

Triumph Against All Odds – Part 1

Series: *Days of Elijah*

1 Kings 18:20-39

June 5, 2016

Good morning again. It's great to be here together.

As you may or may not know, Scott Hayes, Myra, and myself will travel today to Lakeside, which is just west of Cedar Point on Lake Erie, for the West Ohio Annual Conference. We will be gone for most of the week. We ask that you pray for us as over 2,000 lay and clergy come together to talk about ministry here in our Conference. While we are gone, you can still get in touch with me (don't you just love cell phones?)

Oh, yeah, I forgot: Max is going to his second Annual Conference. He likes to ride around in his Puggy Buggy, see the people, and get ice cream every night.

This morning, I would like for us to begin by thinking about how to handle the tough situations, those pressure moments that come from time to time into our lives.

I think athletes face the most constant pressure. Every at-bat, every down on the football field, every possession in basketball or hockey, every match point in tennis, every 15 foot putt for birdie or 5 foot putt for par, is a pressure point. So for every baseball game, a player has usually 4 high pressure moments to get a hit and not look foolish striking out.

So you see, every aspect of an athlete's profession is a pressure point, and how you handle the pressure determines how far you will go.

Some people thrive under pressure, but pressure can also ruin performance. It can push you down in ways you don't want to go.

When we face pressure, our fight-or-flight response kicks in. Our bodies begin to produce adrenaline, that chemical that helps us react quickly and gives us energy.

Adrenaline has many effects on people. Some people get nauseous and sick with too much adrenaline. Other people get shaky.

FIRST TRAINING FLIGHT WHEN I DID NOTHING BUT TAKEOFFS AND LANDINGS FOR ALMOST AN HOUR AND A HALF. 14 TAKEOFFS AND LANDINGS, ONE EVERY 6 MINUTES.

Each of us handle pressure differently. Tommy Lasorda, former Los Angeles Dodgers manager, said, "'Pressure' is a word that is misused in our vocabulary. When you start thinking of pressure, it's because you've started to think of failure." PGA golf Lee Trevino once said, "Pressure is playing for \$10 when you don't have a dime in your pocket."

Athletes live for the pressure, while most of us want to avoid it at all costs. We don't want to face it. One of the most uncomfortable and terrifying things most people don't want to do, don't want to face the pressure, is public speaking.

But in the church and the life of a Christian, I can think of some additional pressure moments; things people don't want to face or do:

- How about work in the nursery?
- Or teach kindergarten Sunday School? Or 1st Grade? Or 2nd Grade? Or any grade, especially Junior High boys' Sunday School?
- How about pray aloud in church?
- How about share your faith to a non-believer, or lead someone to Christ?

These are pressure points today, especially as we face the realization that our values and faith as Christians are questioned and discounted more and more each day, that the truths and standards of our faith are being abandoned by society, abandoned by societal leaders, abandoned in the pews and abandoned in the pulpit. Lies have become truth; immorality has become accepted, and if you have opinions based on traditional values, you are a closed-minded, judgmental bigot.

My friends, you need to face the truth: you, me, Christianity, we are all under pressure right now.

That's why we are studying the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah in our series "Days of Elijah." Elijah was a powerful prophet, calling the people and the nation to repentance. Yet Elijah had his struggles, he was just like us... except for his strong faith in God. Even in the godless times during his life, Elijah declared the word of the Lord. So we are looking at Elijah's ministry and learning how we can be voices in the desert crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

I'm going to invite you to turn to 1 Kings 18. As you do that, let me remind you of what we've learned so far.

Ahab is the king of Israel. He married Jezebel – yes that wicked Jezebel, who ruined the name for all generations – and led the people of the God of Israel to worship pagan idols. As a result, God judged Ahab and the people and gave Elijah a message: there will be no rain, not even any dew, for about 3 years.

Imagine the devastation that would cause around here. We usually get more than 40 inches of precipitation each year, plus whatever we get in the way of dew that isn't recorded. All that would be gone. So that is the context of today's passage.

So let's pick up the story in 1 Kings 18. I will be using the New Living Translation today.

VERSES 1-2

Later on, in the third year of the drought, the LORD said to Elijah, "Go and present yourself to King Ahab. Tell him that I will soon send rain!" So Elijah went to appear before Ahab. Meanwhile, the famine had become very severe in Samaria.¹

SKIP TO 17-18.

When Ahab saw him, he exclaimed, "So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?" "I have made no trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "You and your family are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the LORD and have worshiped the images of Baal instead."²

Ahab had decided like so many others that it is the believer's fault for the problems of society. We are holding up societal progress. And at times, Christians have been hypocritical and not followed the ways of the Lord.

But if we truly lived out lives of holiness, if we lived out the Great Commandment to love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself, then most if not all of society's ills would be solved. We would respect and honor one another because we love God who created you and me together. There would be no pornography or prostitution, no racism or bigotry, no child abuse or human trafficking, no murder or stealing or adultery or lying if we were committed to agape love. There

¹ 1 Kings 18:1-2 (NLT)

² 1 Kings 18:17-18 (NLT)

would be no alcoholism or drug abuse or self-loathing if we saw how important and loved we are by Almighty God.

