

K-539 the Spirit of Elijah (2 of 2)

by Art Katz

Art Katz's sermon explores the profound implications of Elijah's life and ministry, emphasizing the necessity of preparation, obedience, and the radical call of God on His prophets.

Duration: 31:52

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:1-18, James 5:17

Topics: "Endtimes"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the weighty responsibility of preaching the word of God. He compares it to making a pronouncement before a feared and powerful ruler. The preacher highlights the need for fearlessness, confidence, and a willingness to bring judgment through the word. He also mentions the importance of respecting the statements of biblical figures like Elijah, even though God keeps the details of their experiences discreet. The sermon concludes with a reference to Theodore Dreiser, an American novelist who became a communist, and his statement that his political beliefs were the logical outcome of his life.

Transcript

God has a severe stricture for novices that are invited to responsibility before their time. It's a formula for their disaster. And I see this in my observance of our American Christianity.

Young people, youth with a mission, you know, I understand what it's getting on. It's done a lot of good, but I'm just taking the phrase. Is youth even qualified for a mission? I know they need something to do.

But there's got to be a history with God. There's got to be a preparatory time. Jesus himself had to wait for his 30th year.

The priests never could perform their priestly function until that year. And then only for 20 years thereafter, and then they were finished. Their whole lifetime was a preparation for one short span of years.

So, we're getting at the answer to this question. What gave Elijah the absolute confidence that the word that came, that has every appearance of being the enemy's device, was in fact God's word, that he rendered an immediate obedience without even having to question it? Such a discernment could not have been performed by a novice. And how many of us here who are not even novices, who have something of a history of God, would have been as instant in our obedience and our assurance that that is God's word?

How many of us have that assurance now? How many of us had to wrestle even over the word of whether to come here, whether it's God or not, like this fellow? Because we're not that experienced and skilled in hearing.

And if you've missed previous whispers and intimations of God and calls to obedience, would you hear ultimate ones? Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, this is why an Elijah does not come in a day. This is why this is a prized fruit of God, with much investment of God, to bring such a one who was flesh and blood like as we, a man of, what does it say? Like passions. Like passions as we.

He had no more qualification than us. God just like us. Palpitated, he sweated, and other kinds of bodily expression, and the same doubts and struggles, a son of man, but brought to a place where he could hear the most uncanny statement that violates every category of religious and spiritual understanding that is authentic about God, and yet recognize it to be God, and instantly to do it.

I'm saying something that is even beyond the word, that has no precedence in the word, and even flies in the face of the word. It's contrary to the word. The word describes the raven and such animals as beasts of prey, that eat rotting carrion.

It's an unclean bird. Every Jew would know that, and yet that's the very thing God selected to feed the prophet. And why? Why couldn't God as equally have provided a bird to come both morning and evening and feed the prophet that was a kosher bird, approved by rabbis, and having to the biblical standard? Is there anything too difficult for the word? You know, flown in from Brooklyn.

Not only did God just happen on ravens, it was his express and explicit choosing to finger this very thing, that the last subtle tyranny of self that will find itself in opposition to God is the thing that we have obtained from God. Even the thing that is correct in God can be employed against God when it has become something religious or even something spiritual as a value in itself, even beyond God. So this test, that final, last, ultimate membrane, that ethereal, fine thing, that whew, I don't have a word for it.

And until God has got that, he has not got the man. And isn't that where many of us are? We have a history, and we've been brought a long way from obedience to obedience, that the last thing that would never have appeared to us as being even a potential for opposition to God is the very thing that is religious or spiritual, and that we have celebrated. And it's a correct thing in itself.

It only becomes incorrect when it stands as a barrier between a final, last, ultimate and total obedience to God, even his own word. And I'm saying that the only one who can pass that threshold is not someone who's indifferent or casual about the word of God, but ironically, the man who is most insistent upon it. We're on that ground again, that strange ground, that last tissue that, if you get through that, God has you in total, all in all.

