

## In the Middle: Elijah

05.07.2023

---

We are in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of a series titled “In the Middle”, and with that we’re taking a look at some Biblical examples of people who we would consider Heavy Hitters of the Faith... let’s face it, if you didn’t end up on the cutting room floor when God put His Word together, YOU SOMEBODY! Yet when we examine the accounts of these individuals, we find that even the Pros experience seasons where things aren’t going their way, where they seem to flail helplessly, EVEN AS THEY FOLLOW GOD. Wait a minute, you might think, that’s now how it’s supposed to work! Don’t I decide to follow Jesus Christ, then get baptized, and then come up out of the water to find 4 bluebirds flying circles around my head? And then I hold up a finger, and a delicate butterfly alights upon it, and gives me butterfly kisses??

That’s what happened at MY baptism, I don’t know about yours...

I’ll be brutally honest and say that if you think that’s how the followers of God experienced life, whether Old or New Testament, you’ve only been skimming the Cliff notes! In fact, I tend to see all these flaws and struggles as evidence for the credibility of the Bible, because who in their right mind would want all their issues put on display?! If it were fiction, there’d be more butterflies!

So today we’re going to delve into the life of one of the coolest cats in the OT, one of those Heavy Hitters by the name of Elijah. Not Elisha, he was part of Rob’s story of Naaman last Sunday. Elijah was the predecessor of Elisha, his mentor in fact.

Let’s simplify the royal line-up of Israel from this point for you:

King David

Solomon

Jereboam- Dirtbag (Set up two golden calves)

Nadab- Dirtbag

Baasha- Dirtbag

Elah- Dirtbag

Zimri- Dirtbag

Omri- Massive Dirtbag (sinned more than all his predecessors)

Ahab- Massive Dirtbag (sinned more than even Omri) and co-star of this story

See, each of these so-called leaders sat on the throne of Israel, but their adherence to the rule of God, the Theocracy, spiraled further down with every passing of the scepter. In its place was a horrific increase of pagan worship that began as far back as Solomon's reign, due to the influence of his 1000 wives and concubines, and grew worse with every new leader.

At this point, Ahab is the king of Israel, and he takes as his queen the daughter of a pagan ruler:

*<sup>30</sup> Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. <sup>31</sup> He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. <sup>32</sup> He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. <sup>33</sup> Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.*

**I Kings 16:30-33**

So why is this a big deal? Well, for one thing we know that God is a Jealous God, because He says so Himself in the book of Exodus. God doesn't share well with others. Before you get all judgey, compare it to having your kids start hanging out at Kevin's house next door, the vaguely 30-something who never seems to have a job, or bath, or haircut, but always has weed, and now your kids are calling him "Dad". And you catch your 10-year-old going through your wallet because Father's Day is coming up and Kevin needs some new roach clips. Are you a Jealous Dad now?

But let me add to it a bit: The worship of Baal, a name which is a bit of a catch-all for pagan deities throughout the Promise Land that God reserved for His people, Israel, in this instance refers to the Tyrian god Melqart, considered to be the god of rain & dew, vital in this relatively arid part of the country.

### Slide: Melqart

And the practice of worshiping Melqart required lots of animal sacrifices. And on occasion, when times were tough, more serious sacrifices: “Who here is so devoted to Melqart as to offer their child??” And suddenly you see neighbor Kevin leading your kid up to the stage. Jealous yet?

I’ve heard people talk about the evil selfish God of the Old Testament who directed His nation to destroy to the last vestiges the pagan peoples who were inhabiting the Promised Land He was giving them, it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t kind, it didn’t show universal acceptance. But it’s tantamount to criticizing the parent who, before sending their kids out to play in the yard, first clears it of rattlesnakes! Sorry, eco-champions... the rattlers in my yard gonna die!

So, there’s your stage. This is Israel, God’s chosen people, and Ahab and Jezebel are the acting spiritual leaders for the nation, and the things happening in the name of worship are as vile as can be.

**In steps Elijah.** A man with no history, all we know is that he was a mouthpiece of God, a Prophet from Tishbe. He shows up in Ahab’s palace out of nowhere, this mysterious man. In fact, we have an actual photograph of Elijah!

