

10-1-1967

Elijah, God's Lonely Man

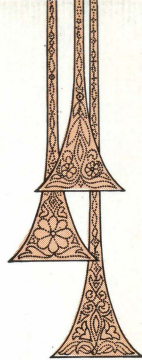
John Allen Chalk

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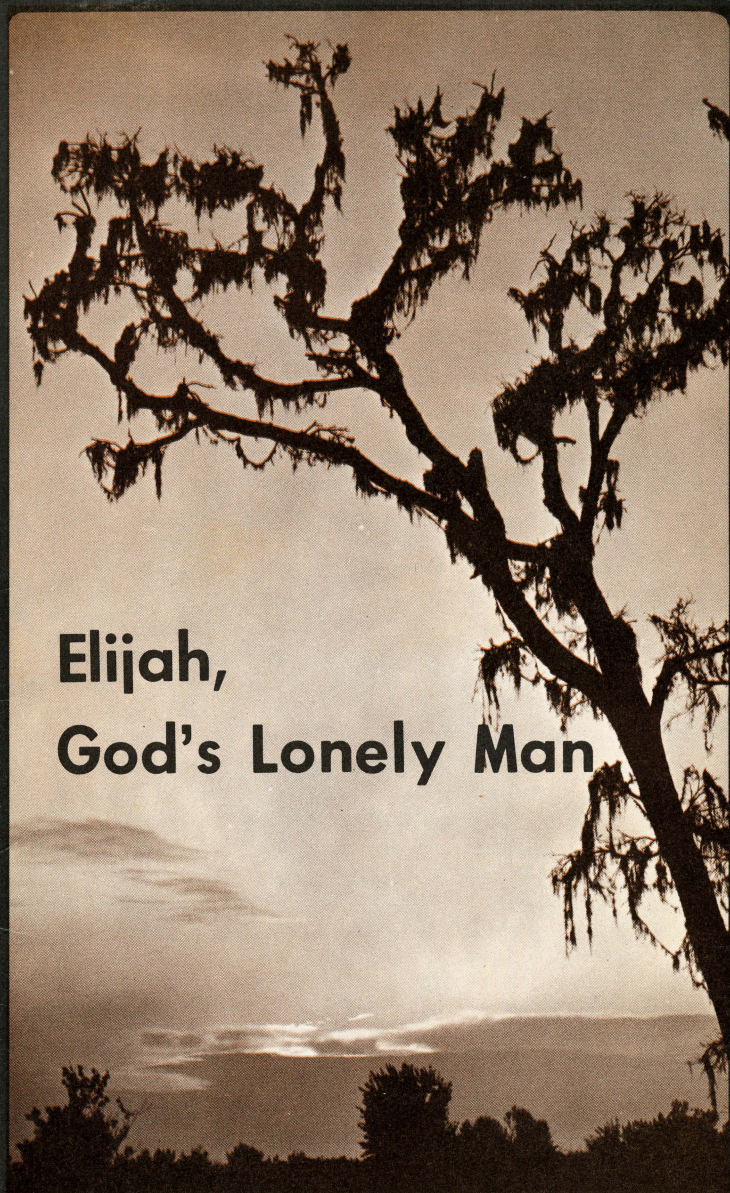
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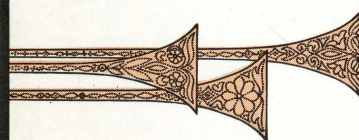
HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST
radio program

P. O. Box 2439 Abilene, Texas 79604

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION



Elijah,
God's Lonely Man



Number 818
TRANSCRIPT OF THE

Herald of Truth
..... *radio programs*

Elijah, God's Lonely Man

His biography begins abruptly, in the Bible at least, at the beginning of chapter seventeen of the Old Testament book *I Kings*. Through rapidly moving narratives the inspired author sketches one of the most interesting men of all time. Then, in the second book of Kings, chapter two, his life ends as quickly as it began.

Who is this Biblical character with such an unusual life? The Bible says: "And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the sojourners of Gilead, said unto Ahab . . ." We will notice what this prophet of God said to the King of Israel, Ahab, later. Already, however, in part of one verse we have learned our subject's name, his hometown, his isolation from the governmental center of Israel, and the second character of a drama that now begins — Ahab, King of Israel, who lives and rules at Samaria. And the conclusion of Elijah's public life and ministry comes almost as quickly as the introduction we have just read. "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, which parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (II Kings 2:11).

Elijah, one of two well-known prophets of the ninth century before Christ, opposed Israel's idol worship and wickedness in all areas of the nation's life. He served as

God's messenger in calling Israel to the true worship of God, to God's justice and righteousness which, during the reigns of Ahab and his sons, were unknown. Elijah's uncompromising commitment to Jehovah as opposed to the false god Baal; Elijah's unwillingness to court the favor of Jezebel, Ahab's unbelieving wife; his courageous denouncement of Ahab's lust for Naboth's vineyard; and Elijah's continual plea for Israel and her kings to seek Jehovah God made this early prophet "God's lonely man." Look with me at "Elijah — God's Lonely Man."

