

Ravens: God's Special Birds • I Kings 17:1-6, Luke 12:22-26

Nine hundred years before the birth of Jesus was a tumultuous time for the nation of Israel. Gone were the glory days of King David and King Solomon when Israel was one of the richest, most powerful and respected nations in the world. No longer did the Hebrew people worship together at the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Gone were the peace and prosperity of yesterday.

A terrible civil war divided the nation during the rule of Solomon's son, King Rehoboam. He ignored the advice of his father's wise counselors and began his reign with heavy-handed oppression of his subjects. They rebelled and divided the nation. The ten northern territories established a new kingdom, leaving King Rehoboam with only two territories to the south (Judah and Benjamin). The southern kingdom kept the capital city of Jerusalem and the temple. This was followed by generations of conflict and the Hebrew people never reunited.

The kings of the north were an ungodly lot. Not one of them was a whole-hearted follower of God. Not one of them practiced the Hebrew faith taught in the Bible. They took a political approach to religion. The northern kingdom leaders didn't want their people traveling to Jerusalem to worship so they established a new religion based in their capital city of Samaria. At first their religion reflected the laws and God of the Bible. But, increasingly, they adopted the practices of paganism from the neighboring nations.

One of the worst spiritual turns of history came when the northern king Ahab married a woman from Sidon named Jezebel. She was powerful, smart, wicked, pagan and thoroughly anti-God. She did everything in her power to turn the people away from God and make them worshippers of the Canaanite god Baal. An old Canaanite myth said that Baal was a god that got into fights with other gods and always won until he became the king of gods. As the king of all gods he was to be worshiped more than any other gods. Jezebel promoted Baal priests, Baal idols, Baal temples, Baal sacri-

fices and Baal worship until the people of God increasingly were turned away from the Lord who loved them.

This broke God's heart. God described himself as the "husband of Israel" and said that Baal worship was spiritual adultery. God fought to keep his people. He did everything he could to hold onto those he loved.

God sent a prophet named Elijah to confront King Ahab, Queen Jezebel and all the sinful and rebellious people of the northern kingdom. Elijah was a truly amazing man. You can read his biography in the Old Testament book of I Kings, but there are many other references to him throughout the Bible. He was one of the greatest prophets of God who ever lived.

Elijah performed more miracles than anyone else in the entire Bible except Jesus. Elijah healed the sick, raised the dead, made an ax head float, multiplied food

so that it didn't run out and he never died. At the end of his biography on earth God sent angels to transport him directly from earth to heaven without going through death.

He was such an amazing man that the Old Testament

ends with Elijah and the New Testament begins with Elijah. The very last words in the Old Testament are in Malachi 4:5-6:

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

The Bible is then silent for 400 years until the New Testament opens in the four gospels with the story of Jesus. When the people heard Jesus speak and saw his miracles they asked if he was Elijah come back to life. They saw him make the sick well and bring the dead back to life. They saw him take food and multiply it so it wasn't used up. When Jesus' splendor was revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration, three contemporaries of Jesus were allowed to witness the event—Peter, James and John.

People just like us can pray prayers that have spectacular, supernatural answers.

But God also sent two witnesses from heaven, Moses and Elijah.

Let there be no doubt, Elijah was one of the most amazing men who ever lived. But he was still a man. He was vulnerable and frail. He became frightened, lonely, hungry, thirsty and depressed. Even the best and most godly people are still frail and vulnerable sinners. That is why the biblical biography of Elijah begins with the birds of God in 1 Kings 17:1-6:

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and 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 the 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.

We don't know where his hometown of Tishbe was. We just know that he wasn't from the beautiful and prosperous capital city of Samaria. Elijah was an outsider. He wasn't among the elite or wealthy or important or powerful. That makes it all the more stunning that one day, at the request of God, he went to King Ahab and made a statement that smacked of political treason. His only authority was that he spoke for God. His only credential was God himself. He predicted that God would bring years of drought on the entire nation. Then he prayed that this prediction would come true!

