline.

After Solomon's death, the nation splintered into two kingdoms (12:1-17). A string of unrighteous kings led the Northern Kingdom of Israel. All these kings failed to obey God, but Ahab distinguished himself as the most wicked and displeasing to God.

Ahab compounded his own moral failings by joining himself with Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. Jezebel zealously followed the false god, Baal. She fought to completely eradicate the

worship of Yahweh from Israel and replace it with Baal worship, assassinating hundreds of people who stood in her way. Like Queen Mary I of England, known as Bloody Mary because of her ruthless persecution of Protestants,³ and Lizzie Borden, who brutally murdered her parents in 1892,⁴ Jezebel's very name has become synonymous with evil. Ahab colluded with Jezebel by worshiping Baal himself and promoting Baal worship as the state religion.

Ahab even built a temple in Samaria where Jezebel could make sacrifices to her god. Among the Phoenician gods, Baal was revered as the god of fertility. Followers believed Baal controlled fertility of crops and reproduction among animals and people. Because they believed Baal followed a seasonal cycle of dying in the fall and resurrecting in spring, they responded with rites of mourning in autumn. And spring brought a celebration that included indulging in sacramental sex acts with male and female temple prostitutes.

QUESTION 2:

What are some idols present in today's culture?

Everything about Baal worship conflicted with the worship of Yahweh. At its foundation, Baalism attacked the authority of God, whose first commandment is "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). At the heart of Ahab's and Jezebel's vile actions was an underlying refusal to bow to God's sovereignty.

We may feel far removed from the wicked behavior of Ahab and Jezebel with their blatant idolatry, reckless killing, and shameless sexual promiscuity, but we do the same when we reject God's rule over our lives. Even we who claim Jesus as Lord assail His authority when we choose to ignore His commands we don't like. We do it when we fail to trust Him and give generously (Mal. 3:8-10; 2 Cor. 9:7). We do it when we refuse to forgive (Luke 17:3-4). We do it when we gossip (Rom. 1:29). And we do it when we dishonor those God has placed in authority (13:1-2).

1 Kings 17:1

1 And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.

When the divided kingdom languished under the leadership of immoral kings who looked to idol worship and forgot their covenant with God, God commissioned prophets to call His people back to Him. They were a bright light in the darkness. During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, onto the stage entered the brightest light yet. Elijah, whose name means “Yahweh is my God,” appeared with a mission to prove that Yahweh is the one and only God.

The writer of 1 Kings tells us little about Elijah’s background. We learn only that he was from Tishbe of Gilead. Yet Elijah would rise to make such an impact one Bible scholar has called him “the grandest and most romantic character Israel ever produced ... a complex man of the desert who counseled kings.”⁵ In 1 Kings 17, Elijah emerged as the “whistleblower” of his day. Against the prevailing popularity of Baal, he took a minority stance to expose the lies of this false belief system. To oppose Baal worship was politically incorrect. It was an invitation to opposition, but Elijah made it his fight. And as he fought, he made some pretty outrageous claims.

When you make a claim, you need to be able to back it up.

- ▶ Volkswagen® once advertised its diesel cars as “environmentally friendly” when they had actually rigged their vehicles to cheat emissions tests. Their false claim has cost the company billions.⁶
- ▶ Without proof, Lumos Labs claimed their Luminosity® app would help prevent “memory loss, dementia, and even Alzheimer’s disease.” They received a hefty \$2 million fine from the Federal Trade Commission.⁷

- ▶ Dannon® advertised that their Activia® yogurt was “scientifically proven” to help regulate digestion and boost the immune system. When a judge ruled the claim unproven, Dannon had to pay \$21 million.⁸

These are claims that couldn't be backed up by the truth. Sometimes individuals make outrageous claims, but no claim has ever been more outrageous than Elijah's contention that he could stop the rain. If we heard someone make that claim today, we would label him delusional, a crackpot or a scam artist. No human has that kind of power. But Elijah's bold claim was based on His confidence in the God he served.

Elijah had a special relationship with God, and he was able to understand God's will and speak for Him. That's why he could be so bold as to declare it was not going to rain until he said so. His faith in God was such that He knew God alone had the power to give and withhold rain. And he knew God would uphold the glory of His name and prove Himself in a culture of unbelief.

Stopping the rain was an assault on the foundation of Baalism. Baal worshipers believed their god came back to life each spring to bring the rain that sustained their agricultural way of life. Elijah's assertion that only Yahweh controlled the life-giving rain was in essence declaring, “Your idol is a fake, and your religion is based on lies!”

Elijah's example challenges me to ask, “Do I trust God enough to declare what He says without equivocation or apology, knowing He will back up His word?” In a culture where it's politically incorrect to say one religion is better than any other, will I bravely proclaim that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him? (John 14:6). Among skeptics who scoff at miracles, will I openly support the integrity of the Bible? And in a society that believes you shouldn't impose your religious views on others, will I still witness eagerly about what Jesus means to me?

QUESTION 3:

When have you seen someone take a stand against our culture's false beliefs?