Ahab reigns as King of the northern part of the divided kingdom, the section that was called "Israel" as opposed to "Judah" in the south. Politically strong but spiritually weak, Ahab's marriage to Jezebel caused Israel even greater heartache and spiritual disorder. We learn of at least three serious problems respecting the King's relationship with God. He "did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah above all that were before him" (I Kings 16:30). Furthermore, he continued the idolatrous worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, instituted by Israel's first king of the division, Jeroboam (I Kings 16:31; 12:25-33). Ahab also disobeyed God's instructions regarding his choice of a wife. "And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him" (I Kings 16:31). At Samaria, Israel's capitol, Ahab built a temple for Baal and a Canaanite fertility goddess (I Kings 16:32, 33). In fact, the Biblical historian who writes *I Kings* says, "Ahab did yet more to provoke Jehovah, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (I Kings 16:33).

But Ahab wasn't the only one. Like parents like son! Ahaziah, Israel's next king who also reigned during Elijah's life, "did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and walked in the way of his father, and in the way of his mother" (I Kings 22:52). "And he served Baal, and worshipped him, and provoked to anger Jehovah, the God of Israel, according to all that his father had done" (I Kings 22:53).

It was a time during Israel's history when justice, fidelity, loyalty, and truth were forgotten in the lustful rush to fulfill the empty, selfish wishes of Queen Jezebel. When King Ahab wanted a certain Israelite's vineyard, the land that by God's commandment had belonged to the family since the beginning, all Jezebel had to do was plot the owner's death and present Ahab with the fulfillment of his vain wish (I Kings 21:1-16).

Things were in a terrible condition in Israel. A moral, spiritual, and ethical blight covered the land and the people. The Bible says, "But there was none like unto Ahab, who did sell himself to do that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up. And he did very abominably in following idols . . ." (I Kings 21: 25, 26).

But God had a man with a vision of what was wrong, what needed to be done, with a message from God of what was right and healthy for the country, and with a commitment that transcended his own selfish concerns. Meet God's man of the day — Elijah! At least seven divine manifestations — miraculous manifestations — attest Elijah's commission as God's man, the prophet with heaven's message! The first Biblical reference to Elijah tells of his prediction that Israel would have a drought, which as we later learn, lasted for more than three years. The rain stopped at Elijah's word and the rain came again at the prophet's prayer for it (I Kings 17:1-3; 18:1, 41-46). God used Elijah to interpret the drought to Ahab as a judgment against his wicked and wanton abandonment of faith in the one, true Jehovah God.

During Elijah's exile at the time of the drought, a widow in Zarephath fed the prophet from a jar of meal and a cruse of oil that never had to be replenished (I Kings 17:8-16). God also used Elijah to bring the widow's son back to life following a fatal illness (I Kings 17:17-23).

The high point in Elijah's active life as a prophet, however, must have been his contest with the prophets of Baal. Following the drought in Israel, God's man challenged the pagan priests to see whether their god could consume their sacrifice from heaven. The contest ended with God vindicating Elijah's challenge by consuming the prophet's sacrifice after the priests of Baal could not avail (I Kings 18:20-38).

When Ahab's son Ahaziah sent his soldiers to arrest the prophet, on three different occasions, he protected himself by calling fire from heaven on the troops (II Kings 1: 9-12). On another occasion the prophet crossed the Jordan River creating a dry path through the riverbed (II Kings 2:8).

But the final and seventh sign of God's approval of this prophet, and of God's use of him as a prophet, comes in *II Kings*, chapter two. Only three men in the Bible have known unusual deaths or endings to their lives. Enoch, early in Bible history, "walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). God buried Moses

after his death in the land of Moab (Deuteronomy 34: 5, 6). And now, Elijah is taken away from this earth.

In the Bible's words, "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (I Kings 2:11). In seven distinctly miraculous events, Elijah's commission as God's prophet, God's man, is made clear.

One does not live Elijah's life, however, without gaining some notoriety. The opinions about this prophet varied greatly! The widow at Zarephath, after witnessing her son restored to life, exclaimed: "Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of Jehovah in thy mouth is truth" (I Kings 17:24). This conviction, however, was not shared by King Ahab. When Elijah returned to announce that the three-year drought was over, the King greeted him in this fashion. "Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel?" (I Kings 18:17). But Elijah had a word for Ahab, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of Jehovah, and thou hast followed the Baalim" (I Kings 18:18). Later, when Elijah returned to Samaria to charge Ahab and Jezebel with murder and theft, "Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" (I Kings 21: 20). But Elijah, unmoved by the king's displeasure, said, "I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to do that which is evil in the sight of Jehovah" (I Kings 21:20).

When Ahaziah, Israel's next king, lay extremely sick in Samaria and sent messengers to inquire about his health of Baalzebub, the false god of a neighboring city, the runners were intercepted by Elijah. Not knowing his name but remembering his question of them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel, that ye go to inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron?" (II Kings 1:3), they returned to the king and described the man as "a hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins" (II Kings 1:8). To which King Ahaziah responded, "It is Elijah the Tishbite" (II Kings 1:8).