Isn't that an irony? That except we've come through into the place of Elijah, we're still in that place that our greatest virtues and understanding could, in the end, ironically, make us opposed to God, and even to the point of murdering or rejecting, which is one and the same. So that's... to bring us all the way through to the Elijah ground, where we can discern the requirement of God that seems even to contradict God, and not in the moment hesitate in our obedience to fulfill it. Because God is God.

And we know him so well in that way that we can say, as my God lives before whom I stand. You know, there are certain words that... I'm trying to find a word now. I'm at a loss for words.

I knew it would happen to me someday. Where a phrase bespeaks things that lie too deep for words. And this is the beauty of Scripture itself, that one statement out of a man's mouth gives such an awareness of a history with God, of what it takes to make that statement, and make that statement to stand as a truth that even an Ahab would tremble at the hearing of it.

It's not a cliché coming out of Elijah's mouth. It resonates with power, with authority. It's the word of truth.

It's the statement of the logic of his entire life in God. Theodore Dreiser, an American novelist, became a communist in the latter years of his life. He was always a writer of American novels about the working class.

And someone said, How is it you became a communist? He said, It's the logic of my life. And I'm not happy that it was, but I can understand it. Like another man being asked, How long did it take you to write that speech? A lifetime.

How long did it take Abraham Lincoln to compose the Gettysburg Address? Well, he did it on the back of an envelope on his way up by train to Gettysburg. But it was the summation of an entire life. And so also these statements of Elijah.

We need so deeply to respect them. And God is so discreet, he draws the shade. You're not allowed to peer in.

You're not allowed to press in with your vulgar curiosity to find out how it was done. You can believe it was done with suffering and anguish and streaks and cries in the night. And where is God and the dark night of, what do you call it? Dark night of the soul.

Of the soul. That a man can be brought forth at a point of time, historically, to stand before the most dread enemies of God and make those statements. And not only make them, but to invoke a judgment upon the nation by his own word.

And in fact, the text would give an indication that Elijah's origins, genealogically and religiously, are not impressive. He came from Gilead. And it's not even a Jewish neighborhood.

It's a mixed bag neighborhood. This is the section where the tribes that refused to cross over, Gad and Manasseh, stayed on the wilderness side. He's descended from those people who never crossed over.

And is that an accident? Why wouldn't you think that the most eminent prophet for the most corrupt age would necessarily have to be born in Jerusalem? Or Bethlehem, or some distinguished place in Israel. No, he comes from no man's land. He comes from a Gentile area.

Wouldn't it be remarkable if we find out that he's not even Jewish at all? Like Abraham? Abraham? From Gilead. And you know what I think? Something like Jesus himself in his Melchizedek formation, without father or mother, or beginning or end of days, without genealogy, but abides, being in the form of the Son of God, abides a priest forever. I think it's not an accident that Elijah's ancestry of genealogy is not distinguished.

In fact, it's suspect. It comes from a place that's not even Jewish. And so it puts even the greater premium that what was formative in his life is exclusively God, and that he himself is without father or mother, or beginning or ending of days, but being in the form of the Son of Man, abides a priest forever.

He cannot be influenced by maternal things, by family tradition, by religious origins. He is solely, exclusively, totally God's. He's above culture.

He's above tradition. He's above values, above history, above time. He's in that realm with God, and the realm to which we ourselves are called, and to which Abraham was called.

Get thee out of nation, kindred, and father's house is not just an accidental aspect of the call, it's at the heart of it. Because those are the places where we are compromised. Not because those places are necessarily evil, but there's something about the flesh, and about father's house, and about kindred, and family, and values, and country, and so on, that keep you from an Elijah obedience.

And how many of us would be ruthless about those things? That though we have fathers and mothers, that we have nation, kindred, and father's house, as far as we are concerned, a total, radical severance, that we might be unto the Lord, his men, and when he speaks, we move. That's the call we have. And the ironic thing is, however precious our forebears and their influence, there's a kind of a tie that connects us that needs to be cut of a cervical kind to release us for the Elijah ministry.

