

The Story: Standing In The Line Of Fire
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 30:8-18, Hebrews 1:1-4, 1 Kings 18:16a-40a

Our final Scripture reading today is from 1 Kings 18:16b-40a. Listen now to God's Word. "King Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at [your wife] Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire – he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. Elijah built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it...he arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!" Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!"

Of all the roles we see in ancient Israel, the one we understand the least is that of the prophet. We get kings. We still have kings today. Just under 25% of the world's countries still have monarchs, and six countries have absolute monarchies where the royal family has complete and total control. We also understand priests, those persons authorized by God to carry out the work at the temple. Our modern pastors and reverends serve different functions than the Levite priests of old, but we get the gist of it.

But what about the prophet? Right now we hear a lot of predictions, but those are about the Super Bowl. We might hear someone who speaks the truth called a prophet. But do we still have biblical prophets? What do they do? Why are they so important in Scripture? While we've seen prophets in previous weeks like Samuel and Nathan, they've been minor characters. This week, we're going to see what it is prophets do, who they are, and why we need them today.

As we reach chapter 15 in *The Story*, we meet a prophet named Elijah. God calls Elijah to stand up to Ahab, the wicked king over the northern kingdom of Israel, and his wife Jezebel. Elijah tells Ahab that it won't rain for several years except by his word. Ahab was incensed. In the three years between Elijah's pronouncement and his return to the scene, famine and drought were widespread. Ahab's response was to allow Jezebel to round up and slaughter the prophets of God. Only those protected by Ahab's palace steward Obadiah were spared in secret.

Finally, the word of the LORD comes to Elijah – go and confront Ahab again. This time, Elijah sets up a contest so that the people of Israel might know who is really God. Both he and the prophets of Baal prepare an offering to their respective deity. The god who sets the offering on fire, they agree, is the true God. The prophets of Baal scream and shout and cry out and cut themselves all day long as part of their rituals, but nothing happens. Then Elijah rebuilds the ancient altar of the LORD. He has the Israelites saturate the offering with twelve large jars of water. Elijah prays that YHWH would show the people that He is God – and the sacrifice, the wood, the water, the stones of the altar itself, all are consumed with fire. The prophets of Baal are seized and killed, Ahab flees, the rain begins...everything looks great for the moment.

But Jezebel is none too pleased at the loss of her prophets. She sends word to Elijah – she intends to have him put to death by the end of the next day. Elijah freaks out and runs for his life. He travels nonstop and reaches the wilderness, asking for the LORD to take him, saying, “I've had enough.” But God sends an angel to minister to Elijah, and God meets with him on Mount Horeb. God instructs him to anoint a new king and his prophetic successor named Elisha. Elijah finds Elisha, and for time they are companions. Elijah continues in his ministry, speaking out against Ahab's idolatry. Eventually, God takes Elijah up to heaven, and Elisha receives a double portion of the Holy Spirit by which Elijah did several miracles. In the course of his recorded ministry, Elisha does exactly twice the number of signs Elijah performed.

But Elijah and Elisha weren't the only prophets sent to the northern kingdom. There were Amos and Hosea, who wrote books of prophesy condemning Israel's behavior and predicting disaster if its people didn't repent. There were other prophets too, who often show up briefly to show God's will and judgment to Israel's leaders. Though most aren't well-known, they too played a part by calling Israel to repentance before it was too late.

For us to understand prophets like Elijah and Elisha – and we'll see more prophets in the coming weeks – we need to understand what they did and who they were. As I studied them this week, I nailed down a few things that help us grasp the office of the prophet. Let's start with the *job* of the prophet. What does a prophet do? The prophet's job is to be a witness for the LORD, speaking God's word to His people. The prophet rarely speaks for himself, but states what God has told him to say. The prophets didn't just speak to Israel; the prophets often witnessed to other lands and warned them of God's impending judgment. Much of their job was to call the people to repentance, expressing God's desire to return them to His fold. The prophet often spoke of what disaster would happen if the people did not turn away from their wickedness. Often, this put them in the line of fire of those determined to do evil – Elijah believes that after Jezebel's purge, he is the only prophet of Yahweh left. But the word of God still must be proclaimed, and that's what a prophet does, regardless of the personal cost.

Yet the prophets were more than spokesmen of doom and gloom. Sometimes, a prophet was given insight into Israel's enemies, and the prophet would tell the king how best to proceed. Through some prophets, God promises restoration to His people, giving them hope and confidence when they were oppressed or in exile. Still other prophets speak about the future, looking forward an eternal messiah who will come from the line of David. Some see even further into God's plans, telling the people about the coming Day of the LORD when judgment will occur and all will be set right. No matter what word they were given to share, God used prophets to warn and lead His people. To king and peasant alike, they spoke the truth of God.

Now the *means* of a prophet, the way they went about their job, was special. Through the Holy Spirit, the prophets were told truths about the future. Whether the word they were given was about the fall of a kingdom or the messiah, they didn't make predictions out of their own heads but through God's revelation of Himself to them. A prophet was only as good as the word he spoke. In fact, throughout Israel's history there were many false prophets who predicted peace and prosperity in order to gain favor with the powerful. But true prophets only spoke what God had said, and proof of the prophetic office was in his words coming true. True prophets were often, though not always, given the ability to do miracles as a sign of their authority from God. Elijah and Elisha raised the dead and fed the poor. Those miracles were not always done for the entire community to see; they often benefited just a few people. Yet reports of those miracles spread far and wide so that the nation knew God had sent true prophets into their midst.

