

# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	9
Chapter 1: When the Odds Seem Against You .....	15
Chapter 2: When You Feel Down and Out .....	45
Chapter 3: When Life Takes a Turn .....	71
Chapter 4: When All Seems Lost .....	97



# CHAPTER 1

## WHEN THE ODDS SEEM AGAINST YOU





# CHAPTER 1

## WHEN THE ODDS SEEM AGAINST YOU

Opening the Bible and beginning to read a story can feel a lot like landing in a foreign country without a map. It helps to have some basic orientation to your surroundings and a direction to follow to help you become familiar.

Such is the case for the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Though they are among the better known and most often referenced characters in the Bible, when Elijah enters the scene in 1 Kings 17, we need some background on what was happening around him in order to appreciate his story.

The death of King Solomon ushered in an important change in Israelite history. Up until then, the Israelites had risen from

humble beginnings as descendants of Abraham (Genesis), slaves in Egypt, and wandering nomads in the wilderness (Exodus–Deuteronomy). They had entered the Promised Land (Joshua) and carved out an existence as a collection of tribes without much central leadership (Judges). At last, the first kings came to power, which would prove a mixed blessing. Israel had reached the height of military and economic power under King David (1–2 Samuel) and his son Solomon (1 Kings 2–11). These were the glory days of the Israelite empire, often referred to as the era of Zion.

But in the second half of the tenth century BC, around the year 922, King Solomon died. The northern tribes, led by a charismatic leader named Jeroboam, revolted against Solomon's son, Rehoboam. They broke away and became independent; the once-mighty empire split into a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah.

There were a number of reasons for the division of the kingdoms; 1 Kings presents this in part as a punishment for Solomon's idolatry later in life, and Jeroboam seemed to be reacting to heavy taxation and conscribed labor. There were also cultural and religious divisions that likely played an important role, including the two kingdoms' understanding of God and the shape of God's intervention in human life.

The people of the Southern Kingdom focused on God's covenant with David, holding on to God's promise to bless the people with land, the Temple, and a continuous lineage of royal rule. David's dynasty persisted throughout the history of the Southern Kingdom. Their kings were selected by heredity, as an ongoing genealogy dating back to King David. Rehoboam, Jehoshaphat,

Uzziah, Manasseh, Josiah, and many others, twenty in all, were all kings of Judah and descendants of David.

This outlook might be understood as one that emphasized God's steadfastness, protection, and ongoing presence. God was reliable and could be trusted, even if God was not quite predictable. God's presence could always be found in the Temple of Jerusalem (where God sat), in the divinely appointed king (through whom God ruled), and in the land (which was a fulfillment of God's ancestral promise). And God could be trusted to protect the people and the land because of the special relationship with the king and the Temple.

In contrast to this more "fixed" view of God in the south, the Israelites in the Northern Kingdom of Israel emphasized a different set of traditions. They focused more on God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their wandering in the wilderness, during which time God went with the people. They were therefore less tied to the Temple in Jerusalem or direct lineage to David. They established their capital in Shechem and later Samaria, and they rooted their memory not in the Temple but in the Tabernacle, the mobile worship center that allowed their ancestors to follow God through the wilderness in Exodus.

A key difference between the north and the south was in the way the north chose their kings. In the south the dynasty of David remained strong, and though there were competition and power games, a descendant of David was always on the throne. But in the Northern Kingdom, a single dynasty could not gain a foothold for very long. The people of the north seemed much more open to following leaders based on charisma—that is, evidence that the Spirit of God had rested on a particular person, for a season of

time, evidenced by the blessings God had bestowed on the people through their leadership.

And when there was no longer evidence that they were following God's lead, or that God had moved on to someone else? It was time for a new king. And often that led to rebellion, revolt, and even assassination to usher in a new ruler.

So, of the nineteen kings in the north, how many died by assassination? Eight. And of the twenty kings in the south, how many died by assassination? Zero.

Clearly, being a prophet in the Northern Kingdom—the setting for the stories that follow—was deathly business. To discern for the people whether God's Spirit had moved on to another ruler was to live a life fraught with risk.

## The Purpose of the Prophets

Prophets were often plucked from obscurity, sometimes with no name recognition or impressive skills, in order to carry out the most dangerous missions. They spoke words of truth against powerful people too hard-hearted to receive them and against populations of people too brittle to respond. Many of these prophets endured long stretches of loneliness, starvation, and fear for their own well-being.