It's one thing to shuck off a lousy father and background and a bad past, but how about if it's good? There's more danger for spiritual compromise than in the casting away of that which had no influence. And not incidentally, I grew up without a father. I don't know what significance that is in my own personal identification with the Elijah call, but I have only two recollections of my father.

The last was at the age of nine, and both of them are unhappy remembrances. I had no formative influence of a father at all. And is that just the way it worked out or part of God's elaborate design of the bringing forth of a man to him who is to be without father, mother, beginning... And the mother that I do have, God bless her, precious, but what a struggle to disengage and not to condescend to that powerful Jewish maternal thing that wants so much to influence sons, even to dominate them.

And I've had to be a disappointment again and again and again in obedience to God. And the moment that the Lord revealed Himself to me aboard the deck of that ship in the first reading of the Gospel of John, my first thought was, what's my mother going to think of this? And exactly what I thought came true. And I always remember coming back to Brooklyn, where she then lived, and my mother slamming the door in my face and crying out to everyone in the apartment building, He's gone mad! He's gone mad! He's gone mad! My mother has been torn by what's happened to her son and what has been the consequence for her in my fidelity to a God and to a name that she has learned all her life to hate and to despise as being inimical to anything Jewish.

My mother's 88 years old and remembers when she was thrown into the swimming pool by her Gentile teacher in London who called her a fat Jew and had her to sink or to swim. She still remembers. And I've embraced that woman's, quote, religion.

You know what I mean? And can you explain that to Jewish mothers? There really is, if we're going to be a people who will arise and go and do according to the will of the Lord, a need for the most radical separation, not of the things that are questionable or evil, but even the things that are not only good, but the most culturally celebrated as being the best good. The very things that God is now fingering, even our understanding of God, if it'll stand in any way as an impediment to the total absoluteness to which the Elijah man is called. And I'm answering my own question.

How is it that there was in the moment's hesitation, that we didn't have to fight the battle? Is it God? Is it the devil? Is it my flesh? He knew that he knew that he knew, because he was in that quality of relationship without father, without mother, without the genealogy of beginning or ending of days, he was the Lord's. This is not an issue of acoustics. It's an issue of relationship and who is in that place.

Who of us even now could hear the word of God calling us to a radical obedience contrary to all our categories, and a license to it? That's what we're moving toward, and that's what God is wanting. And it implies radical, ruthless, stripping, purging, what do you call it when you nip the... pruning, violent pruning. Is there anything uglier than that which is pruned, when only the stump remains? But out of that stump comes a shoot.

That will one day be a tree with its boughs that arch over the walls and whose fruit will fill the earth. For those will allow themselves to be cut and pruned right to the stump in the ugliest way that such pruning requires. And if Elijah did not go through that, I would be a very surprised man.

Only a man who could do that separated unto God can bring the word of judgment to Israel. You know this statement, we're going to have another committee on this statement, it shall not rain nor dew but according to my word. And just to ponder that.

How would you like to be the bearer of a word that initiates the judgment? What is it going to mean for Israel that it's not going to rain nor even dew for three and a half years? Because there was a nation that did not live by the Nile River. There was not an annual overflow that explains the economy of Israel as was true for Egypt and for the Euphrates and Tigris River civilizations. They were the cradle of civilization because of their rivers.

Israel's topography and physical condition is other than all the others in the Middle East. Early rain, latter rain. And in between the rains, the heavy dew that watered the grounds when there was no rain.

That's why the phrase, it shall not rain nor dew is extraordinarily important and shows the total severity of that judgment. There'll be no food saints and that means not only the end of picnics but the end of life even for children and infants. And it comes with your word.

And is Elijah some kind of unfeeling robot who's some mechanical contrivance that God has programmed to speak that word? He's a man of flesh and blood and like passions as we. Doesn't he have relatives in Tel Aviv? Aren't they going to suffer the consequence if he himself suffers the consequence and watches the river drying up? What is it going to mean to children? Do they know what it means to live without water? Do they know what it means to hear the bellowing of animals that are crazed by thirst? I think I can more quickly hear the crying of children than I can hear dumb brutes and animals. There's something about a responsibility to creatures that more quickly grieves me and strikes my conscience than children.

