

June 23, 2019 **“A short story of a troubled life”** by Dave Feick

Elias' entire life had been difficult. Right from birth and maybe even before. His mother had numerous complications during her pregnancy and when Elias was born, the midwife at first believed he was dead. But then, with a gasp, he let out a cry to let everyone know he was alive and well. His mother, knowing that this son would need more protection than she alone could offer him, named him Elias, my God is Yahweh and prayed that Yahweh would truly watch over him.

The family vineyards and orchards provided a fitting livelihood for Elias' parents. They had a real knack for making wine and it sold well in their region. They were known as one of the wealthy, influential families in the area of the Gerasenes. However, not everything was as it seemed. The home was not without its problems. Elias' father enjoyed the wine tasting a bit too much. He often drank to excess which caused a wise, loving and caring man to become something of a monster. Many of the family members, including Elias and his mother had bruises that they tried to hide. Bruises caused by the beatings they received from his drunk father. Elias could never understand why his father had such terrible mood swings and why he would take out his anger on them.

On one particular occasion when Elias was about 12, his father staggered into the house in a terrible mood. No one really remembers what was said or done but something really set the man off. Elias saw what was coming and he knew that none of them were safe. But Elias had had enough and determined to protect his mother and siblings this time, he positioned himself between them and his drunken father. Angered even further by this show of defiance, his father took a swing at Elias but Elias was able to duck under it and gave his father a shove. This unexpected move sent the already unstable man reeling and as he fell, his head struck the table and he fell to the floor unconscious and bleeding.

There was a brief moment of silence as the rest of the family came to grips with what just happened and then they all started crying and screaming. This had never happened before. No one knew just what to do. His mother went to tend to his father and then ordered Elias to get himself and the rest of the children to bed. Elias took them into the next room and did his best to calm them down. There was a lot of crying as they all feared the worst, wondering if their father would be okay but also wondering what could be next.

Once he finally had his siblings somewhat settled, Elias went up to the roof to wait things out. He, too feared that his father might not recover, but before long, he could hear some muffled rumblings as his father came to and he slowly regained his senses. He could also hear his mother trying to calm him. And soon it was quiet again, the alcohol numbing the pain temporarily and creating a fog that led to sleep.

Elias turned when he heard his mother's footsteps on the roof. She had come to assure Elias that his father would be okay and to see how he was doing. She told him how brave he was in standing up to his father with everyone else's safety in mind. But she also made him aware of what a grave thing it was that he had done and that if his father remembered what happened

when he awoke, there would likely be more trouble for him. Still, she suggested he try to get some rest and wait to see what transpired in the morning.

Elias slept fitfully that night. He stayed on the roof. It was a warm night and it was more comfortable to sleep there in the breeze rather than in the stuffy room with everyone else. But the events of the evening, of standing up to his father had him worried. He kept dreaming of his father coming in the night to give him the beating he had missed earlier, but fortunately, they were just dreams and his father continued to sleep off his overindulgence.

Elias woke early and rather than going down through the house and taking the chance of waking the others or encountering his father, he climbed off the roof into the olive tree and let himself down to the ground. As he stood there, wondering what he should do next, his father appeared on the roof and called down to him. The angry tone he heard in his father's voice was enough to cause Elias to fear for his life. Rather than wait for what was to come, he took off out of the yard, running as fast as his legs could carry him, down the street, to where, he did not know. When he saw an open tomb in front of him, he checked around to ensure no one was watching and he ducked inside to catch his breath.

Before long, he heard his father outside, calling his name. Elias crept further back into the shadows of the cave so he would not be seen. Eventually his father's calls faded as he searched for him elsewhere. But they were soon replaced by his mother's voice. He could hear her concern. He knew she would be worried and he knew he should respond, but he was too scared to return home just now. Before long, her voice too faded as her search for him took her elsewhere. Now he was alone with his thoughts in the dark and the silence.

So what was he to do now? He hoped that things would eventually blow over at home, but his imagination was running wild as he feared what might happen. In synagogue just the previous sabbath, the reading from the book of the Law was the passage that stated if a son was rebellious or disobedient his parents should bring him before the elders of the town and he should be stoned to death. The Rabbi had made it quite clear that there was no place for disobedience in the home. Standing up to his father was a sure sign of rebellion. A stoning was not something he was interested in.

Elias crept to the opening of the tomb, peaked out and looked around. Seeing no one, he made his way to the highway and hopped into a passing cart heading out of town.