Yet they served one of the most vital roles in the entire Bible. They were God's mouthpieces, offering course corrections for wayward people and wicked rulers. They did so with dazzling demonstrations of power and performance art. They were equal parts street performer, political pundit, operative, and wordsmith.

Their lives serve as examples to us of how to live with courage, integrity, and faith amid dangerous adversaries and troubling times. When the people were more prone to follow their own understanding and their own pathway to power and prosperity, the prophets spoke out. They challenged people to open up their minds and their hearts to new ways of understanding God, of living out God's commands, and of relating to one other—even as they reminded them of God's covenant made with them long ago. They called people to faithfulness, even when the world around them was changing. And they showed people how to see God amid their hard times in a way they never had before.

And most of the time, a prophet had an adversary.

Every good story, after all, needs a villain. Batman had the Joker, the Avengers had Thanos, and Luke Skywalker had the Emperor. Screenwriters and novelists know that what really propels a good story is not the setting or the characters. It's the conflict. Good, juicy, delicious moments of tension suck you in and make you choose sides. Hero or villain? Bully or underdog? Good or evil?

The historian of 1 Kings must have known this, since there is no doubt that when it came to chronicling the adventures of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the author paid careful attention to their rivals, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. More words are used to describe the wickedness of these two individuals than are used to describe any other villain in the entire Bible—more than Pharaoh, more than Judas, more than Goliath, more than anyone.

It is clear all throughout these stories who the bad guys are: Ahab and Jezebel exemplified evil.

Ahab was the seventh king of the Northern Kingdom, whose rule started just fifty years after the nation of Israel divided. He



succeeded his father, Omri, who ruled briefly until dying of natural causes. In describing the beginning of Ahab's reign, the Bible wastes no time in telling us about his eventual legacy:

*He ruled over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years and did evil in the LORD's eyes, more than anyone who preceded him. Ahab found it easy to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, Nebat's son. He married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, who was the king of the Sidonians. He served and worshipped Baal. He made an altar for Baal in the Baal temple he had constructed in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred pole and did more to anger the LORD, the God of Israel, than any of Israel's kings who preceded him.*

(1 Kings 16:29b-33)

There is no mistaking who the antagonist of this story would be. The people of the Northern Kingdom, who so often needed to discern how well their king was demonstrating the fruit of God's anointing, were now being led by someone who would be the most wayward ruler they would ever know.

The times required a course correction, a messenger with a challenging message, a person who would stand tall and do a most unenviable job. The times required a prophet, a person who would speak God's truth to earthly powers.

## The God Who Calls and Provides 1 Kings 17:1-6

We are told very little about Elijah when he is introduced in 1 Kings 17. He was a native of Tishbe, from the region of Gilead,

east of the Jordan River, and part of the Northern Kingdom. That's all we know. No lineage, no call story, no special skillsets that made him right for the job. He bursts onto the scene out of nowhere with a formidable mission: tell Ahab that he has stopped following the ways of the Lord.

This is the first of many entry points in the stories of Elijah and Elisha that invite us to identify ourselves in their struggles. If you have ever had the daunting task of speaking a hard truth to someone you know, especially someone you love, you know what an emotionally burdensome job that is.

When you are watching a loved one slowly kill himself, one bottle at a time;

When the employer who holds both your career and your livelihood with one hand is bilking the company behind his back with the other;

When your elected government official is skirting her responsibility, promoting self over common good;

When the ones you trust to do what is right choose expediency over integrity, and the way of power over the way of decency and love;

And when the only person who can challenge them is . . . you.

It's not a task you wanted, and not one you would readily accept. If there were any way for you to shirk that call, to pawn it off on someone else, you would. But you know better. Sometimes the hard job of speaking the truth in love, to someone you love or someone with more power than you have, is the most unenviable job in life.

It's what makes the story of Elijah—and every prophet, really—so endearing and so relevant for us. We would much rather God

choose someone else. Our life would be easier, and our days more joyous. But when the times demand it, and we feel the burden of that call is too heavy to avoid, we turn to people like Elijah to follow their example. We push ahead, and we trust that God will be with us, giving us the word and strengthening our every move.

### *A Wilderness . . . Blessing?*

Elijah's first message was simple: There was going to be a long drought, and it wasn't going to end until God said so. Such a drought would be devastating for the people and for the economy, so this news was about as bad as it could get.

And that was just Elijah's first day on the job.

