

## **Elijah, the prophet of God**

### **Volume 1**

#### **Introduction**

Elijah comes on the Biblical scene quite abruptly. He is simply described in 1 Kings 17:1 as *‘Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead’*. Gilead was the land east of the river Jordan, and was wooded hill country. Interestingly, Elijah’s name means ‘The Lord is my God’ and is certainly a very appropriate description of his own faith and the central theme of his ministry.

Elijah’s ministry began during the reign of king Ahab. Ahab was the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel. The kingdom had split after the death of king Solomon, and each of these northern kings who preceded Ahab were evil men. Ahab’s father was a man named Omri, and sadly was a very sinful man (1 Kings 16:25f). Ahab was just like his wicked father. Further, contrary to the law of God, Ahab did not marry an Israelite wife, but chose Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, who ruled over Tyre and Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). Jezebel was an extremely wicked individual, who not only encouraged the cult of the false god and idol Baal, but also deliberately took steps to exterminate the worship of the Lord in Israel by killing the prophets of God. (See 1 Kings 18:4,13,19; 19:10,14.) And so Ahab, like his father Omri, was an ungodly king. He also encouraged the people to forsake God and to worship the idol Baal. Baal worship was idolatrous, and debased immorality was connected with its worship. It was rotten

to its very core. It openly encouraged sinful behaviour which God forbade. And so it is that Ahab’s life is described in this tragic way in 1 Kings 16:33,

*“Ahab ... did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.”*

This was the very sad situation that prevailed in the land when Elijah was called to serve God as his prophet. Spiritually speaking, these were critical days for the cause of God in Israel. It seemed that all was lost and wickedness was succeeding. But what the ministry of Elijah demonstrates is that God was fully aware of all these sad events, and his cause was not finished, nor were his enemies going to succeed in their evil desires. God was not prepared to tolerate them, so raised up Elijah to meet the need of the hour. It was into this tragic and dangerous situation that Elijah was called to serve God and to stand for righteousness, which was no easy task in the circumstances.

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#### **Chapter 1 Elijah’s first confrontation with King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1)**

Throughout his ministry, Elijah was to have several face-to-face encounters with the wicked King Ahab. The Bible introduces Elijah to us as he meets Ahab for the first time.

## 1) Elijah's obedience

Elijah's first job was to confront Ahab to tell him that God was about to send a famine to the land as a judgment, and he delivered God's message. (1 Kings 17:1)

*“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 no dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.’”*

This simple statement teaches us that Elijah was a man who lived in submission to God. He spoke of God as the one ‘... whom I serve...’ This literally means ‘before whom I stand’, and indicated one who was in the service of the king. Here the reference is to the Lord, the Great King of Israel and Elijah's King. Elijah was not merely someone who said that God was his Lord, but who lived as if God's will did not matter. He really did live as one who truly loved and served God as his King, and his obedience is the evidence of this.

Elijah's example brings before us a very important truth for Christian believers today to grasp and live out. We cannot separate the Lordship of Christ from his being our Saviour. Some have taught that it is possible to have Christ as our Saviour, but that having him as our Lord or King is something that comes later on in our Christian lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore if he really is our Saviour, if we do genuinely trust him for the forgiveness of our sins, then that will be displayed by the way we submit to him as Lord in our lives. In Elijah's case, there is absolutely no record

of any rebellion, delay, or making excuses when God asked him to do this difficult task. He just did it. Likewise we must do the same. It is one of the marks of true love for God. The Lord Jesus Christ said in John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”*

## 2) Elijah's courage

Elijah's courage is also displayed in this act of obedience to God. He had to face ungodly Ahab! This was not like going to a friend, or someone who was sympathetic towards him, or eager to hear what he had to say. This was going to an enemy of God and of his servants. A really difficult thing to have to do, and yet Elijah did as God required from him. Elijah was tremendously courageous.

Elijah reminds us that sometimes to follow God is not easy. To be a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ often takes great courage, especially when there are those who oppose us. It can mean being despised and rejected by our families, or being ridiculed by our colleagues at work or school. It may also involve us in being persecuted by our community, or being imprisoned by the authorities who despise the Lord Jesus. These are not easy things to face, but sometimes we are called to do so. We need to have courage like Elijah did here, and not back down like Peter did when asked if he was a disciple of Jesus (see Matthew 26:69-75). It is so easy to be silent when we know we ought to speak to someone about the Lord Jesus. How we need God to strengthen us!

What Elijah did, was something we find in other servants of God in the Bible, and you might like to consider these two examples.

- (1) John the Baptist had the courage to tell Herod that he was wrong to have his brother Philip's wife (Matthew 14:3).
- (2) Stephen gave a very bold testimony before the Jewish council in Jerusalem in Acts 6-7.

### 3) Elijah's faithfulness

The third lesson we learn from this first encounter with Ahab is Elijah's faithfulness to God. He declared God's message in full, even though it was an unpleasant message to declare - a message about drought and famine! He did not subtract from the message. He did not alter it or water it down to make it easier to receive. He did not deny it because it did not sound nice. Rather he declared God's message in full. Elijah was a faithful servant of God.

There is an important background to this message in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. In the days of Moses God had warned the people that if they turned away from him, then they would suffer. Deuteronomy 11:16-17:

*“Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.”*

See also Deuteronomy 28:22. Had Ahab and the people followed the Lord, then it would have been so different (see Leviticus 26:3-4).

What is also significant with this judgment is that Baal, the idol Ahab worshipped, was supposed to be the god of fertility and lord of the rain clouds! Here the futility of Baal worship was exposed at the very point where it claimed it was strongest. Baal could do nothing to oppose the living God of Elijah who controls all things, including the weather. (See Psalm 147:8,16-18; Job 5:10; Matthew 5:45.) How true are the words of Jeremiah which expose idolatry for what it's worth. (Jeremiah 10:5) *“Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.”*

This is a timely warning because idolatry is as prevalent today as it was in the days of Elijah. For many in our world worship carved or sculptured figures which are lifeless and useless and forbidden by the Lord, the only true and living God (see Exodus 20:1-6). But we must not limit idolatry to bowing down to or praying to a wooden or stone figure. For many people other things have become their gods which captivate their lives but which can do them no spiritual good at all. These include things such as money and possessions, prestige, success in business, selfish ambition, power, and much more. An example is found in Colossians 3:5:

*“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires **and greed, which is idolatry.**”*

All of these are false gods, but which have captivated the hearts of millions in our world, and in the end will do them no good. All such idolatry is sin, and makes men guilty in the eyes of Almighty God. We must beware of falling into the very trap which Ahab had fallen into.

Elijah’s faithfulness in delivering this searching message exposed Ahab and the people’s sin for what it was. God was not pleased with them, therefore he was sending the drought as a judgment for their disobedience and wickedness. This was a very solemn message to have to deliver; yet Elijah did so faithfully.

### **Conclusion**

It is the same for the people and servants of God today. Namely, sin must be exposed fearlessly, and people warned of God’s judgment. This must be done graciously, but it also must be done faithfully.

But the difficulty of such a task raises the question, *‘How can we do such a thing like Elijah did?’* Many of God’s people feel their frailty and are only too conscious of their weaknesses, so how can we be as obedient, courageous and faithful as Elijah?

The answer lies in Elijah’s relationship with the Lord. He knew the living God. (1 Kings 17:1) *‘As the Lord, the God of Israel, **lives...**’* his trust was in the Lord. His strength came from the Lord. His devotion was given to the Lord.

To help us, James tells us in James 5:17 that Elijah was *“... a man just like us...”* He had the same fears that we have. He had no superhuman strength and ability in himself. But he relied upon the Lord, the living God, and God enabled him. He knew the Lord would not fail him, and he did not. And the Lord has not changed. He who helped Elijah is able to help us also!