Otherwise, the Bible reserves for Elijah the simple but profound assessment, "the prophet" (I Kings 18:36).

But his exciting ministry did not prevent Elijah's personal burdens from weighing heavily on him. He fled the country after predicting, at God's direction, the drought in Israel. Living by a brook across the Jordan he was fed by "ravens" (I Kings 17:1-3, 6-9). God then ordered him back to Samaria "saying, Go, show thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth" (I Kings 18:1). He not only returns but also charges the king with idolatry again (I Kings 18:18) and challenges the prophets and priests of

Baal to prove that their god exists, that it is a true and living god worthy of worship (I Kings 18:19, 22-24).

The contest was to go something like this: two bullocks would be placed on two altars, one dedicated to Baal and the other to Jehovah God. The prophets of Baal would ask for fire from their god to burn their bullock. If the fire was forthcoming Baal was real but if not, he was false, vain, empty — an idol to be rejected in favor of the Jehovah God, who Elijah said, would hear His servant and send the fire (I Kings 18:23, 24).

Before the contest began, however, Elijah turned to address the people of Israel, all of whom had come for this event. He said, "How long go ye limping between the two sides? If Jehovah be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of Jehovah; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men" (I Kings 18:21, 22). A lonely man who spoke to a lonely people with the only difference being the cause of their loneliness: his because of the people's refusal to acknowledge Jehovah and theirs because of their repudiation of the living God who dwells in the lives of all His obedient followers (Philippians 2:12, 13; I John 4:4).

Baal failed to respond indicating the vanity and despair of all attempts to worship him. God heard Elijah's cry (II Kings 18:38), however, and the people "fell on their faces: and they said, Jehovah, He is God; Jehovah, He is God" (I Kings 18:39). None of the prophets were allowed to escape but rather were slain near the brook Kishon (I Kings 18:40).

Jezebel reacted to this display of paganism's weakness and unreality by threatening Elijah. Her threat sent the prophet out of the country again, this time to the south as far as Beersheba in Judah (I Kings 19:3, 4), then back to the north even above Samaria (I Kings 19:8, 9). Elijah had never been in lower spirits, more discouraged and disheartened, any surer that he was the only man of God alive. At Mt. Horeb, God asked Elijah, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:9, 13). Twice this same question was asked by God of His prophet. And twice God's lonely man replied, "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (I Kings 19:10, 14). Here in this deserted wilderness Elijah found God not in a "strong wind," "an earthquake," nor "a fire," but in a "still small voice."

But it wasn't a comforting, sympathetic voice that condoned the prophet's self-pity. It was a voice that told Elijah to recognize Hazael as King of the neighboring

country Syria, to anoint Jehu as a future king of Israel, and to select Elisha as the prophet's successor. These men would participate in God's plan to rid Israel of its real enemies and to bring God's people back to Him. Then, almost as if an afterthought, God said to Elijah, "Yet will I leave me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (I Kings 19:18). This is what Paul, in the New Testament, refers to after he describes Elijah's dejection and loneliness, when he says, "But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have left for myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (Romans 11:4).

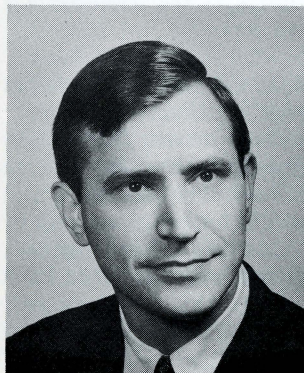
But God used this lonely man in ways that few have been used in all history. Israel, momentarily at least, was led away from Baal worship to serve Jehovah God (I Kings 18:25-40). Later the very things Elijah did now would contribute to the complete rejection of Baal worship. It was through Elijah that God initiated and concluded His three-year judgment of drought on rebellious, idolatrous Israel (I Kings 18:41-46; James 5:17, 18). It was by Elijah's hand that God picked the people — Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha — who would later be instruments through which His will would be accomplished (I Kings 19:15-18). If Elijah had done nothing more than prepare Elisha for his ministry, an entire life would have been justified (I Kings 19:19-21; II Kings 2:9-12).

Now let's understand the reason for much of Elijah's loneliness. His faith and convictions made him a lonely man at a time of great wickedness and idolatry in his country. Just as it took great strength for Elijah to publicly own his faith, so today in a secular, material world faith seems unnecessary to many, especially faith in Jesus Christ. To believe in Him, however, is to have God's life well up within us (John 7:37-39).

Even when discouraged and downhearted Elijah knew that God could victoriously use him, and so every time God called Elijah responded. Jesus Christ commands you today: "except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish" (Luke 13:3). Those who heed Jesus' call come to Him obeying His will for their lives. His wish today for you who have not fully accepted Him in His way is "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

What Elijah says to you and me today is that we need never fear the ultimate consequences of our faith in God, even when living in a hostile and faithless world. God's

lonely man challenges you and me now: "How long go ye limping between the two sides? If Jehovah be God, follow him" (I Kings 18:21, 22).



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.