God then told Elijah to go out into the wilderness for a while, to the Cherith Brook (1 Kings 17:3-4), so that God could take care of him there. In the safety and isolation of the wilderness, he could drink of the brook's water and be cared for by the birds that God sent to him.

This is an important lesson right from the beginning. Before Elijah performed any miracle or confronted any more power or made any more official pronouncements, he needed to experience the wilderness. He needed to learn what it would mean to be utterly dependent on God to provide all he needed.

The Bible is full of wilderness experiences. It is one of the most common set pieces on the entire biblical stage.

The Israelites were there, wandering for decades in a vast wilderness before they entered the Promised Land.

David was there, before he became king, fearing for his life from an enraged Saul.

John the Baptist was there. He turned the wilderness into his office, and the desert into his pulpit.

Even Jesus was there. Before he performed any miracles or uttered any teachings, he was there to experience the gravity of the human condition, and he discovered that it is one of suffering, temptation, and isolation.

If you are in the wilderness today, you are surrounded by a company of witnesses who are among the greatest of biblical heroes. And if even the greats of our faith suffered in the wilderness, don't feel so surprised that you do, too.

You might identify your wilderness as a physical hardship or mental anguish. You might be suffering the sting of shame and guilt from your past, or be fraught with anxiety about your future. Your wilderness might be littered with scorched relationships with people you have a hard time forgiving. Your wilderness might be a financial condition that is crumbling, or a job search that is going nowhere.

Your wilderness might be one of identity and acceptance as you struggle to find out who you really are and what you are meant to become. Or worse, you know who you are and are fearful that others might not accept you. And the cumulative result of all these things is that you are wondering where God is in the wilderness.

But notice something about each of the wilderness experiences in the Bible. In each case, people discovered that God was right there with them, in a way they would not have realized if they had not gone through that wilderness.

The Israelites were fed manna every day; just enough, no more and no less, to make it one day at a time. They had a pillar of fire lead them by night and a cloud by day, to remind them that God was always at hand.

David was blessed with strength and courage by God, and support from his beloved friend Jonathan and many others, to rise above his fears.

John the Baptist was blessed by his mission from God, with great anticipation for the One for whom he was preparing the way.

Jesus was nourished by the angels and his command of the Scriptures to withstand his trials by the devil.

And Elijah received bread from ravens and water from a brook to sustain him during his lonely time in the wilderness. Elijah learned the lesson those before him discovered and after him would also discover in the wilderness: depend on God, who is and will be with you.

This message is clear: if you are going to do the work of God in the world, you need to learn that your strength and your means will not be sufficient to get you through it. And sometimes, when you are in the wilderness time of your life, in pain, hardship, suffering, or anxiety, that may be *exactly* where God wants you to be in order to learn how to trust and depend on God. You can't learn that unless you are in the wilderness.

## The Woman Who Hit Rock Bottom *1 Kings 17:8-24*

Well, the respite at Cherith did not last long, as is often the case with moments of peace or preparation. Just like that, God gave Elijah his first major marching orders. He told him to travel to Zarephath, near Sidon in Phoenician territory, where he would meet a widow who would take care of him.

**W**e've all been there. Rock bottom. The end of our rope. The last straw. During such times, it often seems like the only option is to throw in the towel.

In *Hope for Hard Times*, author Magrey deVega examines the lives of the great biblical prophets Elijah and Elisha and reveals a consistent message in their stories: Don't give up, and don't lose hope. Trust that God will help you find a way. There is hope for you in hard times. Your story of hurt, heartache, and hopelessness has been heard, and God has a message for you. Read these stories, pray through them, and listen as you receive encouragement and guidance for whatever you are facing today. Open your eyes, and open your hands. God is with you, giving you everything you need.

Also available are a Leader Guide and free online videos to help guide small groups through a four-week study. The videos can be found online at [AbingdonPress.com/HopeforHardTimes](http://AbingdonPress.com/HopeforHardTimes).

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Magrey deVega poetically, poignantly, and pastorally animates the experiences of Elijah and Elisha until they walk off of the pages of Holy Writ into our lives. Magrey helps us to see that no matter what, we can live with hope rooted in the confidence that we are not alone. God is with us.

—**Gregory Vaughn Palmer**, Resident Bishop, Ohio West Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church

Magrey deVega has a gift for taking biblical stories and helping us realize they are our stories. In this book, he takes us through the hard times of Elijah and Elisha as a way to guide us through similar times in our lives. Through these prophets, an ancient word becomes a living word for us.

—**Dr. Steve Harper**, retired seminary professor and United Methodist elder

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