The world is stumped by the questions of life, while the believer follows Christ who is the Answer.

Elijah tells Ahab, “You are the problem, you are the reason why life stinks... because you are worshipping a false god.”

So to prove his point, Elijah makes a proposal: an epic cage match, a duel to the death, a heavy weight championship, a colossal struggle, the first Super Bowl, the defining moment in the life of Elijah.

VERSES 19-20

Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel.” So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel.³

Mt. Carmel is a 1,800 ft. high ridge that juts into the Mediterranean Sea. South of the mountain lies the fruitful plain of Sharon, and northeast of it flows the river Kishon. Isaiah used Mt. Carmel to illustrate a beautiful and fruitful place when he wrote,

“The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.”⁴

No place in all of Israel was more beautiful than Mt. Carmel, and it is here that this great confrontation occurs, a place where the effects of 3 years of drought would be the least apparent.

Ahab brought 450 prophets of the male god Baal and 400 prophets of the fertility goddess Asherah. 850 pagan prophets to go against one guy: Elijah. Talk about a mismatch: 850 to 1. Ahab probably thought there was no way he would lose, so he called everyone in the nation to come out and watch the troublemaker Elijah get blown away and crushed by this competition. I mean, this is like the Big Red Machine playing your kid’s T-ball team.

But those odds don’t faze Elijah at all. In fact, because Ahab has gathered all the people of Israel together, Elijah completely ignores the 850 pagan prophets and speaks directly to the people.

VERSE 21

Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, “How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions?”⁵

Literally, “How long are you hopping between 2 forks?” The NRSV translates it “limping”, while the NIV and New Living Translation is “wavering.” It is the same word is used later in verse 26 for dancing.

“How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent.⁶

Elijah tells the people they can’t have it both ways. There is no such thing as Neapolitan when it comes to being a follower of the God of Israel. Pagan worship typically didn’t care; you could be polytheistic, worshipping multiple gods.

³ 1 Kings 18:19-20 (NLT)

⁴ Isaiah 35:2 (NLT)

⁵ 1 Kings 18:21a (NLT)

⁶ 1 Kings 18:21 (NLT)

But not when it comes to the God of Israel. The second of the Ten Commandments is:

“You must not have any other god but me.”⁷

Apparently, the Israelites had not totally turned from the God who brought them out of Egypt. They believed in Him, but they tried to combine their worship of the God of Israel with Baal. Why did so many people waver between the two choices? Perhaps some were not sure. Many, however, knew that the Lord was God, but they enjoyed the sinful pleasures and other benefits that came with following Ahab in his idolatrous worship.

Elijah in essence says to the people, “Make up your minds. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” You can almost hear the words Joshua spoke generations before:

“Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”⁸

This was echoed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other.”⁹

Elijah challenged the people to take a stand – to follow whoever was the true God.

Folks, it is important to take a stand for the Lord. If we just drift along with whatever is pleasant and easy, when we begin to tolerate in ourselves the world’s godless values based as they are on lust and pride, then:

- We inevitably begin sliding toward a chronically, restless desire for more of whatever we think will bring satisfaction to our unsettled and nervous lives.
- We inevitably begin sliding toward an insistence on moral autonomy that resists any pressure toward restraint or accountability.
- We inevitably begin sliding toward an appetite for power and recognition that seeks to control or manipulate others.

Christ, on the other hand, calls us to a radically changed set of values:

- He calls us to contentment, which is giving our work our best effort and then resting the results in God’s sovereign hands.
- He calls us to purity, which is choosing to live a life unsullied by the world’s filth and corruption. Paul instructed young Timothy, “Do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.”¹⁰
- He calls us to simplicity, which is brings freedom, joy and balance. If we lack it, our need for security leads us into an insane attachment to things.¹¹
- He calls us to frugality, which is the product of a disciplined mind and inner self-control. By practicing thrift, we prudently choose to put boundaries on our appetites and inclination toward self-indulgence.
- He calls us to modesty, which is demonstrated in the fact that the incarnate God chose to be born in a cattle shed, and grow into manhood in the out-of-the-way

⁷ Exodus 20:3 (NLT)

⁸ Joshua 24:15

⁹ Matthew 6:24 (NLT)

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 5:22 (NLT)

¹¹ From Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

village of Nazareth. No evidence here of ostentatious abuse of power or position. Rather, moderation and humility.¹²

What is Jesus calling us to do? What's the action we're going to take?

Stop wavering, hobbling between two opinions. Choose this day whom you will serve. Serve the God of Israel and discover the answers to life. Take a stand for the Lord.

¹² Seed thoughts from "Is Popular Culture Either?" by Kenneth Myers in *Modern Reformation*, Jan/Feb'97, Vol. 6.