NB. The two great lessons are:

- (i) Those who oppose God, like Ahab and Jezebel, cannot succeed.
- (ii) Those who trust God, like Elijah, will enjoy his help, even when required to do difficult tasks.

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## **Chapter 2 Elijah at Kerith (1 Kings 17:2-6)**

### **Introduction**

Elijah had announced to the wicked king Ahab that there would be a drought (1 Kings 17:1). We are told in the New Testament book of James that Elijah prayed that the rain would stop, and it did so. (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.”*

Godly Elijah was deeply saddened by the wickedness in Israel, and knowing that God had both warned that a drought would come if the people departed from him (Deuteronomy 11:16-17), and had also specifically told

Elijah this would now happen (1 Kings 17:1), he pleaded with God to act.

We need to note two important things at this point.

**(i) The word of God was the basis for his prayers.**

Elijah learned what to pray about from what God had revealed.

**(ii) Elijah's prayer for the drought was no act of vindictiveness against the king and people.** Instead it was for the glory and honour of God. Elijah longed for God to act so that the people would realise that to sin against God is a very serious matter, and that this would make them repent and turn back to God again. They had taken no notice of previous prophets, so now Elijah prayed for God to act in this solemn way. Elijah both loved God and desired the repentance of the people.

But to pray in this way would mean Elijah himself would suffer, as the drought would affect all the land. Therefore he was evidently trusting that God would provide for his needs during these days, and he was not disappointed. God intervened in a most remarkable way for his servant.

**1) God's Command And Unusual Promise (vv2-4)**

This godly, faithful, courageous believer, Elijah, was greatly blessed because the word of God came to him. God spoke with him and told him what to do. Today, because the Bible is complete, this is the means that God uses to speak to us (2 Timothy 3:16). So Christian believers today have the same great privilege that Elijah enjoyed; God speaks to us as we read the Bible.

Now God's words to Elijah were precise, caring, and remarkable.

**(i) Precise** - *"Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine..."*

This instruction was clear and easy to understand. The Kerith Ravine was on the east side of the river Jordan, and was a very rugged area. This would mean of course that the people would be deprived of the prophet of God. They would experience a famine of food and a famine of the word of God (see Amos 8:38f) as God spoke to the people through Elijah.

**(ii) Caring** - for God told him to *"... hide..."*

The Lord was protecting him against the anger and malice of Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel. How good and gracious God is to his faithful servants. He was lovingly looking after Elijah and preserving his life. If we faithfully follow the Lord Jesus Christ we shall enjoy that same loving care, for none shall pluck us out of his hands (John 10:28-29), nor separate us from his love, however dark our outward circumstances may be (Romans 8:38f). That does not mean that we shall always find life easy and free from difficulties, for that is not true, neither does God promise that. Elijah still had hardships and difficulties to face. But God looked after him during these difficult days, and he will look after us in a similar way in our difficulties.

**(iii) Remarkable** - *"You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered ravens to feed you there."*

That there would be water for him was another indication of God's care for him. Though the rain

would cease, this brook would still flow for a while, and Elijah could quench his thirst and stay alive. But what was even more remarkable was that God said he would use ravens to bring him food! To say the least that was unusual, and was unheard of before. Ravens are normally scavengers and would prefer to steal food rather than share it! And yet this is what God promised Elijah. His life would be preserved by this very unusual means.

This tells us two important things about God.

- (i) He loves his children.
- (ii) He is in control of all things, great and small, the rain and the ravens.

He can just as easily shut the heavens as he can call birds to do his bidding! God is great. He is the God of providence (Ephesians 1:11) “...*who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*” What power and love he possesses and displayed as he cared for Elijah! God is good and loving towards all he has made, especially his own dear children.

This exposes even more the folly of the idolatrous Baal worship that had gripped the nation of Israel. Baal could not provide for his followers, but the Lord, the living God, could provide for his. (See an exposé of the futility of idolatry in Jeremiah 10:3-5.) This loving provision for Elijah was therefore at the same time a further rebuke by God of his wayward people.

## **2) Elijah’s response and preservation (vv5-6)**

### **a. His obedience (v5)**

This message from the Lord was a real test for Elijah’s faith. His response would show the genuineness or otherwise of his trust in God. Doing what God required would also be a means of strengthening his faith, because like muscles that grow and increase by exercise, so faith grows when it is put to work. Such submission to God would also mature his faith so that he would stand firm when under further tests that lay ahead of him. How did Elijah respond?

Without hesitation, questioning, doubting, protesting or complaining, Elijah followed the word of God exactly. “***So he did what the Lord had told him.***” Evidently Elijah’s faith in God was genuine and strong. He knew that God could do whatever he wanted to, and that God would do what he said he would do. He knew God cannot and will not lie (see Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). He also knew that nothing was too hard for the Lord, however impossible it may seem to human understanding (see Genesis 18:14; Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:26). So this godly man follows the Lord’s instructions with all his heart and goes to the Kerith Ravine.

Such obedience is a mark of true love for and true faith in God. And it is that same willing, confident, faithful obedience that is expected from the people of God today. Christian believers are to yield their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ in loving obedience. We are not to argue, or rebel, or question, or doubt him. Are you doing what God has told you to do in his word, the Bible? For example, is there

someone you are to witness to, but are afraid, even though the Lord promises to be with us as we go in his name (Matthew 28:19f)? Is there some step of faith you have to take, but are hesitant? Trust him with all your heart, he will bless and help you (Proverbs 3:5-6).

### **b. His preservation (v6)**

God did provide for him through the ravens. They brought him bread and meat each morning and evening. Here was sufficient nourishment to keep him alive and healthy. Elijah did not live in luxury; God did not promise him that, but he did meet his needs. God has promised to meet the needs of all the true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and is well able to do so (see Philippians 4:19). God is 'Jehovah Jireh' - the Lord who provides (see Genesis 22:14). So it was that Elijah's life was preserved.

### **Conclusions**

We see that God keeps his word, and does not go back on his promises. Not only is God good and powerful and sovereign, he is also faithful. He is the only God, and is worthy of all our trust and much more. Those who trust in the Lord will not be ashamed (Romans 10:11; Isaiah 28:16). There is no other God like the Lord; therefore we should trust him with our needs, whatever they may be, for he can deal with them.

Because God can deal with our biggest need, the need to be forgiven and set free from our sin, which he has done through the Lord Jesus Christ, he is well able to deal with

every other and lesser need (see Romans 8:32). The hymn writer has put it well in these words:

*“Trust and obey  
For there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus  
But to trust and obey.”*

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## **Chapter 3 Elijah at Zarephath: part 1 (1 Kings 17:7-16)**

### **Introduction**

Elijah had gone to the Kerith Ravine in response to God's command, and each day he was miraculously fed by ravens. As he trusted the Lord and stepped out in faith, so the Lord provided for him. Each day was a reminder to him of God's goodness. He learned that to trust God is the wisest thing we can ever do.

We said in the previous chapter that though the Lord promised to provide for Elijah, he never promised that he would live in luxury, nor that the way ahead would be without difficulty. Would Elijah trust God or not when the way ahead was hard? Was his faith genuine or counterfeit? Well, his faith came under test again.

### **1) Elijah's faith tested (v7)**

The brook in the Kerith Ravine that had supplied him with water to drink for some time then dried up. This would not have happened immediately, but gradually as the drought began to take its hold over the area. Elijah would have seen the stream that was keeping him alive grow smaller and smaller until it dried up completely. This was a real test of Elijah's faith.

Each day he would have been aware of the situation as the stream grew less and less. God had commanded him to go to Kerith, and God was silent as the brook got drier and drier. As God's servant, Elijah knew he was under God's orders, and therefore must wait for God to tell him what to do next. To lean on his own understanding would have been so easy in this situation, so he was being tested quite severely to see if he truly depended on the Lord. As Elijah waited patiently for the Lord's next instruction it is instructive that there is no reference to him complaining against God, nor of being filled with anxiety and doubt. He just waited.