The next years went by in a blur. They were filled with fears and anxieties as Elias sought to find ways to survive on his own. He learned that if he went to the center of town first thing in the morning, landowners and shop-owners would come looking for workers. Some were kind enough to provide meals during the work day, other times he had to wait to be paid at the end of the day to be able to buy something to eat. Some of the jobs also provided lodging for him while he worked there, but more often than not, he returned to the center of town where again, someone passing by would offer him a place to sleep for the night. However, he learned to be careful as to where he stayed as some homes were not the most hospitable and he suffered some of the same abuses he had at home. Some nights were even worse.

When he couldn't find work, he would move on to another community. Sometimes his hunger forced him to help himself to food that was being sold in the market. As he got better at finding ways to steal, he would pilfer other items as well, clothes to wear or trinkets to sell or trade for food.

But even the best of thieves gets caught as shop owners learn to watch out for people stealing their wares. On more than one occasion, Elias was caught red handed and was beaten and thrown in jail. Prison certainly didn't help his hunger issues either. All he got was a small piece of bread and on a good day some thin broth. Other people in the prison had family members who brought them food but there was seldom enough to share. Once in a while he could convince someone to give him something, but they tended to ask for certain favours in return. Elias' life was one of abuse and loneliness. His physical, spiritual, emotional and mental health were all suffering. He was always in pain. He longed for a true friend that he could talk to. And with no one else to turn to, he talked to himself. Before long, he was hearing voices that responded to his own. Voices that encouraged him to harm others and himself as well.

Many times he longed to go home but he was uncertain if he had a home to go to and he still feared the repercussions of doing so. But the time finally came when he just couldn't take it any more. What home had to offer, he didn't know, but he needed to go and find out.

Elias' parents were shocked to see him when he showed up at their door. It had been so many years. They thought he was dead. His mother cried when she saw him so thin and so broken. She quickly sat him down to his first home-cooked meal in years. But his stomach was so shrunken, he couldn't eat a lot. He certainly wanted to, but he just couldn't do it.

His father kept his distance. He watched as Elias struggled to eat. He wanted to know where he'd been but was hesitant to ask. He told Elias if he was going to live at home, he would need to help out in the vineyard. But mother was quick to point out that Elias didn't have the strength to work. Give him some time. His father said nothing, but just stormed out of the house.

Elias took up his favourite place on the roof for the night. But he struggled to sleep. Nightmares of the events of the past years kept tormenting him and he would cry out in his sleep and wake up screaming, frightening not only his family but his neighbours as well, as the screams echoed around the neighbourhood, broadcast from the rooftop.

The next morning, his mother went around the neighbourhood apologizing and explaining to the neighbours. Everyone knew the prodigal son was home but none were too eager to welcome him after the noise of the previous night. When the same activity was repeated night after night, they began to complain. Can't you do something to keep him quiet?

Before long, everyone was at their wits end. Elias tried to help out in the vineyard, but he just wasn't interested and most of the chores didn't make sense to him. He spent most of his time sleeping in the shade of the olive trees. His father told him if he wasn't going to be more helpful he would have to leave and that was all the encouragement Elias needed. He took off down the road again with his mother pleading for him to stay and for his father to take back what he said.

But Elias pulled himself away and when he reached the tombs, he recalled how he had hid out there once before and he found the place of the dead to be more welcoming than the living had been. As disturbing as it was for him to be living in the tombs, the villagers preferred he be there than in the community. They could still hear the crying and screaming but it was off in the distance, not as loud as before and it didn't keep them awake all night. And though they hated when he would run out naked from his hiding place to scare those who were going by on their way to the lake, they learned to ignore him for the most part.

His mother took him food and clothes and encouraged him to eat and to be more presentable, but there was nothing she could really do for him. He was a troubled soul and no one knew how to help him. They just learned to put up with his shenanigans. When he got too out of control, a group would get together and overpower him and chain him down. But he got to be so violent that no chains could hold him.

Then one day, Jesus showed up on their shore. Elias ran down to the beach to meet him. Something inside him caused Elias to fear this stranger. Somehow, he knew this was the son of the Most High God and he just wanted to chase him away. But it also felt like Jesus had come there just to see him and he wanted to know why. Jesus spoke kindly to him and before he knew what was happening Elias felt all his pain and anger leaving him and it was like he was a different person. He came to himself just as the pigs ran down into the water. He didn't understand what that was about, but he knew that he was different.