### Slide: Clint Eastwood

Clint, er, ELIJAH says to Ahab, “The God I serve says no more dew or rain til I say so.” (Spit to the side) And just like that, Elijah walks out. He may have walked out at a pretty good clip, because Scripture says God told him to the brook Kerith, which is essentially a hideout in the wilderness with running water. He stays off the radar there for some time. When the creek dries up God sends him to the next hideout, staying with a widow and her son practically in Jezebel’s hometown! And after three and a half years of hiding out, God sends him back to Ahab. There follows one of the most dramatic scenes in the history of mankind!

Upon seeing him Ahab cries, “Is that you, you troublemaker!?”

Elijah says, “I’m not the one who abandoned God for a bunch of Baals. In fact, gather all 450 prophets of Baal you’ve been supporting, and have Jezebel bring her 400 prophets of Asherah, and meet me on top of Mount Carmel. Oh, and you’ll want to bring all the people of Israel out to watch...”

“... cuz I’m calling you out.”

Mount Carmel is an amazing place to gather, as it is one of the highest mountains in Israel, missing first place by less than 100”. The view is amazing!

Slide: Mt. Carmel (photo)

And Elijah shouts out to all of Israel, “How long will you sit on the fence? If the Lord is God, follow Him. If Baal is god, follow him.” The Bible says they were dead silent. Apparently, the fence was comfy.

Elijah issues the challenge: “We each take a bull, we cut it up on the altar, and then you ask your god to light yours, I’ll ask Yahweh to light mine. The one who lights the fire is God. Looks like 1 vs. 850; to make it fair, you can go first.” The pagan prophets choose their bull, sacrifice it on the altar, and commence Operation Ignition!

The prophets begin their “worship”, possibly some coordinated choreography, and keep it up from morning til noon, to no affect. Elijah decides to offer some encouragement:

<sup>27</sup> About noontime Elijah began mocking them. “You’ll have to shout louder,” he scoffed, “for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!”

-- 1 Kings 18:27

So the pagan worshipers really get into it, offering their own blood in return for a little fire, cutting and slashing themselves, again, to no effect other than their blood was “gushing out”. They keep it up until evening, looking by then, I imagine, very much like *Grease* meets *The Walking Dead* meets *Carrie*.

As the time for the traditional evening sacrifice draws near, Elijah goes over to where the Altar of God had been demolished. The stones are scattered so he picks them up and arranges them, specifically taking 12 stones in representation of the 12 tribes of Israel. He piles the wood on, then sacrifices the bull, putting it on top of the altar. Still not really a fair fight, what with the Living God going up against a statue, so he digs a trench around the altar, and calls for 4 big jars of water and pours them out all over the altar, bull and wood. He calls for more, and the drenching is repeated. Once more, and more water is brought and poured out

on the sacrifice, filling the trench. At this point, he's really rubbing it in, considering that now he's really giving the advantage to that Melqart god of water dude that Israel has been worshiping!

Elijah presents this hugely contrasting picture compared to the 6-8 hours of frenzied dancing, screaming, slashing and raving of the prophets of Baal!

<sup>36</sup> ...Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant. Prove that I have done all this at Your command. <sup>37</sup> O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that You, O Lord, are God and that You have brought them back to Yourself."

--1 Kings 18:36-37

***KIDOOOOSHHZZZZ!*** I don't know if it was lightning, or a pillar of fire, or a meteorite blasting in from space, but without a shadow of a doubt it went ***KIDOOOOSHHZZZZ!***

***38 Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench! <sup>39</sup> And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, "The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!"***

--1 Kings 18:38-39

So, pretty amazing story, huh? No, not the showdown on top of Mount Carmel. That's been done and done and done again. And no, not the face off in Ahab's throne room that looked like a flashback of Moses versus Yul Brenner. All that was cool, but I am referring to the real meat of the story: The 1,277 days in The Middle. The days when nothing much was happening.

Now those of you who are Bible scholars may already be aggravated with me (it usually doesn't take too long) because you caught me glossing over The Middle of the story. The Middle is where three specific miracles take place.

