

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Kings, Lecture 13

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Elijah and Redemptive History Preaching

Review: Exemplaristic and Redemptive Historical Preaching

In our last week we discussed, in a rather theoretical way, the question of preaching on historical narratives of the Old Testament. But you might say that what we discussed would apply to preaching on historical narratives generally, Old or New Testament. How do you treat historical narratives in the Bible in homiletics? As you recall, we discussed two methods, primarily dismissing the allegorical approach. We discussed then the exemplaristic or illustrative approach versus the redemptive historical approach. I don't think those two approaches are mutually exclusive. That is, certainly I think it's legitimate to find illustrations and examples in the lives of Old Testament believers for our own lives. However, if that's all we do, I don't think we've done justice to the historical narratives of the Old Testament because the history of the Bible, whether Old or New Testament for that matter, is basically about redemption. The reason the history is there is that it tells us what God was doing in history to bring about revelation and redemption. It seems to me, then, that if we're going to say what is God saying to us in these historical narratives, we have to keep that perspective in view when we try to understand what the significance of these narratives are.

Elijah via the Redemptive Historical Approach

Now, I mentioned last week, what I wanted to do this week was try to illustrate a method of approach to some of these narratives on Elijah that would highlight the redemptive historical significance. I meant to bring a book. It's on your bibliography if you still have that bibliography, I handed out the beginning of the course. If you look on page three of that bibliography there's a section there entitled "Homiletic Use of Old Testament Narrative Texts." There are two entries there by Sydney Greidanus. The first

one I asked you to read, and that was chapter nine of his book, *Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, in the chapter on preaching Hebrew narrative. I think if you read that you'd see something of this significance. There's some things in that book and in that chapter that I wouldn't agree with but I think on this idea on historical perspective, and preaching on historical narrative, you'll find some helpful material there. The second entry in *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Text*. It is in essence his dissertation that was written at the Free University of Amsterdam about twenty years ago, something like that. There he discusses that the debate that I mentioned last week in Holland over these two types of preaching, exemplaristic versus redemptive historical, and he goes back and he analyzes a rather intense debate with a lot of articles on polemics going back and forth over these methods. And that volume is in our library. The next two are just articles, one by Carl Trueman and the other by C. Trimp that address the same issues and advocate a redemptive historical approach.

The last entry there is this book called *My God is Yahweh* written by M. B. Van't Veer, who is also a Dutchman, who represents the redemptive historical side of that debate some years ago in Holland. This book is really a discussion of the Elijah narrative in Kings, as you notice the subtitle on this says, "Elijah and Ahab in the Age of Apostasy." I think this is quite a useful volume. Again, you can't agree with everything he says. And he goes into great elaboration in bringing out some of his ideas of how redemptive historical perspective is found in these texts. I don't think this is in our library. It's translated in English and published by a Canadian publisher called Isaiah Press. I think it's probably available through the store in Great Christian Books; that's where I got this if you're interested in looking at that volume. What I want to do tonight is sort of draw on some of the ideas of Van't Veer in his treatment of some of these Elijah narratives just to give you an idea of the approach.

D. The Dynasty of Omri

1. Omri
2. Ahab

... d. The Work of Elijah and Elisha

1. Elijah's First Appearance – 1 Kings 1-6

If you go back to our outlines, we'll pick up where we left off there last week. We're at the top of page two "d" is: "The Dynasty of Omri." And I discussed "1" "Omri" and the sub-points there. "2" is "Ahab," and I think I discussed there his person, his life, and the menace of Baal worship. That brings us down to "d," "The Work of Elijah and Elisha." And "1" there is: "Elijah's First Appearance, 1 Kings 17: 1-6." So picking up at that point, let's look at this material from a redemptive historical perspective assuming that you're trying to use this material to develop a sermon. We'll do this first with just the first verse of 1 Kings 17 where you read, "Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbi of Gilead said to Ahab, 'As the Lord the God of Israel lives whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain for the next few years except at my word.'" Now in Van't Veer's discussion of that text he uses the theme, "God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant." In other words, in Van't Veer's view this text is basically saying that to us. When you see in 1 Kings 17:1 that Elijah confronts Ahab and says, "As the Lord God of Israel lives whom I serve there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word," God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant.