To hear an animal crazed because of the neglect that we ought to be administering and our responsibility to be stewards of the creation and not be able. I think that would drive me up the wall. It would be unbearable.

Remember how Israel had in the wilderness when they had to listen to the bellowings of the animals and where is God and where is the water? Two and a half million people with their livestock. Well, here's an entire nation. It shall not rain no dew but according to my word.

What a pronouncement. It's saying death to the nation. My nation, my people and its children.

And I don't think a man can say that except he's in the place of God that we're talking about. And it's not an accident that the very first statement that came to Samuel that initiated his entire prophetic life that the word of the Lord came again to Israel and God raised up a prophet was the word of judgment against Eli. The toughest word to bring is the word of judgment.

And I don't think anything less than a radically separated man can bring it. And maybe that's what's got to do with father and mother. We're still attenuated to sentiment.

Even good sentiment and reasonable sentiment. We're not talking about schmaltz. We're talking about mother and father and children, your people, your nations.

You'll not be in the place of the utterness toward God that can perform that obedience. And if Elijah did not say it, would it have come? I know God could do it in many ways. But there are ways in which God restricts himself to the obedience of his saints.

Even their prayers. How much more this? It shall not rain, nor dew, but according to my word. Maybe the Lord has all his eggs in one basket.

And if he can't do it through this man, whom he has been rearing up and training and bringing through the school of prophetic discipline, what else then can be hoped for or expected? It's like the ultimacy of the last days prophetic Elijah people. If they're not going to make it, as I say to the church, if you're not going to be the people to whom the word of the Lord comes to Israel, through whom then shall it come? Are we to hope for another people elsewhere that are made of better stuff than you? This is it. The fat's in the fire.

We're it. We're appointed. We're elect.

It's got to come. There's not going to be any alternative because Elijah was a man of like passions as we, flesh and blood like as we, and if it cannot be performed through him, then what can we hope for or expect? It's remarkable, the responsibility. And you're not just making an abstract pronouncement to the air.

You're making it before the most dread despot of all ages, worse than all of the kings that preceded him, who cut down his opponents as quickly as looking at them, and before him you make this pronouncement. There's got to be a fearlessness for your own fate. There's got to be a confidence that it's God's own word.

There's got to be a willingness to bring that judgment by your word, no matter how fierce. Can you do that? I've seen grown men cry. I've watched heroes collapse when it comes to requirements of this kind, like going through that line when we came into the army and we had to be inoculated, and guys were set up with their needles six inches long and with PFCs and privates who had never done it before, and some of the needles were bent, and you got jabbed in both arms as you went through a trough.

You felt like a pincushion. And I watched men go into a dead faint before me and after me, who had virtually medals and ribbons on their chests from combat, but to look at a needle being administered by some amateur that was already bent, going, clunk. You know, Shakespeare said, conscience doth make cowards of us all.

Or consciousness, certain ultimate requirement, makes us cop out. But we cannot fail at this place of speaking the word of judgment. And it has a connection with the ability to be ordered by the Lord even when our own categories are violated.

It's an utterness toward God. Can you see it? And it's got to come through those who are of like passions, men of flesh and blood, and that's what glorifies God. That He can take beggars off of the dung heaps and make them to sit with princes is to the eternal praise of His glory.

Yes, He could speak it Himself, but there's not as much glory in His speaking it Himself as it would be to come from a man of like passions. That's what glorifies Him, for such a man is His handiwork. And especially such a man coming from a mixed bag area in Gilead, and to have Him to present the ultimate word of God before the ultimate dread of authority is an ultimate glory to God.

