

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

a sermon by

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Text: "And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word." (First Kings 18:21)

Matters of faith can be difficult to understand. What one person can see clearly, another sees only as a blinding fog. What is for one a source of great comfort, to another is nothing but cause for anguish and frustration.

Who among us can understand matters of faith? There are many who have endured terrible tragedies, unspeakable moments of suffering, and in that moment of suffering, faith prospers. Then, there are certain moments in life when we, ordinary people, receive incontrovertible evidence that our faith is true; and yet we continue to doubt.

The ability to hold fast to a particular belief, even in the presence of evidence that the belief is simply wrong, is known as cognitive dissonance. That particular phrase speaks to a remarkably human phenomenon.

Part I

The Bible is filled with stories of people who live with amazing, steadfast faith; and, of others who seem to have no faith at all. Such is the story that we find in today's Old Testament lesson (First Kings 18:20-21, 30-39).

The people have endured a terrible drought. Now that the drought is about to end, there is an interest in knowing who withholds it and who allows the rain to fall. The choices presented to the people are very clear. Elijah, as a prophet of God, is a strong proponent that it is the Lord our God, the Living God, who is the one true God. The people of Elijah's communities seek after another, one that they call Baal of the heavens.

The King of that region, Ahab, had sought after Elijah for quite some time. Hostilities between Ahab and Elijah are famous. When Ahab finally encountered Elijah, he called out to him saying, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"

Elijah's answer reveals contempt for the King. "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."¹

From the manner in which this confrontation and the resulting challenge unfold, we are able to discern at least two very important facts. First, Elijah is very much in the minority. Up to this point in his life, Elijah has worked with another prophet named Obadiah. But, in this moment of conflict, Elijah will stand alone against hundreds of others. The second very important fact that we can discern is this; only Elijah believes that he will prevail. Everyone else gathered at this conflict is there to witness the failure of Elijah. The people believe that they are worshiping the god of the storms, one who can cause rain and lightning to fall at will. As they gather for this contest, they have every confidence that their god will prevail over the God of Elijah.

Before the contest itself begins, Elijah asks this very important question, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."

The people did not answer Elijah's question. Instead, they looked on as the priests of Baal went about their work. They prepared a bull for the sacrifice by fire, and then called upon the name of Baal throughout the morning. At noon Elijah began to mock the people as they danced and cried out.

"Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."²

¹ First Kings 18:17-19.

² First Kings 18:27.

In his choice of language, Elijah is being impolite. Elijah is ridiculing their god by suggesting that he has a short attention span, is going to the bathroom, has abandoned them altogether, or, perhaps, is simply sleeping. The people respond to Elijah's taunts. They cry out more loudly. They dance more vigorously, even cutting themselves until blood is gushing from their bodies. Their dancing continues until the middle of the afternoon. Their work, their sweat, and their blood were all in vain; "there was no voice; no one answered, no one heeded."³

As Elijah prepared for his turn in this contest, he did everything possible to hearken back to the original tribes of Israel. Elijah repaired the original altar that had been damaged, using 12 stones, each one representing a different tribe of Israel. Elijah then asked his opponents to fill four jars with water, and to pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood. By repeating this process three times, Elijah called for 12 jars of water. This was more than just symbolism to elicit remembrance of days gone by. Water poured all over Elijah's altar loads the dice against his God. "As a storm god, Baal ought to be able to produce lightning if he can do anything."⁴

At this point, every spectator understands what is happening. When asked to affirm their faith in the living God, they remained silent; every one of them remained silent. Now, confronted with the failure of their god, the people have watched as Elijah used visual images to tell the story of God. Even more than that, by introducing the element of water, Elijah raises the standards to a new and unimagined height. Now, with every imaginable advantage being given to the prophets of Baal, there is no reason to believe that Elijah will have any opportunity to succeed. He is after all, out numbered and clearly out of step with all that the people value.

Just as Elijah began this episode by calling the people to return to God, Elijah now calls out to God in a way that reminds the people of His divine, redemptive purpose.

"Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O LORD, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back."⁵

Upon seeing Elijah's sacrifice devoured by fire, the people did return to their faith in God. At Elijah's command, they killed the prophets of Baal. As the story is told, Elijah's life was then threatened by Jezebel. And so, Elijah fled into the wilderness, where he offered an honest prayer of exhaustion and self-pity; claiming to be the only one that was left. But he was not alone. As the still, small voice of God spoke to Elijah, the Lord spoke of thousands that had refused to worship the gods of that foreign land.

³ First Kings 18:29.

⁴ Richard D. Nelson First and Second Kings (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), page 117.

⁵ First Kings 18:37.

Part II

For Elijah, the swing went from triumph to tragedy. Because of this great victory, Elijah's life was threatened. Seeing no other choice, he fled into exile. Alone and frightened, Elijah encountered the empowering and calming voice of our God. Elijah is not alone in this journey. There are times when people have encountered hopeless circumstances and events, only to find the hope that we have in our God.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky lived in a community that did not know our God. After participating in a socialist discussion group, after hoping to end serfdom in Russia, Dostoyevsky was arrested and imprisoned for more than eight months in St. Petersburg. He was sentenced to death, and in an act that is described only as "psychological torture," the execution was staged but not carried out. Three days later, on Christmas Eve 1849, Dostoyevsky was sent to Siberia. "As the sled made its way toward Siberia, Dostoyevsky was moved by the compassion of peasant women who trailed behind the prisoners. One of the women offered him a copy of the New Testament -- the only book he was allowed to read in the labor camp. Thus far in his adult life, he had not had much use for Christian faith."⁶

