

I Kings 16:29-17:7; James 5:13-18; Elijah's Appearance I. The Context of this Trial II. The Extent of this Trial III. The Purpose of this Trial

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, have you ever wondered why difficult and trying times come upon both the just and the unjust? Why do we suffer calamity right along with those who reject and rebel against God? Shouldn't we be immune- or spared from a similar hardship? Well, this morning we are beginning a series through the life of Elijah and Elisha in First and Second Kings. We consider this theme: Jesus Christ challenges the idolatrous king by withholding water at the word of Elijah. The appearance of Elijah marks the beginning of the conflict by which the true God will be revealed. As we embark on our series, starting with Elijah, we remember Elijah's place in Redemptive History. Elijah is a shadow of John the Baptist as foretold in Malachi 4 and fulfilled in Mt. 11. From their dress, to the location of their work and even the message that they bring, we are to see their similarities. As John would do- Elijah was sent to turn the hearts of the people back to the God of their fathers- so that they might repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand. What Elijah would do hundreds of years in advance- John would do months before the promised King would come. The name Elijah means- the LORD my God; and Tishbite means- the One who Converts. So his name means, the LORD my God who converts. So how will the LORD convert the rebellious nation of Israel?

I. The Context of this Trial

In our first point, we consider the context of this trial and how it builds to a point of conflict. The conflict really shows how the Israelites are plunging headlong into idolatry- lead by their increasingly wicked king and queen. So we start by being introduced to Ahab in 16:29. Now Ahab, as the King of the Northern Tribes, ruled in Samaria. He receives a significant attention in the book of I Kings- as his life and Elijah's run parallel. As King of the Northern tribes, he ruled 22 years and is one of the 19 kings to rule the separated people- those who left Judah and the Judean King in favor of their own monarchy. But not only have they separated themselves from the Davidic line, they have also solidified their

rebellion in the religious sphere as well. Jeroboam made sure of this- not wanting his subjects to go down to Jerusalem to worship, he set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan. Thus, the people need not- and dare not- go to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship. But Ahab is making things worse- not only in encouraging worship in the wrong location- apart from the temple. Ahab thinks this sin of Jeroboam is a light thing- insignificant as 16:31 puts it. He adds to this sin by dramatically increasing the idolatry in the land. He marries Jezebel- the daughter of a pagan priest of Baal- and he makes Baal worship standard in land. Worshipping Baal and Ashtoreth- false gods- and setting up an alter and house of worship to Baal in Samaria- a house to rival the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. He did more to provoke the LORD than all before him as v. 33 puts it. Encouraging not only a false manner and practice of worship- but even the worship of another god all together. Breaking not only the 2nd and 3rd commandment, but the first as well! It is instructive to remember that Baal and Asherah were Canaanite gods- the gods of the nations around them. They were worshipped as a pair- like a mother and father of sorts that were supposed to provide sunshine and rain- ensuring fertility and plentiful harvest. Baal was said to ride on the clouds- being the god of thunder and rain. So you can see why any disruption of the flow and cycle of rain would be cause for concern of Baal's prophets. And to set the context for us, at the end of chapter 16 we find a little snapshot of what civilization was like during the reign of Ahab. There was a man named Heil of Bethel who decided to rebuild the city of Jericho. The very same city whose walls came tumbling down all on their own- the city over whom Joshua had pronounced a curse- whoever rebuilds this city will pay for it with the death of their firstborn and youngest son- as spoken in Joshua 6. It was not that this curse was forgotten- but Heil simply did not care or disregarded the curse and he paid the cost. With Ahab's blessing, he chose to rebuild- it was more important to him to have a city to honor his name than the life of his own children. Such are the kind of resident living in the land during this time. Even though they are under the curse of God- they still flaunt their sins! So the Israelites look more like the nations- filled with idolatry and pagan in every way.

II. The Extent of this Trial

As we come to chapter 17, we find it opening with a direct attack. It was like the shot heard round the world- the starting of a long battle finds its source here. Although Ahab did not seek or ask for the word of the LORD- the LORD was going to speak! Like a lightning strike out of the blue sky. As the LORD lives- there shall be no water in the land. There is a God in Israel- and Baal and Asherah are but fake, false and impotent deceptions! And the extent of this trial- the scope of this drought would be severe and lasting. No rain and no dew- for years to come. No source of water from the sky shall be had for an extended period of time. Remember that in this area, dew could be quite heavy as Gideon and his fleece proved. But no rain- no dew- no water at all for these years to come except at my word- as v. 1 concludes. It is the LORD that gives rain- and the LORD can take away and withhold as well. We think of a drought as insufficient rain- but this was no rain for years! But there was an added trial given- it was bad enough that there would be no rain! But in v. 2 the LORD says to Elijah- go and hide yourself. There would be not only a drought from rain- there would be a drought from God's Word! If rain would only come by the word of the messenger- and if that messenger was hidden- when would the word be received and rain be given? Elijah was to hide- to conceal himself- so that he could not be found until God's judgement would be poured out and the storm spent. Now we have to remember that Elijah was a prophet- but he was still a man like you and I. And he was also a man of faith and prayer as James 5 reveals. He was a man of faith because when the LORD told him that it would not rain- and that he should go and confront the king- he obeys and goes. He will go where the LORD sends him and say what the LORD utters. But he is also a man of prayer- as we read in James 5:17- Elijah prayed fervently and it did not rain for 3 and ½ years. Did you catch that? Although the LORD told him- it will not rain for years- yet in the desert Elijah prayed- and it did not rain! The prayer of the righteous is powerful- but note that he prayed for what had been promised! So the LORD answers the prayer of Elijah- and it does not rain for 3 years as the LORD had foretold. But now, without rain the brook dries up as well in v. 7.