Sometimes our faith can be put under test like that. The Lord can take away everything we have relied on, even the things he has given us, until there is nothing left but him. It might be that all our money gets used up, or that our health begins to weaken and fail, or our friends are removed from us, or our job is lost, or we are compelled to move away from family and loved ones. While this is going on it is easy to panic, to doubt, or even complain, but the Lord tells us to trust him, and he tests us to see if we really do. And it is at this point that the difference between true Christian believers and false ones is often discovered. The true believer will trust God throughout, and will love him throughout, even during difficult times, whereas false or counterfeit believers will fall away and stop following Jesus when difficulty comes. It is the difference between loving and trusting God for himself, and merely loving his gifts. True believers trust in God at all times - even when their faith is attacked, battered and frail, they still rely on

God. And Elijah did that here, until the last drop of water in the brook had gone.

## 2) God speaks to him again (vv8-9)

### a. The timeliness of this command

It is instructive that verse 8 begins with the word "*Then...*" God literally tested Elijah to the very limit, and when that limit was reached he did not fail his servant but came with fresh instructions. The Lord's timing is perfect, and we must learn to wait patiently for him. Until the brook actually dried up Elijah did not need to know what was the next step for him to take. But the moment it did dry up he did need to know, and it was then that God spoke to him.

The lesson here is twofold:

- (i) we must trust God with patience, and
- (ii) we must realise he often takes us only one step at a time.

It is true that God knows the end from the beginning, but he does not always reveal that to us. Indeed it is very rare that we are told more than one step ahead. Our responsibility is not to know what the next six steps are for us to take in our lives, but to trust God to take us through one step at a time. (2 Corinthians 5:7) "*We live by faith, not by sight.*" We are to trust God for one day at a time. This is why Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:11: "*Give us today our daily bread.*" It is to be daily trust.

### b. The difficulty in the command (v9)

There were two difficulties in God's command to Elijah.

The first was the place to which he was directed. Zarephath was not only in the north and therefore a long distance to travel, but it was also in the hostile territory ruled by Jezebel's father. Jezebel, you remember, was the wicked wife of Israel's king Ahab. She had opposed the work of God rigorously. So Zarephath was in the centre of the very land from where the idolatrous worship of Baal had come! Yet it was here that God said Elijah was to go, and God added he was "... *to stay there ...*" - so an extended visit was in view.

The second difficulty was that God said a widow would be used to meet Elijah's needs. The position of such a widow in ancient times was very difficult indeed. Having lost her husband she had lost her means of financial support, and therefore would have been cast on the mercy of others for her own needs. Also the drought would have affected this region as well, so food would have been very scarce anyhow! This is seen in that verse 12 tells us she had only enough food for her last meal. Yet it is here that the Lord directs Elijah.

Elijah has to learn that God will provide for him in his way, and not according to human reason. Elijah is called again to depend on God completely with wholehearted trust. And he obeys instantly (v10). Elijah was a man for whom the sovereignty and power and grace of God were realities and not just theories he held in his mind. These great truths about God gripped, governed and sustained him. He trusted God completely.

### **3) God's miraculous provision (vv10-15)**

Elijah's faith was not misplaced. As he sought to honour the Lord, so the Lord honoured him (see 1 Samuel 2:30). The Lord encouraged his faithful servant, for as he arrived at Zarephath the first thing he saw was the widow gathering sticks. She would have been easily recognised by the distinctive clothes widows wore. This must have greatly reassured Elijah.

On meeting the widow he first of all asked her for a drink, and she proceeded to fetch him one. Encouraged by this he then went a stage further and asked for a piece of bread. It was at this point that the widow outlined her own sad plight. She recognised that he was a servant of the Lord God, and proceeded to tell him she had only a handful of flour in a jar and a little amount of oil in a jug. When Elijah met her she was gathering sticks in order to cook her last meal for herself and her son. Her outlook was bleak, to say the least. And Elijah's faith was tested again.

Instructively, and perhaps we might say amazingly, Elijah did not doubt nor complain to the Lord about this state of affairs. God's promise had been given, and that was his solid foundation. (This is why Bible study is so beneficial. We get to know God's promises too!) Calmly and confidently Elijah told the woman not to be afraid but to go and cook some bread, and first to bring some for him to eat and then make something for herself and her son. And he added these amazing words (1 Kings 17:14):

*"For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says:  
'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil*

*will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’”*

He was absolutely sure that God would keep his word to provide for him through this widow, just as he had said. And equally encouraging is the record that the widow went and did just as Elijah had spoken. She also acted in faith upon the word of God. She too believed in the living God (cf. v12a). And as she did so, so the blessing of God came to her, her son, and to Elijah, for the flour in the jar did not run out, neither did the oil in the jug. Every day God fed them though the drought continued.

### **Conclusion**

As Elijah and the woman sought to live by the word of the Lord - that is putting him and his will first, trusting him and obeying him - so they were nourished by his love. Disobedient lives are soiled lives, and soiled lives are unfit vessels for the Master's use. If we likewise are to know the blessing of God on our lives then we too must put him first, trust him fully, and obey him with glad and willing hearts. Those who do put God first discover his goodness every day. As Elijah submitted to the changes God brought in his life so he was blessed in remarkable ways.

The Lord Jesus put it like this in Matthew 6:33:

*“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (i.e. God's), and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

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**Chapter 4 Elijah at Zarephath: part 2 (1 Kings 17:17-24)**

### **Introduction**

Elijah had gone to Zarephath in humble, believing obedience to the word of God. There the Lord used a widow to feed him, and she also believed the word of God. And God did that as, miraculously, her jar of flour and jug of oil did not run out throughout the whole period of the drought. It was then, after things had been going well for some time that the faith of both Elijah and the widow was severely tested.

#### **1) Tragedy strikes (v17)**

The widow had only one son, and he is described as a boy in verse 21. Such a child would have been very precious to her in her loneliness, and her hopes for the future would have been bound up in him. But then tragedy struck. He became terminally ill. His illness increased (v17), and his suffering would have increased also. The emotional strain of this on his mother would have been considerable. And then he stopped breathing. He died.

To say the least, this was a devastating experience to have to endure. The widow had already suffered the tragedy of losing her husband, and now her son is taken from her. And this happened while she was believing and obeying the word of God through Elijah, God's prophet. We are reminded through this tragedy that even the righteous suffer, because we all live in a world that bears the results of sin whose wages is death. Even those who faithfully obey God are not exempt from these things. Suffering and death are part of our lot as sinful men living in a sinful world. We need to remember the world today is different

from when it was first created and called very good by God (see Genesis 1:31). Sin has entered the world (Genesis 3), and death has come to all (Romans 5:12-14). (See also Genesis 3:17ff; Job 5:7; Psalm 90:10; Hebrews 12:6; 1 Peter 4:12.) The righteous do suffer - consider Joseph, Daniel and the Lord Jesus himself!

## 2) Elijah is blamed (v18)

This sad event caused the widow to become aware of her sinfulness. Very often God speaks to us through trials and we become aware of spiritual issues in a way we were not conscious of before. It may be we are made more ready to receive God's guidance at such times, or grasp the depths of some aspect of his character, or appreciate his nearness more, or realise our lack of growth in holiness. In this case the widow became conscious of her sin at this time. It is true for all genuine believers that afflictions can make us aware of our sins, and this should humble us and cause us to be submissive to the mighty hand of God.

Sadly, though, we do not always react like that, and the widow was no exception. She turned against Elijah and blamed him for what had taken place, feeling he had come only to bring judgment on her for her past sinfulness. Indeed she asked him if this was why he came! As if it was all his fault!

Now we need to say a number of things here.