His story is told almost at the end of the New Testament, in James 5:17: "*Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.*"

The point is that people just like us can pray prayers that have spectacular, supernatural answers. That raises all kinds of personal questions. Suppose God gives you a message, an unpleasant message. Suppose it's a confrontation against something

wrong. What would you do? Would you speak up for God? What if you thought it would cost you your friends, your job or even your life? Many would choose silence or tell God to speak for himself. But, not Elijah! He courageously confronted the powerful king and warned him of divine judgment.

The judgment of God is always serious and sometimes frightening. But God never begins with judgment. He always starts with blessing and generosity. God gives us all kinds of good with the expectation that we will be so attracted to him that we will respond with gratitude and obedience and be drawn to him. Then God blesses us some more.

But, what if that doesn't work? What if we take the generosity of God for granted. We assume that we have it coming or we ignore him. We become lazy. We become indifferent and distance ourselves from the God who loves us and is so generous to us.

Then God faces a difficult choice. God loves us enough that if we won't respond to good he will give us some bad. That's what happened to Israel. They took the blessings of God for granted and rebelled against him. To get their attention and to bring them back he stopped the rain, killed their crops, dried up their wells and took them to the brink of death.

The same thing can happen to us. God shows his loves to us by giving us friends, jobs, opportunities, money, homes, church and an eternal relationship with him . . . and we take it for granted. We disobey God's commands, bow down to idols, act as if God didn't exist and live consistently sinful lives. God then does what he must do to get our attention, humble our hearts and bring us back to him. If necessary, God will strike us with drought in our careers, finances, relationships and health. It's just like Elijah and Israel all over again.

When prosperity and goodness won't turn our hearts to God, God uses calamity. The lesson for us all is if we have turned our backs on God and chased after the Baals in life, we need to dump those Baals rather than have God bring drought into our lives.

When God brought drought to Israel, Elijah was not exempt. His garden died, his well dried up and his throat parched. And to add to all of this, King Ahab was out to kill him. So, God ordered Elijah into hiding in a ravine of a tributary of the Jordan River called Kerith. God told him to hide and promised him water from the river and food from the ravens.

Yuck! Elijah would rather have died that be fed by ravens. Ravens are big black birds—scavengers, omnivorous, the biggest of the crow family with wingspans up to 42 inches. Their favorite meal is dead food. They are flying garbage disposals. The largest of all songbirds, they are capable of imitating the songs of other birds and people. In flight they can soar like a hawk and do acrobatics like an Olympic gymnast. Considered among the most intelligent of birds, ravens have been vilified in many cultures as messengers of disease and death.

Even God classified ravens as “unclean”, in the same category with pigs. No respectable Jew then or now would ever eat a raven. Come to think of it, neither would we! Chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks but, never ever a raven or a crow!

For three and a half years God sent a twice-a-day airlift of bread and meat by raven. Put yourself in Elijah’s sandals. Elijah had to wonder where this bread came from. Was it from the garbage dump? Where did they get the meat? Did they pick it off the centerline of an interstate highway? Who wants a steady menu of raven road kill?

Or was it nothing like that at all? Was it that God had chosen the most unlikely creature, the least loved animal, to bring life, health, sustenance, safety and blessing? God did not give Elijah a five-year supply . . . just enough for half a day. Every morning and every night for three-and-a-half years the ravens showed up with breakfast and dinner. It was not one miracle. It was nearly 2000 consecutive miracles.

We have here powerful principles for us because the God of the birds is our God, too. He calls us to speak the truth in the midst of sin. It may be in our family, our business, our school, our neighborhood or our denomination. One of America’s largest and oldest denominations recently voted between the authority of the Bible and the current trend of culture. Culture won a majority of the votes. Now there is a minority of Elijahs confronting the Ahabs and standing for biblical teaching. The story of 1 Kings is repeated in every generation.

God provides for us in our need. Sometimes he tells us to stay in the middle of the mess and con-

front the Ahabs and Jezebels. Sometimes he hides us away in a ravine like Kerith. Rarely does he supply all of tomorrow’s needs today. Seldom does he send the resources we need in fancy wrapped packages. But God still surprises. God still uses the unexpected. Often he sends ravens to get us through a morning and an evening at a time. Let there be no doubt that the birds of God still come to meet our needs. As God took care of Elijah, God takes care of us!