The thing that Van't Veer notes is the time of Ahab and Jezebel is also the time of Elijah. You see the end of verse 16 has told us about Ahab and how wicked his reign was, and then all of a sudden when you get to 17:1, Elijah appears from almost out of nowhere, and he's there and he's confronting Ahab. So the time of Ahab is also the time of Elijah. Van't Veer suggests that in these two figures, Ahab and Elijah, you have embodied an antithesis. You're familiar with that word antithesis. And it is the antithesis that exists in the many representations throughout biblical history. You find it really as the antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Look at it in its most fundamental form, the antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. It's the antithesis between truth and error, between belief and unbelief. You go back to Genesis 3, and it's between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.

When we come into our time, it's the antithesis between the church and the world. But it's that same battle that's going on between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. So in these figures you have that antithesis, and the line is sharply drawn. There's going to be a confrontation and a battle.

Significance of Ahab

So the preceding chapter where Ahab is depicted gives a dark picture. But now there's a new element in the picture because there's Elijah in the picture. There's space given to the description of this particular time in the kingdom period of Israel's history. What I mean by space is the amount of material that's devoted to this particular time. I think it emphasizes that this antithesis is significant in the history of redemption because the time of Ahab and the house of Ahab is a comparatively short period of time, when you look at the period of Old Testament, or Israel's Kingdom period, as a whole. It's less than one tenth of the time from David to the captivity. But the description of that time takes up about a third of the books of 1 and 2 Kings. You have an extended description of this period of time. It's a significant time. In Ahab's days Israel turned away from the Lord to other gods. They forsook the covenant. It's a crucial turning point in their history. Ahab's significance in this history is that he places Israel at a crossroads and then consciously led them on the road really to disaster. He ruled, of course, in the Northern Kingdom, but his influence wasn't limited to the Northern Kingdom. If you look at 2 Chronicles 21:6, you read there of Jehoram, king of Judah, of the Southern Kingdom: "He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel as the house of Ahab had done. For he married a daughter of Ahab. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord." So the influence of Ahab served onto the south. And Jehoram walked in the way of the house of Ahab. He had the daughter of Ahab for a wife, and of course, that is Athalia who was, at least presumably, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. It's never explicitly said. But later you remember Athalia attempted to wipe out the royal line of David in Judah and nearly succeeded in doing so except for the Lord's preservation of that line. So Ahab represents a crucial turning point. It's a significant time, but at that point God is faithful to his

covenant even when his people forsook the covenant because God sent Elijah.

What Elijah did was to proclaim the controversy that God had with his people. He did that in pronouncing the judgment of the drought. So you have that theme, God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant. We see that in a couple ways first of all forsaking of the covenant is epitomized in Ahab.

Ahab's Sin of Syncretism

What was Ahab's sin? I think you can say that his sin was syncretism. Syncretism is basically the failure to maintain the antithesis. So we spoke earlier of that antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, between truth and error. Syncretism is the failure to maintain the antithesis. Ahab was a theocratic ruler. He was supposed to be a covenantal king. But he gave Baal and Asherah a place for official worship in his capital, Samaria, in the Northern Kingdom, right next to the worship of the Lord. That's a violation of the first commandment, "Thou shall have no other gods before me." And if you violate the first commandment, you really violate all the commandments because there's a sense in which all the other commandments hang on the first commandment. So he really nullifies the entire law. He introduces heathen worship into the Northern Kingdom.

His action was different than any before him. You read in 1 Kings 16:30, "Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him." You can think back in the time of Solomon and there's some similarity in the sense that Solomon's heart was turned away from the Lord towards the end of his reign. He built temples for these other deities in Jerusalem. But there's a difference: that wasn't characteristic of his entire reign. He sort of gradually seems to have slid into that. Here we have a conscious choice of policy by Ahab.

But almost ironically what makes the situation worse is that Ahab was reluctant to go all the way. In other words, he didn't desire the radical elimination of the confession of "the Lord is our God." He didn't want to change Israel's confession from the "Lord is our God" to "Baal and Asherah are our gods." He didn't want to make that choice. In

other words, he did not want an antithesis in which the one excluded the other. He wanted both. He wanted Baal next to Yahweh. In other words, he wanted the syncretism. In that sense you could say Ahab's attitude was probably more dangerous than Jezebel's. Jezebel wanted to wipe out the worship of the Lord. Ahab wanted to keep both of them. It's a more deceptive and dangerous position, I think.

