

GOD’S TRUTH PREVAILS EVEN DURING THE DARKEST TIMES¹

By John Cheeseman

In the year 874 BC, Ahab began to reign over Israel (1 Kings 16:29). At this juncture the people of Israel were enduring one of the darkest periods in the whole of their history. Since the death of Solomon in 931BC, when the kingdom was divided, seven kings had ruled over Israel, and they had all been evil men. The last of these was a man called Ahab, and we are told that he ‘did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him’ (16:30). It is obvious, therefore, that Israel was in a deplorable state. Things could hardly have been worse.

Ahab’s attitude to sin

Verse 31 records that Ahab wanted to outdo all his predecessors in wickedness: ‘...it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam’. What exactly were the sins of Jeroboam? The Scriptures record that he made two golden calves and he encouraged the people to worship God under the form of these images (12:28). So he wasn’t advocating pagan idolatry, but rather the worship of the true God by means of images, which was a breach of the second commandment rather than the first. However, it was still a gross sin, and it paved the way for Ahab to repudiate altogether the worship of Yahweh.

There are those in the Christian church today who say that it doesn’t matter how we worship God so long as we are sincere. If some people find it helpful to have crucifixes around their necks or statues of the Virgin Mary in their buildings, this is deemed acceptable. Against this line of thinking, the Word of God clearly states, ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image’ (Exodus 20:4). It does matter how we worship God. Our worship should be governed, not by man-centred impulses or mystical feelings, but by the plain teaching of Holy Scripture.

Notice that it was the beginnings of sin under Jeroboam which led ultimately to the apostasy of Ahab. Having tolerated the worship of the true God by means of images for nearly sixty years, the people eventually lost their sensitivity. They lost their ability to discern truth from error, and so their consciences no longer troubled them when it came to rejecting completely the worship of the true God.

What a sobering lesson this is for us all! Sin is a deadly evil, and we must beware of its beginnings – a little white lie, a little dishonesty, the occasional peep at salacious literature. This is how it all starts, and, before we know it, we are immersed in lust, deceit and corruption. When sin gets a toe in the door, its ultimate intention is to destroy us. Every stirring of envy, if sin had its way, would lead to murder; every doubt concerning the truths of Holy Scriptures would lead to the ultimate denial of God himself; every unclean thought would lead to acts of immorality. Let us make sure that we keep our consciences constantly attuned to the Word of God. If we don’t, our consciences will become desensitized, as happened to Ahab, who considered it a ‘light thing ... to walk in the sins of Jeroboam’ (v. 31).

Ahab’s choice of a wife

The next thing we’re told about Ahab concerns his marriage to Jezebel. In the second half of 16:31 we read that ‘he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him’. In 2 Kings 9:22 we are told that Jezebel was a harlot and a sorceress, and in the book of Revelation ‘Jezebel’ is the name given to a seductive prophetess who encouraged immorality and idolatry under the cloak of religion (Revelation 2:20). Such a person Ahab decided to marry, and as a consequence he went and served Baal.

It is a sad fact that many a Christian man or woman has been ruined as a result of a distracting relationship with a member of the opposite sex. None of us is immune from this. Even ministers of the gospel have fallen prey to this temptation. It was written of King Solomon that he 'loved many foreign women', and his wives 'turned away his heart' from following the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-3). Let us not be complacent about these things. We can all fall, at any time. It doesn't matter who we are or how long we have been Christians: let us beware of any relationship that is going to draw us away from the things of God.

The nation's attitude to God

In 1 Kings 16:32 we read that Ahab actually set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. The worship of the true God was formally repudiated and in its place the worship of Baal was established. It now became the official religion of the land. Open defiance of God had reached its climax in Israel. This is made even clearer by what we read in verse 34: *'In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.'* What was the significance of this? We read in Joshua 6:26 that Joshua had pronounced a curse, saying that if anyone tried to rebuild Jericho, he would do so with the loss of both his firstborn and his youngest son. Up to this moment in time, no matter how wicked Israel had become, no one had ever dared put God to the test. However, wickedness had so abounded under Ahab that this man, Hiel, actually dared to tempt God. What a terrible state of affairs!

Are there not many parallels here for us today? Do we not live in a day and age when God is being openly repudiated at virtually every level of our national life? He is dragged in only now and again to give the semblance of a little flavour of religion, and so we have the occasional service of celebration or commemoration at St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey; apart from that, everything is ruled by pure humanism. For all practical purposes, most people live their lives today as if God were dead.

Even those of us who name the name of Christ have become spiritually and morally desensitized to the sickness of our society. We are no longer outraged by such things as easy divorce, abortion on demand, and promiscuity on the television. We accept these things, almost without so much as the bat of an eyelid. Forty years ago, we would have recoiled in horror, but now our consciences hardly twitch. Indeed, there are many within the visible church who are openly advocates of such depravity. Surely a regular reading of Scriptures like Romans 1 will leave us in no doubt about the moral degeneration of our society.

God's provision of a witness

However, all is not lost. After the bad news comes the good news. In the midst of all this darkness and degradation, there suddenly appears on the stage of human history one of the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. At the beginning of chapter 17, we read these words: *'Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."'* It is fascinating to notice how abruptly Elijah is introduced in the narrative. We are not told how or when he was called by God. It is as if the writer is saying, 'Everything's so desperate here, let's cut through all the preliminaries', and so this whirlwind of a man appears on the scene out of nowhere. What a thrilling moment! As always, God has his man - someone who is not afraid to stand up and be counted for the truth. Elijah was called upon to deliver a most unpalatable message - a message of judgement to the most powerful man in Israel - but because he was conscious that God was with him, he didn't flinch from it. He knew that he was in the presence of God: *'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand ...'* He could have been writing his own death warrant, but 'If

God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). Elijah wasn't going to be pushed around by any human being, not even by the king of Israel.

God never leaves himself without witnesses in this world. Even in the darkest period of human history, he will raise up those like Elijah who will testify that Yahweh is alive in spite of all those who are shouting to the contrary. Are we prepared to be God's witnesses in the days in which we live? Are we prepared to stand up for God in a climate of increasing apostasy? When we are in conversations at work, and the discussion centres on moral and ethical questions, are we prepared to make a stand for Christian principles? Do we shy away from opportunities to witness for Christ because we're afraid of what others might think of us? Or are we going to say, with Elijah, *'As the LORD ... lives, before whom I stand ...'*?

Standing up for the true God may mean that we shall experience mockery. It may mean that we don't get promotion at work. For some Christians in the world today, it could even mean death. However, the fear of God is such that it removes from us the fear of man and the fear of consequences. If we are saying, 'No, I can't do that because I'm afraid of the consequences', it shows that we don't fear God enough.

May God grant us the courage and the faith of Elijah. In an age of confusion and compromise, we desperately need men and women who are prepared to stand up and be counted for the truth of the gospel, and who will not yield to the pressures of the world, come what may. Let us follow the example of this great prophet. Do what is right. Commit your way to the Lord - and he will give you the grace to stand firm.

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Endnotes:

- 1) This article is a reprint of chapter 1 of *'Elijah, Man of Fire, Man of Faith.'* By John Cheeseman. Published by Day One and used with permission.