**Miracle 1—The Ravens:** After the showdown in Ahab's throne room, God tells Elijah to go to the Kerith Ravine and stay near the brook there where he will be fed by ravens and sustained by the water.

**Miracle 2—The Widow:** After a while the water dries up, and God directs Elijah to travel to Zarephath where he meets a widow and her son, who are preparing to eat their last handful of flour and oil and then die. Miraculously, God sustains the three of them by extending the meal and oil so that the jars never run out.

**Miracle 3—The Widow's Son:** The widow's son becomes gravely ill, worsening until the boy finally dies. Elijah is miraculously able to bring the boy back to life.

We read the post-miracle report and come away thinking, "Wow! That was amazing! Incredible stuff! God was right there all the time!" But I think Elijah would say, "Are you kidding me??" Last week Rob said, "All we want is to skip the middle and get to the miracle." Rob says a lot of stuff in the course of a work week that I wouldn't brag on, but that there, that's GOLD! Don't we want to skip the faith and get to the fun? You might not realize it but NONE of that Middle was fun for Elijah.

We envision this cheap movie production version of the prophet, smooth, confident, implacably calm, possibly a cultured accent. In an Eden-esque glen, a raven flies to his raised hand delivering a freshly wrapped Chic-fil-A sandwich and fries. ***"Ah, thank you my winged friend, for your sustaining care."*** But that's not what the Bible says. The Bible has Elijah skedaddling from Ahab and hiding in a brushy ditch that has a wet-weather drainage that dries up every 6 months in a good year. And ravens?! HA! You're picturing a crow in your mind, right? Nope. Ravens are 4x larger than the average crow, bigger than a red-tailed hawk! And if a raven is your Door Dash driver, here's what you can expect to be on the menu:

- Trash
- Carcasses
- Lizards
- Frogs
- Nestlings from other birds
- Meat (Raw or cooked)
- Insects
- Carrion (Decaying Flesh)

To offer perspective, let's say you look outside just in time to see a piece of something fall from a passing bird. Your kid walks over, picks it up, looks it over, and pops it in his mouth. Well ain't that fun!?! Every day Elijah was in the wadi, twice a day, bread and unidentified bits of flesh were delivered, and no matter how delectable it may have appeared, it fell from the beak of a carrion-eater! Elijah's faith hit the wall between theory and reality, and it all happened in his mouth!

As for the widow situation, Elijah finally is allowed to crawl out of his ditch after a few months, only to find his next destination has none of the exciting culinary variety provided by the ravens! I'm sure he starts with a classy ***"Fear not, good woman, for thy meal and thy oil shall not fail thee before the drought ceaseth."*** But did I mention 1,277 days? Pretty soon Elijah's journal starts reading, *"Day 406: Oily flour cakes again. I'm quite certain that the widow is trying to kill me..."*

'But Keith, the dramatic death-to-life miracle with the widow's son... That's got to be exhilarating!'

Listen, this lady's son dies and she grabs Elijah by the lapels and screams, spittle flying, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

There is no "Fear not, good woman, for my God has heard thy prayers..." I think Elijah is so taken aback that he doesn't have a clue what to do, but he sure doesn't want that to be obvious, so he says "You stay here, I'll be right back!", and runs the boy's body up to his room. And he's gotta be muttering, oh man, this is bad, oh man, this is bad...." All the way up the steps. Listen to Elijah's prayer, not a head bowed KJV prayer:

***Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?"*** <sup>21</sup> ***Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"***

And don't think I'm kidding about his panicked retreat out of momma's sight, because it says Elijah picked up the child and carried him back down from the room into the house where she was waiting. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" I can only imagine the nervous laughter that followed.

Why do we assume that there is little value in The Middle? I think in part it's because the Mountaintops get so much attention. Mountaintops are where showdowns take place. That's where we jump into the movie, an hour and a half in, when things are getting exciting. In fact, I'd venture to say that where our tech-paced and entertainment-based culture lives, there isn't enough entertainment value for us to want to spend time in The Middle! But I'm telling you that The Middle is where we have the best opportunity to strengthen our reliance upon God and build a foundation of Faith durable enough to see us through to the Mountaintop. From what we've seen, these are the first and possibly ONLY miracles Elijah has ever seen! Without his 3.5 years in The Middle, how would he have had the nerve to challenge 850 pagans to a duel to the death!? Don't forget, Mountaintops require a climb, and a climb requires strength!