So the sin of syncretism was Ahab's sin. Syncretism is the union of conflicting beliefs. Syncretism attempts to erase the lines that God had drawn around his people. And if you go back in Old Testament history in Abraham's day, the Lord drew a line between the people of the covenant and the other people. Remember, he took Abraham away from his people, from his country, from their gods. That's Joshua 24, verses 2 and 3, and he brought Abraham to a new land and to a new relationship with the one living and true God, the God of the covenant. This was done so that Abraham's seed stood apart from and over against other people and their gods. The Israelites became God's peculiar people, his own private possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. They were to be a channel through which God's redemptive work would be accomplished. Ahab sought to erase that line that God had drawn around his people.

Modern Syncretism

So I think from that perspective you can say that the calling of God's people then, as well as now, the principle remains unchanged. The calling of God's people then, as well as now, is to live out the antithesis that the word of God has placed in the world. Now, today we don't live any longer in a theocracy so that line of demarcation between God's people and the world is not drawn today along national, ethnic, or political lines as it was in the Old Testament period. Nevertheless, the line is still there between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, God's people and those who are not. And the sin of syncretism still takes place. It may take different forms today than it did in the time of Elijah and Ahab, but it's a very real, present problem.

We live in what would be termed a post-Hegelian time. Hegel was a German philosopher who argued, to put it simply, that you have a thesis; and then an antithesis

develops and that's resolved by a synthesis that then creates another antithesis, and the process goes on and on. What that idea philosophically meant was relativism--you don't have absolutes. Absolutes are gone, and we live in a time when the mentality of the western world is gravely influenced by that kind of an idea. There are no absolutes if we define syncretism as erasing the lines that God has drawn around his people. I think that's certainly a continuing problem today, this whole distinction between the church and the world, between believers and unbelievers. I think just as in Ancient Israel, we have to give attention to the fact that we're called to maintain the antithesis and to work that out in the way in which we live and the way in which we form our values, and so forth. We must honor the boundaries God has set around his people. We should not relinquish the biblical concept of truth and the lines that draws. So God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant. The forsaking of the covenant is epitomized in Ahab.

God's Covenant Faithfulness is Show in Elijah

Second, God's covenant faithfulness is shown in Elijah. Against that background of what Ahab represented, all of a sudden here Elijah appears unannounced. There's no introduction, no information given about his background, where came from. It just reads, "Now Elijah the Tishbite said to Ahab." It's interesting that his name, Elijah, is a sermon in itself. His name is really the message of his life because "Elijah" means "My God is Yahweh." That's what the title of Van't Veer's book is: *My God is Yahweh*, that's what Elijah means. Well, I say his name is the fundamental message that Elijah brought to God's people at this time; it was "the Lord is our God." "My God is Yahweh," that's what his name means. You know if you take apart the two components of the name in Hebrew, actually three because the pronominal suffix "God," El, is "My God is Yahweh." So the name is his message. And his name is what Israel needed to be reminded of.

Now, we may ask the question, what was Elijah's strength? And I think in our texts the answer would be he appealed to God's covenant faithfulness. He asked God to

do that which he had already promised that he would do. He appealed to God's faithfulness, asked God to do that which he promised he would do. Elijah comes and announces judgment, and the judgment is really simply the enactment of the covenant curse.

Link to Deuteronomy's Covenant Curses

Remember when the covenant was established, the Lord said, if you're obedient there'll be certain blessings; if you're disobedient, there'll be certain curses. Elijah was familiar with the covenant and with its stipulations. If you go back to Deuteronomy 11:16, you read there, "Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain, and the ground will give no produce." That's Deuteronomy 11:16 and 17.

Deuteronomy 28:15-18: "If you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. You will be cursed in the city and in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds, and the lambs of your flock. You will be cursed when you go in and when you go out."

And then down in verse 22 and following there's a long list of curses there. When you get down to verse 22, it says, the first point: "The Lord will strike you with blight and disease, lightening and mildew." Verse 23: "The sky over your head will be bronze. The ground beneath you iron. The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder." So it's quite clear that drought was one of the covenant curses. Elijah was familiar with that.