- (i) The widow was in great distress and therefore her outburst against Elijah must not be considered as a deliberate and premeditated malicious act of rebellion.

Her heart was broken and her emotions made sensitive by her bereavement. She was in a state of shock. So we must not be too hard in condemning her.

However, she does illustrate the fact that we are far too ready to blame others for our troubles than to look at our own hearts and submit under the mighty hand of God and seek to learn from him through our trials. How we need the Lord to give us grace at such times!

- (ii) Her spiritual vision had been clouded by the bereavement. It was as if she had forgotten how God had sent Elijah to her so that in looking after him God had provided for her and her son this long time. She was in a state of confusion. God does not change in his attitude towards those who trust him. We are loved with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), and that is as true in good days as in bad. But sometimes our weakness and frailty cloud our judgment and we listen to our feelings when they are unstable and in turmoil. How good to know that God understands our frailty, that we are but dust (Psalm 103:13-14), and does not cast us off at such times.
- (iii) We see that often God's faithful servants are blamed for things outside their control. The Lord Jesus warned his disciples that in this world they would face tribulation (see John 16:33; Acts 14:22). Sometimes we shall be on the receiving end of unfair and untrue accusations. This is not easy to endure. But this is not a sign that God is displeased with us. Neither is it an indication we have failed him in some way, nor that

God has deserted us. All these things are God's way of proving and sanctifying us, as he refines us through the fires of affliction and distress.

### 3) Elijah's response (vv19-21)

Note first of all what he did not do! He did not complain either to the widow nor to the Lord. He did not retaliate and rebuke the woman and crush her with weighty accusations and judgment. He did not forsake following the Lord by saying the way was too hard for him to follow. He did not display a single gram of bitterness. He did not even protest his innocence. How strong Elijah was in faith and faithfulness to God. How Christ like Elijah was at this point. We read in 1 Peter 2:21-23:

*"... if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."* (See also 1 Peter 4:12-19.)

Note also that he did not pretend to have the answer to the widow's question. He was as ignorant as she was as to why her son had died. So Elijah spoke tenderly to the distressed widow. He took the boy in his own arms and carried him to his room. And there he cried out unto the Lord. How wise!

- (i) In verse 20 he told the Lord that he did not understand why this had happened to the boy. He could not grasp why, when God had promised life, that death should come to this family. He was as mystified as the widow as to why this took place. We need to note that this was not the 'Why?' of bitterness which characterises the wicked. Instead, this was the 'Why?' of the righteous in which he acknowledged he did not understand God's ways. **(Interestingly he received no answer from the Lord to his question. Sometimes we are just not told why certain trials come to us. Remember Job was never told why he suffered.)**
- (ii) In verse 21 Elijah pleaded with God to restore the boy's life. His lying on the lad may have been to impart warmth to the body, longing for the child to live. It certainly indicated how much he loved the boy, for to touch a dead body was to become ceremonially unclean for a Jew. Elijah knew that God alone could make the boy live, and therefore it was to God alone that he looked for this mercy. We need also to note that it was not Elijah's honour that was at stake here, but the Lord's.

Consider these five characteristics of Elijah's prayer. He prayed:

- (i) in humility - he cried to the Lord.
- (ii) in dependence - 'let this' - pleading not demanding. There is no room here for those who teach all we have to do is to name something in prayer to God and you will automatically receive it.

- (iii) specifically - not with vague phrases.
- (iv) confidently - in faith, looking to God alone to meet the need. He knew that nothing is too hard for the Lord. There is no record in the Bible of anyone being raised from the dead prior to this occasion, but still he believed!
- (v) with love and concern for the widow and her son, not for himself.

The question we must ask ourselves is, do we pray like that? Consider these helpful Bible passages about prayer. The first from James is a challenge to us about praying in the right way (James 4:2-3):

*“You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”*

Then there is this encouragement and warning from Peter (1 Peter 3:12):

*“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

Finally, James again stimulates us to fervent prayer with his statement in James 5:16: *“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*

Where Elijah did not understand, he knew that God did, and therefore could safely leave this situation in his all wise and all loving hands, therefore what an

encouragement to pray. Let us go to God with our every need, whatever our distress.

#### **4) God answers prayer (vv22-23)**

The Lord heard Elijah’s prayer, and the boy was raised to life again. This was a marvellous miracle and demonstration of the power and grace of God.

The Biblical text is very careful to stress that it was the Lord, not Elijah, who made the boy live. The praise and the glory and honour was therefore to be given to God. The fact that God heard Elijah is also an indication that the boy’s death had not been Elijah’s fault because of some sin or failure on his part. Remember what we read in Psalm 66:18-19:

*“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened, but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.”*

Rather this was for the glory of God as he was seen to triumph over death. (cf. The similar thing in John 9:1-12 and the man born blind, and John 11:4 and Lazarus). This miracle was also a foretaste of that final victory over death which the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished in his own death and resurrection. (See Hebrews 2:14-18; 1 Corinthians 15, especially vv20-28).

Quickly Elijah returned the boy to his mother, declaring that the boy was now alive. The effect of all this on the widow was profound, and helps us to see in part why this tragedy had occurred. In an instant she was utterly taken up with the power of God. She was now convinced that

Elijah was in truth a man of God. She had called him a man of God before in verse 18, but now she knew it to be true without a shadow of a doubt (v24). She was convinced that the word of the Lord was totally reliable. She had learned that she could depend upon it completely, and that it would not fail her or anyone who trusts in it.

And so through this tragedy the Lord brings triumph. The widow's faith was strengthened with complete assurance, and Elijah was encouraged for even greater trials that lay ahead.

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## **Chapter 5 Elijah and Obadiah (1 Kings 18:1 -16)**

### **Introduction**

The time was drawing near when God in his grace would send rain again to the land of Israel and demonstrate to the people that he was indeed the Lord God of all the earth. So he issued instructions to Elijah about this, and as Elijah obeyed the Lord, he met one of the lovely characters of the Old Testament - a man named Obadiah. He is not to be confused with the prophet Obadiah who wrote one of the Old Testament books, but he was a very godly believer. The name 'Obadiah' means '*servant of the Lord*' and, as we shall see, that was a very apt name as this man was indeed one who sought to live for God.

As we consider this passage we will learn some more about king Ahab, and also the Lord's relationship with Elijah.

### **1) The word of the Lord came to Elijah (vv1-2a)**

We have seen that Elijah maintained frequent communion with God in prayer, and we have also seen that God

maintained frequent communion with Elijah through his word. God spoke with his servant. This was a blessed privilege indeed. In his day, very few enjoyed this blessing. Many did not want it, of course, as they gave themselves to follow the idolatrous worship of the idol Baal with all its attendant immorality. However, the Lord came and spoke with his faithful servant, Elijah (1 Kings 18:1):

*"After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah:..."*

This is a privilege that is given today to Christian believers. Not only can we commune with God through prayer, but he also communes with us, especially through his word, the Bible. It is through the Bible that God teaches us about himself, the Lord Jesus, ourselves and our needs, his directions for daily living, his promises and purposes for us, and so much more. (See 2 Timothy 3:16 and Psalm 19:7-11.)

We have seen that each time God spoke with Elijah he gave him things that were difficult to do! This is not always the case when God speaks to us, but it was so again here. (NB. We must remember that each of these difficult tasks God gave Elijah to perform were God's way of both testing his faith and strengthening him for the great contest he was to engage in on Mount Carmel later in 1 Kings 18.) Three years had now passed since the drought began, and the Lord told Elijah (v1) to go again to Ahab! Now it does not take much imagination to see the enormity of the difficulty that confronted Elijah. Ahab was a man of great

wickedness. By now his hatred of Elijah would have reached boiling point. The later verses of the passage tell us how Ahab had repeatedly hunted for Elijah during the years of this drought (v10). And yet it was to this wicked man that Elijah was now sent, and the Lord promised that he would send rain on the land.