So Elijah will share in the suffering of his people- he too will face the hardship brought upon the land by their sin! Elijah enters into the suffering of His people- through no fault of his own. Elijah was a righteous man- but the consequences of living in a fallen land in the midst of a wicked people was felt by him as well. Can you think of anyone else who suffered for sin- although having no fault of His own? Someone who cried out on the cross- I thirst- even though He was free from sin and evil and only always obeyed His Father's will? As we will see next week as well, the obedient prophet, Elijah, has to search for food and water. The name of this brook- Cherith- means to cut. Perhaps it was a ravine cut into the stone. But now, the water is cut off- dried up- and Elijah experiences the need of lack for water as well. The LORD who dried up the Red Sea and the Jordan so that the Israelites might pass- now dries up the brook which fed his child. We could put it this way- the prophet Elijah prayed for the drought so that the drought would awaken Israel to her sin. Let me ask you this- if you know that the tanking of the stock market and the following financial chaos would cause the people of our nation to repent- would you pray for that? Would you pray for severe hardship and financial trial to fall on your home nation- with the hope that this trial would awaken sleeping sinner? Well, that is exactly what Elijah does!

III. The Purpose of this Trial

So the LORD sends Ahab a word of warning and woe- while sending Elijah a word of comfort and deliverance for a time- but soon that water runs out. So both Ahab and Elijah face the consequences of a the drought. When we consider the purpose this trial, the reason why this drought had come, we find a two-fold purpose. One of the reasons applied to Elijah- the other reason to the people of Israel. First of all, what was the purpose of this trial for Elijah? Why did he also need to hunger and thirst in the wilderness? Well, Elijah's faith needed to be tested. He had to be disciplined and tried as a father disciplines his child. Would the LORD still provide- even in the wilderness- even after the streams have run dry. It is true that our faith is the most tested when we walk through the fire and the water- so that the tested genuineness of our faith may be found to result in the praise and glory at the revelation of

Jesus Christ; I Peter 1 puts it. Trials put seriousness into our prayers. Think also of Jesus- who was in a similar situation in Mt. 4. After fasting 40 days, without food and water in the wilderness, Satan came tempting. Would Jesus remain faithful- would He remain an obedient man of prayer- even when He suffered want? Yes, Jesus would, because the food for Jesus was to do the will of His Father in heaven!

But not only was the purpose of this trial meant to chasten His servant, it was also a rebuke of Israel's sin! Judgement had come upon them because of their sins. They had followed their king into idolatry- and now they were tasting the covenantal judgement and condemnation! Back in Lev. 26 the Lord said, if you serve me and obey my command, I will give you your rain in due season and you will have peace. But if you rebel against me and serve the gods of the nations, I will send calamity, wasting and want! God was keeping His word- but more than that- God was calling to the straying sheep. Remember that Elijah was sent to turn the hearts of the people- to confront them in their sins- so that they might repent and flee to the one true God! There is an element of grace here. God does not leave them in their sin, rebellion and even ignorance. He sends His servant to expose their sins- and as we will see in a few weeks- to call the nation back so that they serve the one, true God again! We find this theme again and again in Scripture- God sends a message of rebuke but also a call to repentance and faith! The way is open- there is a path that leads back to blessings and life! And we know that this path has been hewn out of the rock by Jesus Christ- making a way in the wilderness- turning the desert to a garden- places of weeping into places of joy! Any good news spoken to man in his sin is good news secured by Jesus Christ- so the ministry of Elijah will be just that- a rebuke of man's idolatry to teach us that idols cannot save! Life and abundance come to us from the Father through Jesus alone! It is not just a question of who provides us our food and water- but where do we find true food and true drink? The Father provides us with these lesser things- so that we might also look to Him for the greater gifts. As Jesus said in Mt. 4, man does not live on bread alone. Yes, we need bread, but we also need God's Word! We need Jesus- the Word that proceeds from the Mouth of the Lord! Jesus could have turned the rocks into

bread as He was tempted in the wilderness- when He was hungry and thirsty- but He submitted and reminded us to look to God for these greater gifts! And as we celebrate Baptism this morning, we ask ourselves- what do we truly want for our children? What blessings from God would we ask for them to receive? Not just daily bread and water- but that they would be given true food and true drink- even Jesus Himself! That our little ones would remember- you do not belong to this world! As Israel needs to be reminded- you are God's people- God's child! So serve and love Him- and He will provide! That the Holy Spirit would be sent into their hearts to become a fountain of living water that will never run dry!

To conclude, the arrival and appearance of Elijah on Ahab's stage was a challenge. The LORD was declaring to Ahab and to all of Israel- who is the true God? Baal or Yahweh? Choose this day whom you will serve- you cannot have Baal and the LORD be your Divine! In this, Jesus is exposing the impotence of the false gods. Only the true God can give and take away. Jesus Christ challenges the idolatrous king by withholding water at the word of Elijah. So may we learn to look to the only true God as our source of blessing and life- not trusting the idols of this age for our health, security and blessing. The gods of the nations are nothing- only the one true God can provide and save! In Him alone is true, living water which gives life for today and tomorrow!