What we learn from James 5:17 is that Elijah, which is not told us here in 1 Kings 17, but James 5:17 says that "Elijah prayed that it might not rain and it did not rain on the earth for the space of three years and six months." In other words, the strength of Elijah was that he appealed to God's covenant faithfulness. He asked God to do that which he

had promised to do, and that is withhold the rain. Elijah's prayer was a prayer of faith because it was grounded in the word of God. He prayed for the fulfillment of those words in Deuteronomy. Now, I think in this we're reminded of the great power of prayer. The faithful, fervent prayer of a righteous man, as James 5 says, avails much. He's speaking of Elijah. Elijah here prayed, and God came into action. He prayed and appealed to God's covenant faithfulness requesting the drought.

In that response, the Lord would demonstrate to Israel the strength of the Lord over against the weakness of Baal, because Baal was a nature god. By all rights, that phenomena of rain should belong to the realm of Baal. Yet Baal was powerless and could not bring the rain. So the people are shown that the Lord is the true God.

Pray and Work

Now we live, of course, in a different time than Elijah. Our situations are different. Though I think in principle we can say we still have a function in maintaining the antithesis, in doing all we can to preserve a faithful remnant of God's people, and our strength should be found where Elijah's was. And that's, first of all, important to have a faithful covenant faith in God. It's easy to forget that.

But then at the same time, we have to remember prayer's not a substitute for work and action. There's a Reformation model that goes back to the time of the Reformation in Latin. It's "ora et labora," meaning "pray and work." You notice what Elijah did. He put feet on his prayer. It doesn't even tell us in 1 Kings here about the prayer. We learn about that only in James. But he went and he confronted Ahab with a message. So from 1 Kings 17:1 remember: God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant. God needs those who stand in the line of Elijah to bring the truth of God's word to preserve and strengthen a remnant and to oppose all syncretism. That's as true today as it was in the days of Elijah. The strength of Elijah was an appeal to God's covenant faithfulness, and that is our strength as we pray and work and maintain this antithesis today. So those are some ideas of approaching 1 Kings, this first verse of chapter 17, from a redemptive historical perspective.

Now I want to go further with this when we go to the next section. In verses 2-6 we read there, “Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, ‘Leave here, turn eastward, hide in the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.’” So he did what he Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.”

2. The Concealment of Elijah is of Revelatory Significance – Kerith Ravine

So verses 2-6 the theme is: “The Concealment of Elijah is of Revelatory Significance.” Now we’ve just looked in verse 1 at the appearance of Elijah. The appearance of Elijah with the word of the Lord was of revelatory significance as well. As we just tried to develop, the appearance of Elijah was a revelation: the idea that God is faithful to his covenant even when his people forsake the covenant. But now you have the disappearance of Elijah, at least from any public view, and his concealment. And the thesis here is that the concealment of Elijah is also of revelatory significance.

Several things to notice: First, his concealment is commanded. When Elijah appeared in verse 1, he had taken it on himself to pray for the actualization of the covenant curse and then confronted Ahab with the announcement of its coming. When we get to verse 2, the situation is different because here God gave the command. You don’t read of any command in connection with that first action, but here God gives the command. It was a command, no doubt, quite different from what Elijah might have suspected. He undoubtedly had a desire to call the people back to the Lord and to continue a public ministry. But God says go to the wilderness. His retreat to the wilderness and his concealment is thus not that of a deserter. But it’s an action of an obedient servant of the Lord. The Lord says go, leave here, hide in the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan.

Many questions probably arose in his mind. Could a prophet fulfill his function in isolation from the faithful? What am I supposed to do there? Had his prophetic task ended? Would he be permitted only this one short word to the king, the pronouncement

of the drought? “There’ll be neither dew nor rain except at my word,” but in spite of questions, you read in verse 5 he did what the Lord told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine. So concealment is commanded.