Elijah's response was very instructive. He obeyed immediately. He did not question God about this difficult task. There was no hesitation, no rebellion or excuses. In humble submission he obeyed! Elijah had long learned that the will of the Lord is to be accepted, because it is always right and best, even when it is difficult to do. He had also learned from prior experiences that the Lord does not desert or fail his faithful children. He knew God would go with him. He had also learned that men with all their might and power are no match for the Lord - they are but dust and ashes in his sight. To use a New Testament expression, Elijah knew that if God was for him, then no one could be against him and prevail. (See Romans 8:31.) And with reference to the rain, he knew that God is sovereignly in control of all things and could as easily send the rain again as he had stopped it those three years previously. Therefore we read in 1 Kings 18: "*So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.*" (v2a).

I wonder if the Lord has been telling you to do certain things, which are really quite difficult for you to do? It might have been as you have read the Bible at home, or through the preaching at your church, or listening to Bible teaching on the radio, or reading a Christian book like this

one. There are many things God may require of us that are not easy. For example, it might be to give up that sin which you have enjoyed for so long. He might want you to share the gospel with people at work, or college, or school or in your home. He may be requiring you to forgive someone who has hurt you, and to be willing to make the first move to bring about a reconciliation. He may want you to share in the responsibility for your church's evangelism, or even to leave home to take the gospel to others. It may be one of these things or something entirely different, but you know the Lord wants you to do it, yet as you think about it, it seems very hard. Learn from Elijah's godly example. Remember the Lord will go with you and give you the strength to do whatever he requires of you. In faith trust the Lord and do what he is asking you. Obey him today.

## **2) Obadiah is introduced to us (vv3b-4)**

It is at this point, as Elijah is on his way to meet Ahab, that the man named Obadiah is introduced to us (vv3-4). He had a very responsible position for he was in charge of Ahab's household. This meant he was an administrator and steward of the palace. But we are told some even more important things about him.

### **a. He had a close relationship with the Lord (v3)**

*"Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord."* In other words, he feared the Lord. Obadiah acknowledged God as someone who is awesome, wonderful, marvellous and holy. He was a man who loved God and sought to honour

him. One who revered God as the One who was majestic and glorious, and he did so exceedingly. His devotion to God was real, deep, and fervent. He was not a man who was shallow or careless about his relationship with Almighty God. He loved the Lord deeply and sought to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. He was one who walked with God each day. For Obadiah, to talk with God in prayer was the highest privilege. He was a man for whom to obey and please God was his highest ambition and delight. To fail God was for Obadiah the greatest shame and source of deepest sadness.

This description of Obadiah is so lovely because it was true even though he worked for this ungodly king Ahab, and was surrounded each day by the sinfulness of the king's life. He was 'in' the world but not 'of' the world. He was unspotted, uncontaminated, unsoiled by the ungodliness around him. How different from so many who, when they have received promotion to a high position in their land or in their business, are overtaken with pride and then fall away from the Lord and begin to compromise with sin and lose their zeal for God and are easily diverted from meeting with the people of God and grow spiritually cold. Obadiah stands as a real challenge to us, and an illustration of the keeping and sanctifying power of God. He also reminds us that God often has his servants in high places. While the New Testament tells us that not many wise or influential or noble by human standards are called into the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:26ff), it does not say 'not any' of such people are included in the people of God. And that is an encouragement, for it instructs us that the grace of God

is able to reach people whatever their position in society. No one is outside the scope of his saving power to transform. Remember both Matthew and Zachaeus were influential tax collectors (Matthew 9:9; Luke 19:2), and Cornelius was a centurion (Acts 10). The godly Countess of Huntingdon who lived in England from 1707 to 1791, said how she praised God for the 'm's' in 1 Corinthians 1:26ff. It said not '*many*' of noble birth were called by God, but it did not say not '*any*'. This meant it did not exclude her or others who had high position in the land from becoming God's children. Indeed, in Biblical times, the Lord even had his saints in "*Caesar's household*" (Philippians 4:22)!

#### **b. Obadiah's devotion to God directed his conduct (v4)**

James tells us that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-26). Jesus tells us we can tell true believers by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-17). Those who are genuine believers will display it in the way they behave, and Obadiah was such a man.

During the days of low spiritual ebb in the land of Israel, Ahab and especially his wicked wife Jezebel encouraged the worship of the idol Baal. To further her wicked schemes Jezebel sought to destroy all the prophets of God. His servants were rounded up and killed without any just cause. At great personal cost and even greater personal risk, godly Obadiah had taken a hundred of the servants of God and hidden them in two caves and fed them. This was a remarkable act of self-sacrifice and devotion to God. If he had been discovered then he would have faced certain

death. But he was a man who put God first. Like Peter and John of New Testament days, he knew that he had to obey God rather than follow the wicked dictates of men, or a woman in this case! (See Acts 4:19.)

Whilst to obey God is better than to sacrifice, we must say that Obadiah did both! What a lovely man Obadiah was! A true servant of God as his name indicates.

### 3) Ahab's hardness of heart (vv2b-3a, 5-6)

By stark contrast to Obadiah, Ahab was seen for what he was, a selfish, hardened, unmoved sinner. We are told that the famine was severe in Samaria. Ahab knew why the famine had come as Elijah told him before it started (1 Kings 17:1) that God had sent it. Ahab also knew why this was. It was because he had forsaken God and turned both himself and others away from the Lord. So you would think that by now, three years on, Ahab would have humbled himself and been heart-broken that he had grieved God so much. You would think that his conscience would have been severely smitten as he saw the suffering of his people which he had caused. You would think Ahab would be crying out to God in deep repentance and seeking the Lord's forgiveness. You would think he would be doing all in his power to relieve the suffering of his people. You would have expected so much, but none of these things occurred! All Ahab could think about was sufficient pasture for his horses and mules! He did not have a gram of spiritual concern at all, and that is astonishing!

Tragically, here we have a glimpse of the incredible hardness of the human heart. Paul describes such a condition in two of his letters. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

*"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

(Romans 8:5-8) *"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires... The mind of sinful man is death ... the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."*

And Ahab was such a man. He thought only of himself, and how he could save killing any of his animals, and does not have a care for his people nor his own soul. Jesus taught in Matthew 16:26:

*"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"*

But Ahab, in all his spiritual rebellion and blindness, could only think selfishly of his animals, and so sent Obadiah to find suitable pasture (v5).

In his excellent book on the life of Elijah, A. W. Pink makes this very solemn comment about Ahab's complete lack of spiritual response to all that the Lord was saying to him through the drought:

*"Unless God is pleased to sanctify directly to our souls his chastisements, they profit us not. No matter how*

*severe his judgments or how long they be protracted, man is never softened thereby unless God performs a work of grace within him.*" (See Revelation 16:10-11.)

Returning to 1 Kings 18 we are told in verse 6 that Ahab went one way, and under the providence of God Obadiah went in a completely different direction, the significance of which now unfolds.

#### **4) Obadiah Meets Elijah (vv7-16a)**

As Obadiah went in search of pasture he met Elijah who was on his way to find Ahab (v7). Elijah was immediately recognised by Obadiah, and in respect for the servant of God he bowed to the ground before him. And yet as he does so, he can hardly believe that it is Elijah, and asks, "*Is it really you, my lord Elijah?*" The reason for this was that Elijah had been out of the public view for over three years now - first at Kerith and then at Zarephath. Added to that, Obadiah later related that Ahab had searched for Elijah but had been unsuccessful (v10). So it was quite a surprise to godly Obadiah.

Yet here we see the providence of God. It was no accident that the paths of these two men should cross. God had arranged it so. Obadiah was then asked by Elijah to go and tell Ahab where he was. Elijah's courage did not fail.