I'm going to give you 3 things to do when you're feeling stuck in The Middle:

- 1) Remember your Faith in God**—Being in The Middle is a great time to do some reviewing. I think most of us have some sort of history with God, perhaps chapter after chapter in your personal story, or even a very brief one because you're relatively new to faith. Regardless of the length, sit down and think back on what all worked to get you where you are. Think back to times when God's thumbprint showed upon your life. He often shows up where we might have overlooked Him in the details. (Illustration: Dakota Walker of White Mills KY) **In The Middle is where we should Reflect on God's Past**
- 2) Reset your Dependence upon God**—Being in the Middle is a great time to take stock in God's current involvement in your life. I believe that even Elijah had his moments, in the midst of miracles, where he was thinking "I sure wish God would DO something!" Use that slow time in The Middle to identify how God is sustaining you—I have used that word several times, intentionally, because I generally forget that each and every day of my life requires a thousand miracles just to get out of bed, to get to the office, to interact with people, to sort one thought from another. If our body starts to fail in any one of these thousand areas, we notice it, and we pray for a



miracle, don't we? **In The Middle is where we should Look for God's Presence**

- 3) **Resolve your Commitment to God**—Once you've spent time in steps 1 & 2, the next natural step is to do the basic math: Based upon how I have seen God work in the past... adding the ways I see His hand around me even now... my best course of action adds up to following Him. Even if I'm not on the Mountaintop yet. Even if there isn't fire falling from the sky to fix all my problems. You might even take time to remind yourself of God's promises. Google it, and you'll start finding things like:

**Slides of graphics (any order) Perfect Peace, Fear Not, My Power, Never Leave**

**In The Middle is where we should Prepare for God's Plan**

Back in high school there was a new girl who showed up my senior year, and I found my interest in her continually growing to the point that, towards the end of my last semester I asked her out. My pitch was that I was going to go for a drive into the country, and I wondered if she would like to come along with me. Perhaps it was me, perhaps it was my sweet '71 Mustang 3-speed, but she said yes, and so on a lovely warm Spring Saturday I swung by and picked her up, and we drove across the bridge and into the Missouri River bottoms, which was primarily thousands upon thousands of acres of corn and soybeans. We made two stops that day: The first was to a little country church cemetery where my friend Kenny had been buried 3 years earlier. It was the first time I'd been there since his funeral. The second stop was to the home of Kenny's parents, probably one of the most non-descript couples I've ever met. Kenny's dad was a small framed callous of a man with thinning hair who looked like he worked from sunrise to past sundown every day of his life; Kenny's mom was a wisp of a lady with buck teeth and horn-rimmed glasses who seemed as pale as the faded dresses she wore. It may have only been my perception, but it seemed whatever vibrancy they had ever had must have bled out with the death of their boy. We had a pleasant visit with them a while, said our goodbyes and drove off back to town.

Again, it could have just been my imagining but I felt the weight of them thinking just how close we might have been to what Kenny would be, had tragedy not intervened.

I've told folks about that date before, and mostly I hear responses like "What's wrong with you?" and "Why in the world would you take a girl *there* on a date!?" I tell them that it wasn't about the destination at all. It was a 45-minute drive each way, and that hour and a half investment, that time in the middle of our destinations, helped change my life. 3 weeks ago, that girl and I celebrated the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of that momentous outing, and in two weeks we'll celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

If you're feeling trapped in The Middle, I hope you'll hang on to a few of these principles, and focus your attention more than ever on God. I am convinced that the biggest difference between the Heavy Hitters of Faith and us is that they faithfully outlasted The Middle, made the most of The Middle, and learned from experience that the same Lord who is the God of Mountaintop Miracles is the same Lord who is the God of our Dry Valley Days.