Fyodor Dostoyevsky lived the next years of his life in the most hopeless circumstances. But in the midst of that hopelessness, he found hope. It is in the Siberian prison that Dostoyevsky "embraced the New Testament's powerful redemptive possibility." This hope, which comes only from God, is reflected in Dostoyevsky's subsequent writings. As one historian described the event, "the Russian government robbed Dostoyevsky of political freedom for nearly a decade. But they couldn't touch what he later called the 'regeneration of my convictions.'"⁷

Nearly 100 years later, similar circumstances would change the life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn was serving faithfully as a captain in the Soviet Army as they marched toward Berlin. He was removed from his unit and placed under arrest because "he met up with an old friend who shared his passion for what they believed to be communism's utopian possibilities. Yet they also shared a Leninist critique of Stalin's economy and style. Together they secretly composed 'Resolution No. 1,' which compared Stalin's communism to feudalism."⁸

Solzhenitsyn endured more than a decade in prison. He was plagued by shameless and continuous censorship of his great writings, and eventually, he suffered with cancer. Even after all that, Solzhenitsyn had not encountered the living God; he had not become a Christian. He was very much a child of his time and place in history. The atheistic views of the 1917 Revolution formed his faith; or, more honestly, his lack of faith.

⁶ Collin Hansen "Unchained Faith: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and John Bunyan" in *Christian History and Biography* (copyright 2005, Christianity Today International; Reprinted and published June 2007 at <http://www.ctlibrary.com/33376>).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

In February 1952, Solzhenitsyn was a patient recovering from cancer surgery. While in the hospital, he met and was comforted by a doctor who spoke of his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. The morning after that particular conversation, the doctor died after suffering several brutal blows to the head.

That healing physician, with his words of faith, and the fact that he died for it, marked a turning point in Solzhenitsyn's life of faith. "By this time, Solzhenitsyn felt hunted by the Almighty. He recovered from cancer and he embraced Christ 'When at the end of jail, on top of everything else, I was plagued with cancer,' he recounted for biographer Joseph Pearce, 'then I was fully cleansed and came back to deep awareness of God and a deep understanding of life.'"⁹

From tragedy to triumph; such actions are hardly uncommon when guided by the hand of our God.

Part III

Matters of faith can be difficult to understand. What one person can see clearly, another sees only as a blinding fog. What is for one a source of great comfort, to another is nothing but cause for anguish and frustration.

We see this all around us; though the phenomenon is hardly new. The Gospel of Luke tells of a centurion who had a cherished slave who was sick and nearing death.¹⁰ When this Centurion learned that Jesus was entering into his town, he sent elders of the Jews asking Jesus to come and heal his slave. When those elders approached Jesus, they begged his mercy saying, "He is worthy because he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue."

That particular statement is very telling. The religious leaders measured the sincerity of the centurion's love solely by his ability to produce a tangible and worldly benefit. In their minds, there was no greater good than providing for their particular needs and desires. Their values were not shared by Jesus. As Jesus approached the home of the centurion, the centurion sent others to meet Jesus. These friends of the centurion explained that the centurion considered himself unworthy of having Jesus enter into his own home; but that he was confident in Jesus' ability to speak a healing word for the benefit of the slave.

One can hardly imagine the stinging power of the insult that Jesus hurled towards the religious leaders. Speaking to the crowds that followed after him, Jesus said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

The religious leaders sought righteousness; but, they seemed not to understand it. We live in a world that values... well, us. We like to think that our faithfulness is measured in

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Luke 7:1-10.

terms that bring benefit to us. Oh, yes, we will say that it is for the good of the church. But, Jesus looks not for those outward signs to appeal to each one of us. Jesus is seeking after faith.

From a worldly perspective, love is necessarily defined by our own self-interest. But, from a Christ-like perspective, love is defined by faith. The faith that comes from God can come in any circumstance. Faith can take root in a moment of triumph. But just as easily, faith can take root in a season of tragedy.

By limiting our view to the worldly view around us, we make it difficult to respond to faith. Even when the options are fairly clear, we don't know how to act, what to say or what to do.

Little more than one year ago, our nation celebrated when Jill Carroll, a freelance journalist working with the Christian Science Monitor, was released from captivity in Iraq. Since her release, she has written honestly and pointedly about her experiences.

You may remember how her ordeal began. On January 7, 2006, Jill Carroll was kidnapped by insurgents. Several of her traveling companions were murdered at that time. The days that followed were marked by uncertainty. Surely this was for her a season of tragedy. After 82 days in captivity, Jill Carroll was released. She wrote of the confusion and of the fear that paralyzed her ability to make decisions as she was being led away into safety. Later, she reflected on the difficulty of receiving her freedom.

“For me, my release is one of the hardest memories of my captivity. I don't know why. Suddenly, my structure was gone. There was no one to tell me what to do. My body was free, but my mind was not. I was conditioned to be whatever anyone around me wanted me to be. I had no opinions, no self-will. I didn't know how to make decisions.”¹¹

Matters of faith can be difficult to understand. What one person can see clearly, another sees only as a blinding fog. What is for one a source of great comfort, to another is nothing but cause for anguish and frustration. What may seem to be liberating, may actually be yet another cause of our spiritual paralysis.

And yet, the question is asked. “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if [*another*], then follow [*him, her or it*].”

When Elijah asked this question of the people God, they did not answer him. Today, as I ask this question of you, my prayer is that we respond more appropriately.

¹¹ Jill Carroll and Peter Grier, “The Jill Carroll Story – Part 10: Freedom” The Christian Science Monitor, August 25, 2006. With