At first sight this does not seem a difficult task at all, but Obadiah was filled with fear at the prospect. He was anxious because he thought the Spirit of God might move Elijah to another location. Interestingly, Obadiah asked what wrong he had committed to be asked to do such a

dangerous task (v9a), an indication that his own conscience was clear. He explains how Ahab had already searched for Elijah to no avail, and that he had made people swear on oath that they had not seen him. This indicated Ahab's evil intentions, and Obadiah was afraid that if he went and told Ahab, and then the Lord moved Elijah, Ahab would be so angry that he would execute him. Interestingly, we must say that this also illustrates how effectively God had preserved Elijah. A.W.Pink comments, "*Utterly futile is it for man to attempt to hide when the Lord seeks them out: equally useless is it for him to seek when God hides anything from him.*" Obadiah then pleaded with Elijah, explaining how he had sought to honour the Lord in his life, but that this apparently simple task was likely to result in his death (v13-14).

Elijah, however, assured him that it was God's purpose for him to speak to Ahab, and promised on oath that he would most certainly speak to the king that very day (v15). On this assurance, Obadiah obeyed and went to tell Ahab (v16).

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### **Chapter 6 Triumph on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40)**

#### **Introduction**

In the last chapter we left godly Obadiah going to meet king Ahab to tell him of Elijah's whereabouts (v16). In response to this news Ahab went to find Elijah and eventually the two met.

#### **1) Ahab's arrogant stubbornness (v17)**

1 Kings 18:17:

*“When he saw Elijah, he said to him, ‘Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’”*

As has been true from the very beginning of time, sinful man is slow to admit he is wrong, and quick to blame others. Adam and Eve did this in Eden (Genesis 3), and it was the same on this occasion. Ahab blamed Elijah instead of himself. After all that had happened there was not a gram of godly sorrow in Ahab’s heart! Ahab was incredibly insensitive to all that God had been saying to him, both through Elijah and through the drought. He refused to take notice, and remained unrepentant. There was everything to convince him that the Lord is God, but he refused to acknowledge this, and was determined to have his own way.

How tragic this was! This is the sinner who is left to himself, and it is a solemn reality to behold. You may recall that there was a similar response from the people of Jerusalem during the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). Sadly we must add that there are many today who refuse to take any notice of what God is saying to them. How sinners need to take care lest they become this hardened by their persistence in their sinful ways and refusal to heed God’s warnings. How we need to guard our own hearts. Indeed, if our hearts are different from Ahab’s then it is because of the grace and sovereign mercy of God to us in Christ, for we were all sinners. (See Ephesians 2:2-4.) Therefore there is no room for boasting, or carelessness in the believer’s heart, but

only humble praise and submissive obedience. And if your heart is still like Ahab’s then you stand in great need of that same grace and mercy of God. Therefore, do not let this pass by without seeking God in true repentance and faith.

## 2) Elijah’s boldness (v18)

Elijah courageously stood his ground; he did not give way to Ahab at all. Though Ahab was the king, and exercised considerable power, the fact was that he was the one who had sinned and caused the misery Israel was now in. Therefore Elijah responded firmly (1 Kings 18:18):

*“‘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.’”*

How pointed was the “*But you*”. This was similar to Nathan’s words to David when he sinned, (2 Samuel 12:7) “*You are the man.*” Elijah was stating clearly Ahab’s sin, and exposing it.

(i) Negatively - he had given up obeying the commands of the Lord

(ii) Positively - he had taken up the idolatrous worship of Baal

He had lived as if God did not exist, but had suffered as a consequence. Yet still he continued in his wickedness. Not only Ahab, but also his father’s family had been just as guilty. (See 1 Kings 16:21-28 for the details of Omri, Ahab’s father.) And the lesson we learn from this is that

the only way to deal with sin is to expose it. If we pretend it is not there, or is not that serious, it will only increase and reap its evil results. The time had now come to expose the sin, and Elijah courageously did so in the Lord's name. That same courage was displayed in the life of John the Baptist over Herod's sin, when he rebuked him for immorally marrying his brother Philip's wife (Matthew 14:3-5).

We cannot sin and think that God has not seen us, for everything is open to him. He knows all about us. How searching this is, and how we need to do what Ahab refused to do, and humbly confess our sin and seek the Lord's mercy. To encourage us we have those remarkable words of 1 John 1:9, which are a tremendous promise for repentant sinners.

*"If we confess our sins, he (i.e. God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

### **3) The challenge laid down (vv19-26a)**

God's time had now come to demonstrate the wickedness of the people and the rightness of serving him. Restoration could only come by the judgment of the sin. Elijah calls all the nation and the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah the supposed wife of Baal, whom Jezebel supported and fed, to come to mount Carmel. Amazingly they all obey, even Ahab, such was the power of God at work. When they all arrived a number of things took place.

### **a) Elijah challenges the people (v21)**

With the whole nation before him he cried out (1 Kings 18:21):

*"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."*

Elijah revealed that all their past idolatry was known to the Lord. He challenged them to think seriously about their unfaithfulness to the Lord. The term "*waver*" is the same word translated "*danced*" in verse 26 where it describes the fanatical and useless religious dance of Baal's prophets. Elijah was telling them that all their religious activity in Baal worship was folly and futile.

Then he placed a clear choice before them - it was the Lord or Baal. It is important to note that Elijah left absolutely no room for a joining of these two. The Lord demands our exclusive worship (Exodus 20:3), because he is the only true and living God! The Bible allows no room for those who think they can mix their religion and give some devotion to one and some to another. The Lord will not share his glory with another! We must love and serve him and him alone.

### **b) The people's response (vv21b-22)**

We sadly and solemnly read "*But the people said nothing.*" They were shamed into silence. They had no excuse, for God had been gracious to them over centuries. They had his law to direct them plainly. But they had ignored God's law and ignored God himself. They knew

they were wrong, but refused to admit it. And none of them stood with Elijah, and desired to defend the honour of the Lord. Their silence spoke volumes.

### c) Elijah's response (vv22-26)

(1 Kings 18:22) *“Then Elijah said to them, ‘I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.’”*

He was the only one who was prepared to stand publicly against the king and for the Lord. Again his remarkable courage stands out.

Then he set before them a challenge to prepare two altars and put wood on them and a bull as a sacrifice. Then in turn prayer would be made. The 450 prophets of Baal would pray to Baal, and Elijah would pray to the Lord. The true God would be the one who would answer the prayer by sending fire down to ignite the wood and burn the sacrifice. Interestingly, this was to challenge Baal worship at its strongest because he was considered to be lord of the sun! However, the Bible teaches us that it is the Lord, not Baal, who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). (See the burning bush - Exodus 3, and the pillar of fire - Exodus 13:21.)

We see not only Elijah's courage - one against 450 - but also his faith, for he knew that God could do what he asked. We see also that his one great desire was the glory of God. In addition we see Elijah's grasp of the issues that needed to be addressed. The people desperately needed rain, but before that could come atonement had to be made for their sins, for their sins had caused this drought. God's

law had declared that there could be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (see Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22). God's wrath had to fall either on the guilty or on an innocent substitute. Hence the choice of a sacrifice was not only a way of displaying who the true God was, but also the only means of reconciliation with him. All the sacrifices of Old Testament days pointed towards the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ and the shedding of his blood on the cross. Salvation comes only through faith in him.

The people accepted the challenge as a good one (v24). They were still undecided who to follow and who was the true God! In many ways they were just as bad as Ahab. Elijah allowed the prophets of Baal to go first, and they proceeded (v26a).