1 Kings 17:2-6

2 And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying,

3 Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan.

4 And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there.

5 So he went and did according unto the word of the LORD: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan.

6 And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook.

Have you ever wondered, “If I go out on a limb for God, will He support me there?” God never calls us to do something courageous for Him only to let us fall flat. Throughout Scripture, God proved Himself faithful time and again.

- ▶ When God told Noah to build an ark before the earth had ever seen rain, He brought the promised flood.
- ▶ When God commanded Abraham to offer up Isaac, He provided the sacrificial ram.
- ▶ When Jesus invited Peter to step out of the boat and come to Him, He empowered Peter to walk on water.
- ▶ When God instructed Barnabas to visit Saul, the great persecutor of Christians, God protected Barnabas and forged a partnership to evangelize the world.
- ▶ And when God sent His Son to die for the world, He did not leave Him in the grave.

We sometimes hear the phrase: “set up to fail.” Someone might say, “I was set up to fail” when the boss assigned a task he couldn’t possibly succeed at doing. Perhaps it was hitting an unrealistic sales quota or finishing a difficult task in an unbelievably short amount of time. Another person might say she was set up to fail because her supervisor assigned a job without providing the tools needed to do the work. Maybe you’ve been set up to fail, put in a no-win situation, or left without resources to do your job. God won’t do that to you.

The key is for us to listen to God and do what He says. God will not protect us from our own foolishness when we make unwise decisions based on our own thinking or emotions. But when we seek His will and follow the clear direction of His Word, He will always back us up. After commissioning Elijah to proclaim there would be no rain, God protected and provided for His obedient servant. How did He do that?

1. **God kept His promise.** He withheld the rain. God did what He told Elijah He was going to do.
2. **God cared for Elijah by sending him into hiding.** In the brook Cherith east of Jordan, the prophet was safely out of reach from Ahab and Jezebel.
3. **God cared for Elijah by miraculously sending him food during the drought.** God did not lead Elijah to stop the rain only to let His prophet die of hunger and thirst or assassination. God is faithful to provide. While those around him suffered from the drought, Elijah dined on free delivery every day. God provided drinking water from the brook, and bread and meat brought by ravens twice a day. His situation calls to mind the words of Psalm 23:5, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.”

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways God has sustained you in the past?

On the one hand, God was faithful to provide for Elijah. On the other, Elijah was willing to obey God. There was a direct correlation. God gave Elijah specific instructions about where to go and what to do. “So he went and did according unto the word of the LORD.” In that place of obedience, Elijah found God’s provision. “We cannot rely on his promises, without obeying his commandments.”⁹ This is not a quid pro quo; we do not obey God’s commands only so He will bless us with all we need and protect us from harm. But Scripture makes it clear: When we courageously stand to honor Him as God, He will always prove Himself on our behalf.

QUESTION 5:

How does God’s provision encourage us to exercise courage in serving the Lord?

ENGAGE

Sin is often an authority issue—a failure to trust God’s authority in your life. For each area in the chart below, list a sin that can be the result of ignoring God’s authority.

Area of Life

Finances

Relationships

Work

Leisure

Family

Body

Disobedience

failure to tithe

Prayerfully consider if you are living in disobedience in one of these areas. Ask God for forgiveness and for the courage to obey in the future.

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do to serve God with courage?

- ▶ **Look around.** Approach your week with an eye to identify beliefs and practices around you that conflict with God's authority. Pray, asking God to help you discern false beliefs and practices.
- ▶ **Speak up.** Take a stand against ideas that attack God's authority. Speak up in a discussion or write a letter. Be a voice for God's truth, but do so with grace and love.
- ▶ **Sign up.** Sign up for a mission trip to a place where God is not recognized as the One true God. Represent Christ in a place that does not know Him.

The choice to serve God where serving God is unpopular also may come at a cost. You may face rejection or ridicule. It may cost you advancement in your job or friends in your social circle. But the choice is always worth the price.



END NOTES

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Over-looking Ajloun, Jordan from Mar Elias, which tradition holds to be Tishbe, the home-town of Elijah.

ELIJAH: A MAN OF GOD

By Robert C. Dunston

The Bible refers several times to Elijah as a “man of God” (1 Kings 17:24; 2 Kings 1:9-13) placing him in the company of faithful individuals like Moses (Deut. 33:1), Samuel (1 Sam. 9:6-10), David (2 Chron. 8:14), and Elisha (2 Kings 4:7,22). In Hebrew, Elijah’s name translates either “my God is Yahweh” or “Yahweh is my God.” He lived up to his name by demonstrating exclusive faith in God and seeking to lead Israel and its leaders to follow only God as well.

Elijah came from Tishbe, a village of uncertain location, in the area of Gilead east of the Jordan River. During Elijah’s time Gilead comprised a forested, sparsely settled area of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Since “Tishbite” is so similar to the Hebrew word for “settler,” Elijah’s identification as a Tishbite may describe him more as a settler in Gilead than as an inhabitant of a particular village.¹ The Bible describes Elijah as a hairy man who wore a leather belt around his waist (2 Kings 1:8), suggesting he lived apart from the

society of his day. His ability and willingness to survive off bread and meat ravens brought to him (1 Kings 17:6) and his moving from place to place at the Spirit's direction (18:12) imply he did not live a settled life.