God not only takes care of us, he also takes care of

those who take care of us. He is the God of the birds. The ravens that fed Elijah return in the teaching of Jesus. He talked to his followers (and to us) about why we worry and what we should do to worry less. In Luke 12:22-26 Jesus said to his disciples:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?”

Are you a worrier? Jesus says that worry doesn’t work. Jesus’ example is length of life. Suppose you worry about dying. You think about it, lose sleep over it, wonder how you will die and when you will die. You obsess about how dying feels and what it will be like. In a year you consume an hour a day for a total of 365 hours worrying about dying. What does it get you? Nothing. Zero. Zilch. You will not live one hour longer because you worried than you will live if you never worried at all.

Okay, you don’t worry about length of life. So, Jesus gave other examples. Do you worry about what to wear? Do you worry about what to eat? Do you worry about how much you weigh? What do you worry about?

Whatever it is that you worry about, Jesus says, *“Consider the ravens!”* God takes care of the ravens: *“And how much more valuable you are than birds!”*

***As God took care of Elijah,
God takes care of us!***

This is one of the most practical and powerful lessons we can learn in the Christian life. God takes care of ravens—scavengers, non-Kosher, unclean, inedible ravens. God cares about their dinner. God cares about their nests, their eggs and their feathers. By comparison, you are worth ten trillion times more to God than any raven pouncing on dead meat. God loves you. God will do what you cannot do. God will take care of you. God will provide. God will be there when you need him. Be responsible, yes . . . but you don't ever need to worry.

But you are worried. You're worried about your job, your clothes, your car, your son, your grades, the lump you discovered in the shower this morning, the bills that are due at the end of the month, your daughter, your dad and mom, all the things you have to get done, the meeting coming next week.

Give your worries to the God of the birds. Trust the God who takes care of the ravens to take care of you. Believe that he knows your every need and is engaged in your every worry. Be convinced that he is on your side. Trust him. Like the raven, trust God.

Our son Jeff taught high school in Guatemala for a year. While he was there, he bought a 1989 Isuzu Trooper with about 250,000 miles on it. He thought it had 250,000 miles on it. The speedometer and odometer both quit at 204,000 miles and he had driven it quite a bit since he purchased it.

Toward the end of July Charleen and I flew to Guatemala City and drove with Jeff from Guatemala City to Minneapolis. It is a 3,000 mile journey that includes the entire length of Mexico from border to border. Southern Mexico is often in political rebellion. It is rural with narrow roads, vast empty spaces, rain forest and virtually no one else who speaks English.

One hot afternoon along one of these rural two-lane roads in Chiapas State an alternator belt broke, knocked off the fan belt and the truck wouldn't run. The only tool we had was an adjustable crescent wrench that wasn't much help. We tried every make-shift repair we could think of for an hour or two and realized we were stuck. During that time no one stopped to help.

So, Charleen, Jeff and I got into the truck and prayed for God's help. Within about three minutes a pickup truck stopped with a government mechanic who had all his tools and said he would help. Within about another minute or two a taxi driver stopped and offered to drive half an hour into the next town to find, purchase and bring back the part we needed to get our truck running. Their repairs worked. The mechanic requested no money and the taxi driver just asked for the 30 pesos (about \$3) he had spent of his own money to buy the alternator belt.

And, we were on our way again.

God did not send ravens. He sent people of Chiapas. And that was exactly what we needed.

Don't worry about your life. You are valuable to God. God knows what you need. He loves you with all of his heart. He will take care of you.

God of Elijah, God of the ravens, and our God, too . . .

See us in our need, hear us in our prayers, help us in our questions and meet us where we are. May we be drawn by your love and your grace. May we not need your judgment to get our attention. May you—the great God of the birds—touch our lives, for we are ten trillion times more valuable to you than any raven could ever be.

Lord God, I pray that we will trade in our worries for trust and come to you in a confidence that will be met by your provision of whatever our needs may be.

All for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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