We must say that Elijah's actions here do not mean that any believer can set such challenges and expect similar answers, for Elijah did all this in obedience to the specific commands of God to him (1 Kings 18:36): *“... I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.”*

### 4) The futility of Baal and idolatry (vv26b-29)

For many long hours the prophets of Baal cried out to him and shouted, but there was no answer. No fire consumed their sacrifice. They danced in a frenzy around their altar, but all to no avail. At noon Elijah began to taunt them (v27), suggesting their god needed them to shout louder to attract his attention or to wake him up (1 Kings 18:27):

*“‘Shout louder!’ he said, ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’”*

And by so doing he was exposing the futility of worshipping all other gods except the Lord, the one true God. But these prophets still failed to repent and turn to the Lord. Instead their frenzy increased, their voices grew louder, and they began to cut themselves supposing this would gain Baal’s favour! (v28-29). But all this achieved nothing because, of course, Baal was not God.

The lesson for us is this: **idolatry is useless**. Idols have ears but cannot hear, eyes that cannot see, lips that cannot speak, and legs that cannot walk. They are futile! (See Psalm 115:4-8; Jeremiah 10, and then the contrast between such useless idols and the Lord in Psalm 115:3 and Jeremiah 10:6-10.) The Lord himself laughs at such folly (Psalm 2:4). And prayer to them, however intense, will achieve nothing.

## **5) The Lord is the only true and living God (vv30-40)**

### **a) The sacrifice prepared (vv30-35)**

Then the time came for the evening sacrifice. This was one of the daily appointed times God had said his people were to worship him. (See Exodus 29:38-41; Numbers 28:3-8.) Elijah called the people to him, so that they could see all that he was doing. He repaired the altar with twelve stones; one for each tribe in Israel, indicating that the sacrifice being offered was for the whole nation. Then he dug a trench around it and ordered that water be poured all

over the sacrifice and the wood. This was done three times until even the trench was filled. The wood and sacrifice were soaking wet and impossible to be set on fire by ordinary means. This was something only the true God could do. This would demonstrate irrefutably that the Lord was indeed God. Elijah’s faith in the goodness and power of God was solid.

### **b) The prayer he offered (vv36-37)**

Then at the appointed time for the sacrifice, Elijah prayed to the Lord (1 Kings 18:36-37):

*“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.”*

This prayer is very instructive.

- Elijah’s whole desire was that everyone would know that the Lord alone is God. In other words, God’s glory was uppermost in his heart. Even the reference to himself was simply that the people would realise that the Lord had sent him, because the Lord wanted them to listen to his message.
- He identified the Lord as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, or Jacob as Israel is also known (Genesis 32:22-32). It was by this title that the Lord was known as the God of the covenant, the God who had faithfully pledged himself to draw near to and bless his people

(Genesis 17:7-8). He was the God of previous generations, and the God who was alive even though many centuries had passed since those men lived.

- He sought the Lord to demonstrate that he alone was God; that he would vindicate his holy name.
- Then he pleaded with God to turn the hearts of the people back to him again. Elijah did not want them to follow him, or praise him, but that they would love and follow and serve and worship the Lord.
- He did not pray for his own advancement, but for God's honour and the good of his people. This is the mark of a true servant of God, whose great aim is to direct people to the Lord and not to themselves. It was the desire of Christ himself (see John 8:50, 12:28, 15:8, 17:4).
- Note also that the prayer was very short. There was no vain repetition or frenzy such as had characterised the prophets of Baal. Remember the Lord Jesus condemned that kind of praying in Matthew 6:7 and Mark 12:40. Instead, this was a real prayer, offered in faith, from a heart that loved God, and was for God's glory and the good of the people, and from a man whose life was pleasing to God. This was a prayer of quality, rather than quantity.

**Lesson:** True prayer is much more than going through the motions, or uttering vain repetitions. It is the heart of the believer communing with God, desiring his glory and the good of his people.

### c) Prayer answered (vv38-40)

At that very instant, fire fell from heaven and not only ignited the wet wood and sacrifice, but was so intense that all the water in the trench dried up as well (v38)! In a single moment and in answer to a very short but God centred prayer, the Lord demonstrated before everyone there that he was the true God. It was such an unmistakable demonstration that the people fell prostrate to the ground and openly acknowledged that the Lord was God alone (v39)! At last they heeded the Lord and returned to him.

Elijah commanded that the prophets of Baal be destroyed (v40). This was not an act of vindictiveness on Elijah's part, but obedience to the command of God given during the days of Moses: (Deuteronomy 13:12-18)

*“If you hear it said about one of your towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in that wicked men have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’ (gods you have not known), then you must enquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in the town. Destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock... It is to remain a ruin for ever, never to be rebuilt.”*

(Deuteronomy 17:2-5) *“If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God in*

*violation of his covenant, and contrary to my command has worshipped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars of the sky, and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death...*"

We must also say that execution is no longer the way Christian believers are to respond to false worship, but the principle remains the same. God detests all who forsake him and follow after other gods, and we must turn from such ways with equal abhorrence and determination. Those who do forsake the Lord will in the end have to face God and give account to him. Such people will be without excuse, and the consequences of their open rebellion will be God's solemn judgment. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.) Those who persist in rejecting God will find that God will reject them, with all the solemn consequences of that. (See Proverbs 1:22-33.)

### **Conclusion**

God, through Elijah his prophet, triumphed over Baal and the false prophets, and over Ahab and particularly Jezebel who had so avidly promoted Baal worship in Israel. The lessons from this passage are:-

- God is God alone, and he is mighty and awesome. Therefore men must turn *"to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from*

*heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."* (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

- How marvellous to have the Lord as our God, and how dreadful not to!
- What encouragement to believers whose faith is weak. Your God is strong!
- What encouragement for believers faced with humanly impossible difficulties and trials. Nothing is too hard for the Lord!
- What encouragement to God's servants to remain faithful to him, though they may be facing the severest opposition and persecution for so doing. Nothing can separate you from his love!
- What encouragement to engage in believing prayer. The Lord hears!

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## **Chapter 7 Effective prayer for rain (1 Kings 18:41-46)**

### **Introduction**

In the New Testament, James refers to Elijah's prayer life (James 5:16b-18):

*"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."*

It is a very encouraging statement not least because it tells us that Elijah was “*just like us*”. This is quite amazing after all that we have seen about this godly prophet, but it is still true, he was just like we are. He was frail flesh and blood, faced the same ups and downs we face, experienced joy and sorrow like we do, and had the same kind of needs including forgiveness for his sins. And James’ purpose in making this statement is to encourage Christian believers today to be men and women of prayer just as Elijah was.

God had demonstrated that he alone was God. The wicked prophets of Baal had been destroyed, and now the time to pray for the rain had come.

### **1) Elijah instructs Ahab (v41)**

Indicating again his tremendous faith in God’s promise to send the rain just as he had told Elijah earlier (v1), Elijah tells Ahab in verse 41, “*Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.*” And he did this when there was not even a single cloud in the sky! Elijah knew that because God is holy it is impossible for him to lie. He knew that God always spoke the truth. He knew that God is faithful and does not change his mind or let his people down. He knew that however unlikely it may seem to human understanding at times, God always keeps his word. He knew that God had the power to send the rain, and none could stop him. Therefore he both trusted God and acted upon it, and told Ahab to get ready for it. Elijah heard by faith what he could not hear with his ear (see Hebrews 11:1). The coming rain was certain because God had said it was coming, therefore he spoke as if it had already taken

place (cf. how Paul does this with our being glorified in Romans 8:29-30).

God’s word is the same today, it is wholly reliable and cannot fail. And we find God’s word in the Bible. Indeed the Bible is God’s word. Therefore with complete confidence we too can rely on all that God has said to us, knowing that he will not and cannot fail to keep his promises.

### **2) Ahab's continued lack of spiritual concern (v42a)**

All he could think of doing was to go and eat and drink! This really was as astonishing as it was tragic. After all that had taken place moments earlier on Mount Carmel, Ahab could think of nothing more important to do than to look after his bodily needs! Now admittedly this is what Elijah had told him to do (v41), but it was not the most important thing. The urgent need for him to repent of his own sins, to mourn and grieve at his obstinate wickedness and complete disregard for God, to renounce his allegiance to Baal, and to turn back to the Lord, was of no concern to him at all! Spiritual matters had no priority in his life.