So far, everything about the prophets looks extraordinary. But the prophet as a *person*? Ordinary. The prophets were called from various walks of life. Elisha was a farmer plowing his fields when Elijah anointed him. Amos was a shepherd. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were Levites in the priestly line when God called them. The prophets themselves weren't always bedrocks of faith. They often bemoaned their status and how few people listened to them. The day after the victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah turns tail and flees when he hears that Jezebel has marked him public enemy number one. He'd seen God's immense power not a day before, yet he ran for his life, telling God he couldn't take it any more. Jonah, who most of us know as the guy who wound up in the belly of a whale – he fought being a prophet until God made it impossible for him to refuse. The prophets were people of unique power and revelation, but it all came from God and not from themselves. In every other respect, they are just like us.

How far along the timeline of faith do we see prophets? At very least, we see them in the New Testament. Jesus Himself was a prophet. He constantly spoke about future events concerning His own life and the life of Israel. He did miracles even greater than those of Elijah and Elisha proving His identity. He called us all to repentance and gives us hope that through his death and resurrection, we can be forgiven and given eternal life. While Jesus was far more than a prophet, He also held that role.

But moreover, the early church treasured the gift of prophecy. Paul said to the Corinthian church, “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy...everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” Acts 21 talks about a prophet named Agabus who warned Paul about what would happen to him when he traveled to Jerusalem. The book of Revelation is a prophesy given to John. So the prophets were not just a phenomenon in the Old Testament era, but one experienced by the New Testament church as well.

So are there still prophets today? This is a question the church cannot completely answer. Paul said there would come a day when certain gifts of the Holy Spirit like speaking in tongues and prophecy would cease. We are familiar with plenty of false prophets who have made predictions about world events that simply never came true. On the other hand, missionary reports in various countries around the world tell us that signs and wonders and prophecies often occur when people groups are first presented with the gospel. Sometimes prophetic words do come true. What should we believe about the prophetic gifts and the role of the prophet?

I believe in our era, based on what we see in the New Testament, God does not call specific people to act as prophets...He calls all of us to follow in the pattern of Jesus Christ, who Himself acted as a prophet. That means that all of us have the potential to be called into service in this role when God desires.

Let me share with you how prophecy changed my life. When I was still in college, one day I got a call from my friend Mark Dinnage – many of you here have met him. We chatted for a little bit, and then he got to the heart of the matter. He said matter-of-factly, “Jason, I’m going to Russia, and you’re going with me.” In prayer, God had revealed to Mark a call for him to be a missionary to Russia for a year. In that same prayer, God told Mark to tell me the same thing! I was flabbergasted; God had never said anything to me. I was reluctant until I asked God in prayer myself – and God answered those prayers. But had God not shown His will for the future to Mark, I doubt I would have been on the path that led me to be your minister here today.

This may sound crazy or scary to you. I understand those feelings. Many of us do not get specific leadings from the LORD when we pray. But if and when we do, we should act on them. And moreover, we must be mindful of this: God calls on us to witness to His work and message in our world just as the prophets did. We are called upon to boldly spread the news of what God is doing. When we speak to the world, we share not only the joy of salvation that Christ brings, but we also call upon everyone to repent of sin. Many people today have no concept of Christianity because they feel no need to be forgiven. They don’t know that they have sinned against their Creator and are under His judgment unless they turn to Him and receive life in the name of Jesus Christ.

We have something that none of the prophets had – we have the full and complete Scripture of God, leading us not only through the era of Israel that we’ve been reading about, but through the era of Jesus Christ and the final victory He has won over sin and death. We have God’s own revelation of Himself to us. Since we have that revelation in all its fullness, we are in a position far more wonderful than those who merely saw pieces of the picture. God’s Word will speak to us today if we dive into it and study it and ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture for us. Through His Word, God will give us words to speak to those around us.

It can be scary being a prophet. It does sometimes mean being in the line of fire. It means that we will say things that will offend those in power and the false gods of our day. We will stand against the modern status quo. We will not be politically correct. It’s not easy to stand upon the Word of God when so many in our day despise it. Yet we must. For culture always changes; what is popular now will be unpopular in a season. But the Word of God stands firm through all ages. We must stand upon what it says and share it with those around us.

I’m going to make a confession to you...I have not always been prophetic in the way I should have been with you. When I came to the church two and a half years ago, there were many wounds to be healed. In my desire to reach all of you, to lose as few as possible from the congregation, to mend those scars, I have not always spoken as boldly as God would have me speak. I have at times decided to inform you about issues rather than to take a clear biblical position on them. I have been at times afraid to talk about sin and what Scripture says about it head-on with you for fear of offense. I apologize for that and ask your forgiveness. I’m not going to lecture on politics from the pulpit or tell you who to vote for or anything remotely like that – but my prayer is that I will speak boldly when Scripture calls for it.

Because in this era of confusion on moral issues and what God has said about them, we need clarity. Morality in and of itself is not at all what Christianity is about. Christianity is about God, about who He is and what He has done in history, and how through His grace and mercy in Jesus Christ we may be in relationship with Him. But our disobedience to God is what has broken our relationship with Him, and we need to understand how we have disobeyed. We need to confront our own sins boldly, rooting them out of our lives through the Holy Spirit’s work and direction. And when appropriate, as the prophets did, we need to confront others, confidently warning them to repent while gently reassuring them of the love and salvation God holds for them when they find true faith in Him. It’s not easy, but it is our call as God’s people, and through Him we can do this task with care and love.

The job of the prophet still needs to be done. The people of God need to hear His call and obey. The prophetic voice we hear in Scripture is still living and active today. We are still ordinary people, just like the prophets of old, yet God is calling each and every believer to challenge the world with His message. To be a Christian is to speak truth into each other’s lives. May God give us the courage to risk everything for His sake, to be an Elijah and an Elisha to this era, so those around us may come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.