Second his concealment is a revelation. We might ask why was he sent away? He was removed from the people and isolated from the people. Some have suggested this was done for his safety. We read later that Jezebel persecuted the prophets, but that’s after the events of Mt. Carmel. You might say it would be rather foolish for Ahab to kill him since he said there will not be rain except on his word. It was only his word that could end the drought. Why kill him? I don’t think if you answer the question why was he concealed, that safety was the primary explanation. The Lord would have protected him. If that was the only point, why couldn’t he have been kept by Obadiah? Remember, Obadiah protected these groups of other prophets during the time of Ahab’s persecution. So that doesn’t seem to be a valid reason.

But here Elijah is isolated from God’s people, and then he will be sustained directly by God’s hand without the cooperation of God’s people. In other words, he’s not going to be sustained by others, but directly by the Lord. I think if you reflect further on the question why his concealment, a good response is that his concealment is a revelation, as I’ve noted there. It’s a revelation of what? It’s a revelation that revelation had ceased. That’s what this is saying to us. Revelation has ceased. Elijah’s function here is not, I don’t think, to be seen simply as a type, or example, of the believer in general. Elijah had a special function. He was a prophet. He was the bearer of God’s word in Israel. When he goes to Kerith, it’s not just a believer going into the wilderness. He was a believer, it’s not just that. It’s the word of God itself that is ceasing. God is removing his spokesman from among his own people. His concealment was a revelation in that sense: his concealment says to us that revelation has ceased. You can call it a revelation, but that’s using the term twice there: revelation that revelation has ceased. His concealment says that God is going to stop speaking to his people through his prophet. So that the silence of God, you might say, the prophet’s removal tends to confirm and intensify the judgment.

Here's this drought, and now God is not speaking and all. God is speaking only through the judgment. So when God sends Elijah away, what has happened? God is isolating his people from the administration of his word. But the Lord sends Elijah to the brook Kerith. He is isolated from the people, but he himself is not isolated from God's word as the people were because God stays in communication with Elijah, and he cares for Elijah.

3. The Significance of the Care of God for Elijah During His Concealment

So let's go onto 3. "The Significance of the Care of God for Elijah During His Concealment." Now it's right here where you often find this passage used as an example of God's care for all his children. The implication is God will never let his children die of hunger or thirst, but will send his ravens to satisfy their needs. Thus, Kerith becomes a symbol of God's providential, miraculous care for his people. The ravens represent unexpected help in time of trouble. But think about that for a bit. Is that a proper way to understand the message of this text? Does the Bible promise God will always keep his children from hunger and thirst? I don't think that kind of a reading is of much help to Christians who really suffer--and many have. Many are in situations where they do hunger and they do thirst, and God doesn't send his ravens. Besides, what do you say about the 7,000 back in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal and were faithful to God, and yet were in a time of drought and famine, and they were suffering. They were hungering, they were thirsting. Why not use them as an example instead of Elijah?

I think when you place the incident in its context in redemptive history, we're provided with a better perspective. Elijah's a prophet; Elijah's the bearer of the revelation of God to Israel. The Lord sustains him because his work is not yet finished. The Lord does that independently of the people in that it becomes clear that the word of God is not dependent on the people. But the people are dependent on the Word. The principle that you see working there can be applied to us as well in this sense: that as long as our work is not finished, God will care for our needs. He may do that by ordinary means or by extraordinary means, but as long as our work is not done, God will provide

for our needs. But the reverse of that is also true. As long as our needs are met by God, we have a task to do in the service of God. And when that task is finished, God may take us anyway he chooses. It may be by sickness, old age, but it might be by famine, maybe by accident, revolt, or whatever means. So Elijah's preservation in concealment means his work is not yet finished.

4. Elijah's Concealment Reveals His Own Weakness and Points to the "greater than Elijah" – Jesus Christ

Fourth, Elijah's concealment reveals his own weakness and points to the "greater than Elijah"--Jesus Christ. I think we can see that in all Elijah can do is pray and then declare justice. He prayed for the covenant curse, pronounced its enactment, but then he had nothing more to say. He couldn't revoke the covenant curse. He could call for obedience, but he could not provide for forgiveness or justification. He's helpless in that; he's much like Moses in Exodus where Moses requested to take the punishment of the people on himself to remove the curse from the nation. But it wasn't possible to do, for that to be done one greater than Elijah is necessary. So that Elijah left the people under the covenant curse in isolation from the word of God. Yet he himself enjoyed the blessing of fellowship with God in concealment.

Okay, let's take a ten minute break.

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