Elijah's ministry occurred during the reigns of Ahab (874–853 BC) and Ahaziah (853–852 BC), both kings of the Northern Kingdom. A good economy had enabled Omri to build a capital city of Samaria. Omri also created a stable government that allowed him to pass his kingship peacefully to Ahab.²

Ahab married Jezebel, a princess from the Phoenician city of Tyre. Ahab and Jezebel's marriage cemented ties between the Northern Kingdom and Phoenicia, provided expanded opportunities for trade, and created an alliance against the expanding power and influence of Damascus. As Solomon had done before him, Ahab allowed Jezebel to worship her gods; he built a temple in Samaria to Baal and set up an Asherah pole (16:31-33). Having freedom of worship and a place to worship

were not enough for Jezebel. She became an evangelist for Baal, actively seeking to lead the Israelites to worship him rather than God, and killed those who opposed her.³

Baal's followers worshiped him as the storm god who brought rains, and thus fertility, to the land and as the one who provided for the agricultural needs. Baal worshipers believed that during the annual dry season, their deity was trapped in the land of the dead unable to return without help. Baal worship involved fertility rites and ritualistic prostitution as the people sought, through sympathetic magic, to coax Baal's sister and lover Anat to go to the underworld and rescue him. Worshipers wrote stories about the deity that suggested Baal "could go on a journey, fall asleep, or even resort to bloody self-mutilation."⁴ Baal prophets sometimes employed mutilation in an effort to get his attention (18:27-28).

Elijah's ministry focused on combating belief in Baal and trying to bring Israel back to

exclusive faith in God. In Elijah's initial confrontation with Ahab, Elijah prophesied God would withhold rain and dew for the next several years. God intended the extended drought to underscore Baal's inability to free himself from death and provide for people's needs and to demonstrate God's living reality and power (17:1). While Ahab blamed the drought on Elijah, Elijah explained the drought as God's punishment for Ahab and Jezebel leading the Israelites to worship Baal (18:17-18).

The climactic showdown occurred on Mount Carmel, when Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah to see whether Baal or God could provide fire to consume a sacrifice. "As [the] storm god Baal was thought to be responsible for lightning as well as rain, so this should [have been] an easy contest."⁵ The prophets of Baal, however, received no response to their shouts and activities (vv. 19-29). After repairing the altar and having the people drench the sacrifice

and altar three times with water, Elijah prayed, asking God to demonstrate His existence and power so the people would know Him. Elijah was not content to have the people simply abandon their Baal worship. He wanted them to embrace God exclusively and enter into a covenant relationship with Him. When God sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice, wood, altar, and water, the people professed their loyalty to Him. Their loyalty, however, was short-lived (vv. 30-39).

Elijah's final conflict with Baal worship involved King Ahaziah, Ahab's son. After injuring himself, Ahaziah sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, a Philistine god, regarding whether or not he would recover. Elijah intercepted the messengers and told them Ahaziah's consulting a foreign god rather than the Lord had doomed him (2 Kings 1:1-6).

Elijah demanded justice when Jezebel engineered Naboth's death so Ahab could seize his vineyard. Elijah confronted Ahab and pronounced God's judgment on him and Jezebel (1 Kings 21).

Elijah's conflict with Ahab and Jezebel continuously placed him in danger. Throughout the prophet's ministry God protected and cared for him and those close to him. God miraculously provided Elijah with food as the drought began (17:6) and when he fled from Jezebel (19:5-8). When Ahab sought to kill Elijah, God hid him (18:10). Later two groups of soldiers Ahaziah sent to capture him were consumed (2 Kings 1:9-16).

During the lengthy drought God instructed Elijah to go to Zarephath, near the Phoenician city of Sidon in the heart of Baal worshiper territory, and stay with a widow there. The widow was preparing to cook the last of her food, but Elijah requested she make him a small loaf of bread. Miraculously, her flour jar and oil jug continuously provided flour and oil for Elijah, the widow, and her son until the drought ended. When the widow's son became ill and died, Elijah prayed and God restored the son to life (1 Kings 17:8-24).

Even a "man of God" can experience despair. When the

widow's son died, Elijah cried out to God wondering why He had brought tragedy on the woman after she had shown such kindness to him (vv. 20-21). After God's victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah fled in terror from Jezebel's wrath, complaining to God that he was the only faithful person left and asking to die (19:3-8). In both cases, God cared for Elijah and responded to his prayers by raising the widow's son (17:22-23) and by providing food, His presence, and new tasks (19:15-18).

When Elijah completed his ministry, God brought His prophet home not through death, but through a miraculous transition that Elijah's successor Elisha witnessed (2 Kings 2:11-12). Elijah left behind an enduring example of what a man of God can accomplish.

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3. *Ibid.*, 211.
4. *Ibid.*, 220.
5. *Ibid.*, 219.

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