And it's a picture of last days. Let me read a little concluding piece here by A.W. Pink that sums up a lot of things we're talking about, about a man subject to like passions as we. Yes, he was, but a man, nevertheless, he trembled not in the presence of a monarch.

Though a man, yet he had power to close heaven's windows and dry up earth's streams. But the question returns upon us, how are we to account for the full assurance with which he foretold the protracted drought? His confidence that all would be according to His word. How was it that one so weak in himself became mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds? We suggest a threefold reason as to the secret of Elijah's strength.

First, his praying. Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth but in the space of three years and six months. Let it be duly noted that the prophet did not begin his fervent supplications after his appearance before Ahab, but months before.

Herein lies the explanation of his assurance and boldness before the king. Prayer in private was the source of his power in public. He could stand unabashed in the presence of the wicked monarch because he had melt in humility before God.

But let it also be carefully observed that the prophet had prayed earnestly. No formal and spiritless devotion that accomplished nothing was his but wholehearted, fervent, and effectual prayer. Second, his knowledge of God.

This is clearly intimated in his words to Ahab as the Lord God of Israel lives. Jehovah was to him a living reality. On all sides the open recognition of God had ceased.

So far as outward appearances went, there was not a soul in Israel who believed in his existence, but Elijah was not swayed by public opinion and practice. I know that my Redeemer liveth. The infidelity and atheism of others cannot shake the faith of one who has apprehended God for himself.

It is this which explains Elijah's courage. He who really knows God is strong does not fear men. Third, his consciousness of the divine presence as the Lord God of Israel lives before whom I stand.

Elijah was not only assured of the reality of Jehovah's existence, but he was conscious of being in his presence. Though appearing before the person of Ahab, the prophet knew he was in the presence of one infinitely greater than the earthly monarch. O my reader, such a blessed assurance is this.

This sets above all fear. If the Almighty was with him, why should the prophet tremble before a worm of the earth? The Lord God of Israel lives before whom I stand clearly reveals the foundation on which his soul rested as he executed his unpleasant task. And I just thought that appearing before the person of Ahab,

the prophet knew he was in the presence of one infinitely greater.

He stood before something visible, but his confidence was in knowledge of one who is invisible. And this is the nub of the whole mystery of the principalities and the powers of the air, which I hope we'll be able to turn to somewhere before our time runs out. But the wisdom that God is waiting for, to stand before the things visible with an authority of boldness and audacity and obedience because of the knowledge of a God who is invisible, but yet so real and so true as to eclipse the things visible, that the realm of the things invisible are the true determinants of godly living in absoluteness and obedience even unto death, is the wisdom of God contrary to the world's wisdom that where everything is reckoned and affected by things visible, to act and live and have your being in an obedience to an invisible God in the face of the most visible authority that has the power to slay you and yet be obedient to the invisible God is the supreme wisdom of God.

And that's the place to which we're called. And that's why this issue of the things eternal, the things invisible God, his purposes is so supreme and why it requires such an extraordinary investment of God to break the powers of the things invisible, the things seen, that have such a seeming weight and opulence and authority, cities and skyscrapers and universities, their programs, their towers, their buildings, their prestige, against an invisible God before whom you stand. So let's bow before that and invite whatever it takes to bring us to that place because we're called to that place.

That's it folks, that's the last day's calling, the Elijah Band. That prophetic presence that will perform last day's obedience in utterness toward God without trembling. Hallelujah.

So Lord, you're not speaking to us to scare us. You're speaking to us to inspire us. You know what is inspiring, Lord? That Elijah was not some kind of supreme macho being.

He wasn't the epitome of the Israeli type who had all of these distinguished credentials. It's exactly the opposite. His origins are suspect.

They're not at all conspicuous. You've taken the rudest, most ordinary element and you've made of him the supremest prophet. What a picture for us and of us.

So thank you that this is your Shabbat message to us. Call to encourage us because the one who had gone before us who is our type and model was a man of like passions as we, flesh and blood. But he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not.

Lord, bring us to that place as you brought him. The testimony of Elijah is the testimony of God.

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