Elias quickly ran to the tomb where he'd been staying and found some of the clothes his mother had brought him. When people from the village came to see what was going on, they almost didn't recognize him. He was dressed and sitting calmly with Jesus and the others who had come with him and having a good time together, talking and laughing and enjoying one another's company.

But the village members were not happy. They were more concerned about what happened to the pigs than what had happened to Elias. In no uncertain terms, they let Jesus know that he was not welcome there. They escorted him back to the shore and onto his boat. Elias was disappointed that he was leaving and asked to go with him, but Jesus told him to stay and tell everyone what Jesus had done for him.

So that's what Elias tried to do. But at first, no one was willing to listen. They were far too upset about the pigs. And over time, the situation didn't improve a lot. As he talked about how much better he felt, about how Jesus had changed his life, they responded by asking if Elias thought he was better than them. They quickly grew tired of his story, believing that before long he would be back to his old self. But he proved himself changed.

Elias did go back to his family. With a clear mind, he was able to help out in the vineyards. The work even made sense to him now. His father seemed to have a handle now on his drinking and he wasn't so angry anymore. It seemed the change in Elias had affected a change in his father as well. At least that relationship was improving.

Together, father and son began to make plans for going to Jerusalem for Passover. Elias was looking forward to it, hoping that he might see Jesus there. But then, just a week before they were to leave, he found his father lying on his face in the vineyard. Elias turned him over but he knew it was already too late. His father's heart had stopped. He helped his mother wrap his father's body in grave clothes and he and his brother carried him out to the tombs.

The grief of losing his father was compounded by missing out on the trip to Jerusalem. Then, those who had gone to Jerusalem returned home with news that Jesus had been crucified. Remembering what had happened to the pigs, most were quite happy that Jesus had been put to death. The religious authorities and the Romans were right for taking care of this trouble maker.

Elias was grief stricken again. He didn't know what to do. He wandered around in a daze those first few days. The feelings of depression he had known most of his life were crowding in on him again. He knew that he was in danger of being dragged down a dark road all over again and he fought it with all of his being. He prayed more than he'd ever prayed in his life and as he did, it felt like Jesus was back there with him, calming him once again.

As the family slowly began to move on from the passing of his father, Elias felt himself being drawn to Jerusalem. As the Pentecost festival approached he felt like he needed to be there. Maybe it was to honor his father and the new relationship they'd built, making up for the missed trip for Passover. But it felt like more than that. Deep in his heart, in his spirit, he knew he needed to be there.

So, he said his goodbyes to his mother and his siblings and he climbed into a boat to take him to the other side of the lake and on to the road to Jerusalem. And there, in the celebrations, he experienced God in ways he had never experienced in his life. It was good to be healed, to be whole and to be in the holy city. He could just feel it in his being that something was about to happen. And then it did.

On Sunday morning, as he prepared to make his way back home, he heard a noise like a loud wind. But there was no wind. And it seemed to be coming from a building. And when the noise stopped people came pouring out of the building and speaking in all languages and dialects.

And then, one of the men went to the middle of the street and began calling for people's attention. He talked about Jesus. He told how Jesus had been put to death but that he is alive! And he called people to believe and to be baptized. Elias was touched to the heart. And he ran to the man whom he learned was Peter and he asked to be baptized and he was filled with such an overwhelming feeling that he hadn't felt since the day he met Jesus.

The followers of Jesus took him in and welcomed him into their fellowship. They told him about their experiences with Jesus and all that he had done the previous three years. Elias, in return was able to tell them what Jesus had done for him and for the first time, people listened, really listened. They wanted to hear his story.

Elias felt like he was finally someplace where he belonged. He liked these people. They had a lot in common and they took care of each other. When he asked what he could do, they asked him

what he would like to do. He remembered his days in prison and on the streets and his struggles with mental illness. And he recalled how Jesus had said they should visit the sick and those who are in prison and he said, that's what he wanted to do.

And so they gave him food to take to the prisoners and he went and shared his story and helped them to know that someone cared and helped them to find healing and hope.

Elias had lived a troubled life, but it all made sense now, as he lived the gospel with the people around him. The name his mother had given him was prophetic. Elias, my God is Yahweh. Yahweh had protected him and now he was able to tell others all about it.

Elias' story is not unique. Far too many people today have had experiences similar to his own. They've battled poverty, abuse, mental illness, addictions and so much more. Many are still on the road to recovery, still waiting to meet someone who can give them hope in their situation. Could you be that someone?