Consider the contrast between Ahab and Elijah after these great events on Carmel. Ahab went to eat and drink, but Elijah went to commune with God alone. Knowing that rain was about to return Ahab did not even pause to give thanks to God! He was evidently a man without the Spirit of God. (See 1 Corinthians 2:14.) This really is a most dreadful thing. Ahab’s eternal wellbeing was at stake, but he had no thought for his soul’s condition at all. How

incredibly hard the human heart can become. In the face of the sternest warnings, severest chastisements, indisputable demonstrations of the glory and majesty of God, this man continued in his life of wickedness. He thought more of his stomach than he did of God (cf. Philippians 3:19). Ahab is a tragic example of so many in our world today who have irrefutable proof of the reality and being of God, yet who refuse to turn from their wicked ways and live! There is such a thing as hardening our hearts too far, as happened also with the Egyptian Pharaoh during the days of Moses. God's patience, while a marvellous thing to behold, is not something that goes on forever - a time comes when he withdraws it. The people of Noah's day learned that to their eternal peril. Noah preached to them for 120 years about the coming flood, then the day came when the Lord shut Noah and his family in the ark. Noah and his loved ones believed God and acted upon it and were safe, but everyone else who ignored God was shut out of the ark and perished! Ahab was now far down the path that would eventually lead to his destruction.

### **3) Elijah turns to prayer (vv42-44)**

The promise of God was the firm basis on which Elijah built as he turned to the Lord in prayer. God's promises are one of the greatest incentives to pray. This helps us to see how useful Bible study is, because it is in the Bible that we find God's promises. They help us to know what to pray for and how to pray. Interestingly we are not told Elijah's precise words on this occasion, just simply that he

prayed (cf. v42 with James 5:16b-18). However, a number of things are evident about the way that Elijah prayed.

#### **a. He prayed with humility.**

*"... he bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees."* Elijah knew he was coming before Almighty God. Even if Ahab ignored that fact, Elijah did not. Therefore he approached God with reverence and godly fear. (See Hebrews 12:28-29.) This is very instructive and important. Though Elijah was God's prophet, and had been used in some remarkable ways at both Zarephath and now at Carmel, he did not rest on his own efforts nor parade his own achievements. He knew these things were really the Lord's doing, and he was just his instrument, his servant, and no more. Therefore he humbly bowed before the Lord to plead his promise. There is no room for pride or familiarity in the presence of God. When we draw near to him, we must ever remember we come to the great God of heaven and earth, the omnipotent Lord of all, the Holy One of Israel. Therefore our approach will be like that of Elijah's, in humility. The fact that as Christian believers we are urged to come to God with boldness (Hebrews 4:16) does not mean we are to forget reverence.

#### **b. He prayed with expectancy**

Elijah prayed, then sent his servant to see if there were any rain clouds coming on the horizon from the direction of the sea (v43). Elijah expected it to rain. He expected God to keep his promise. Now this was not wishful thinking, nor presumption, but faith in the revealed will of God. God

had said there would be rain (v1) and therefore Elijah expected rain to come. He believed God. Hebrews 11:6:

*“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him.”*

Elijah had that faith, and it enabled him to pray with expectancy.

### **c. He prayed with persistence**

He sent his servant to look for the rain seven times (v43)! Though the answer to his prayer did not come immediately, that did not discourage him or put him off. He did not give up on prayer, but persisted. It is so easy to become weary in doing good, especially in the matter of prayer. The human heart is naturally lazy; it is soon distracted and soon disappointed. Further, because prayer is a spiritual activity, the devil makes it a specific area of the believer's life to attack. But Elijah gave in to none of these things, but persevered. The Lord Jesus gave instruction about this very thing to his disciples on more than one occasion. When he told the disciples the parable of the persistent widow we are given the reason in Luke 18:1, *“... to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”* In the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus urged his sleeping disciples in Matthew 26:41, *“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”* Paul urged that same steadfastness in prayer (Colossians 4:2): *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”* Sometimes answers to prayer come immediately, but

sometimes we have to pray for years before our prayers are answered. The issue is will we persevere as Elijah did, however long it takes? Elijah was not put off praying although the answer did not come immediately. He knew that the Lord would not fail to keep his word, and this stimulated him to pray fervently. We noted that when Elijah prayed in public his prayer was short (v36-37), but his praying in secret, away from the crowd and alone with God, was longer. He kept on praying. His climbing to the top of the mountain indicated he knew there was the need for God's servants to have times when they are alone with God, away from the mad rush and bustle of everyday life (cf. Matthew 6:6).

### **d. He prayed effectively**

In verse 44 when Elijah sent his servant to see if the rain clouds were coming for the seventh time, he returned with the news that a small cloud as big as a man's hand could be seen. This small encouragement was enough for Elijah; he knew the Lord was sending the rain, which soon became a heavy torrent (v45). (James 5:16b-18) *“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”* As this godly man prayed, so his prayer was accepted by God and answered by him. It is important to stress that Elijah did not produce the rain, God did, but Elijah's prayer was effective, because he prayed in the way he did. The fact that James mentions *“The prayer of a righteous man...”* is very important. If there is one thing that will make our prayers ineffective it is when we harbour sin in our hearts and lives. If we live disobedient lives then we cannot

expect God to answer our prayers, as the Bible explains in these passages:-

Isaiah 59:2: “... *your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*”

Jeremiah 5:25: “... *your sins have deprived you of good.*” (See Lamentations 3:42-44.)

Psalm 66:18: “*If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened...*” (See also John 15:7; 1 John 3:22; Hebrews 10:22.)

We have seen Elijah’s devotion to God. His obedience and service teach us he was indeed “*a righteous man*” and so his prayers prevailed with God. The Lord sent the rain, just as he had said. This again not only underlines God’s faithfulness, but also reminds us of his sovereignty and control of all things including the weather. Nothing happens in this world which is outside his control and overruling. (See Psalm 2:7; Job 28:26; Proverbs 8:9; Jeremiah 5:22; Psalm 147:8; Amos 4:7.)

All of this teaches us to depend on the Lord for everything. There are aspects of God’s sovereignty which are a mystery to us and beyond our full understanding, but this little incident in the life of Elijah reminds of this great truth again. God is the King of creation, and is working out his eternal plan and purposes (see Ephesians 1:11). He is able to do whatever he wants to do, and none can stop him. And this is a great comfort to God’s believing people, because he who controls the weather also controls the

affairs and details of our lives. Often we do not understand why certain things happen to us, especially things like suffering and distress. But we can rest secure in the knowledge that God knows all about us and what he is doing with us, and so we can rest secure in his almighty and loving hands. And further, the fact that God kept this promise teaches us that he will keep all his other promises, especially those concerning bringing the Christian believer to heaven. (See John 14:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Hebrews 2:10; 1 Peter 1:3-5.)

#### **4) Elijah’s miraculous running (vv44-46)**

Elijah sent his servant to tell Ahab to hurry home or else his chariot might get stuck as the rain came. Ahab was now convinced that God was sending the rain, though he was not repentant! As he rode off, so the sky grew dark with rain clouds, and the torrent fell. It was at that moment that the power of the Lord came upon Elijah in a remarkable way enabling him to run ahead of Ahab’s chariot all the way to Jezreel, a distance of about 18 miles or 30 kilometres. With God’s servant running ahead of him, and God’s rain coming behind him, Ahab was again challenged to break with sin and idolatry and turn to the one true and living God, but he did not. Such was his sinful obstinacy. At the end of this most encouraging passage of Scripture about prayer, Ahab stands as a warning to us to ensure we are not like him!

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