

Elijah

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 November 2023

Preacher: Duncan Macpherson

[0 : 00] We have here in these verses that we read from 1 Kings a story that arises from the rebellion of Israel against the word of God.

We have the reality of Israel having for several generations turned away from God when they rebelled against Judah, they split off from Judah and they weren't happy enough just to be a separate nation with their own king.

But the king Jeroboam created false gods for them to worship and this continued down the generations and they drifted further and further from God till the point we get to in our reading when Ahab becomes king of Israel.

And we see here that tells us in verse 30 that Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.

He was by far the worst king to date in the land of Israel. To the point that for him it was simply something trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, the worshiping of those false gods he created.

[1 : 21] And instead he went on and he married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Sidonians. And he imported the false worship of her gods into the country of Baal and also of Ashtara and set up altars to serve those false gods within his own nation.

So things were really coming to a very difficult situation for Israel. And the fundamental thing in terms of bringing in these false gods of Baal and Ashtara, Baal being the male and Asher, and Asher being the female, the idea behind these paganistic gods and animistic religions even today is that your religion is one of appeasing the gods.

And as long as you do the right things in terms of ceremonies and actions, you will be able to appease the anger of the gods against you. And fundamental to that is that seed time and harvest will continue to happen, the rains will continue to come as long as you make the right sacrifices to those gods.

That is the falsehood that people who worship in that manner live in. And yet the people of Israel were happy to enter into that. So here we have a situation that is a great affront to God's glory and honour going on within Israel.

This is the nation that he chose for himself, the nation that he set apart from all other nations to be a special nation to whom he would reveal himself in a way that he revealed himself to no other nation in the Old Testament.

[3 : 10] And they themselves have wandered off into false worship. And these false gods are hijacking the living gods' authority.

So God needs to show the consequences of their sin to the people. And that brings us to the first point I think we can draw from this text which is that of the primacy of God's word.

Because we read at the beginning of chapter 17. Now Elijah the Tishbite said to Ahab, As the Lord the God of Israel lives whom I serve, they will be neither Jew nor Reign in the next few years except at my word.

And here's a message direct from God. God saying to the king of Israel, there isn't going to be any reign and therefore there's going to be no harvest for the next several years except at my word. And we know from the Gospel of James that the period without reign lasted three and a half years. I'm saying the Gospel of James, the letter of James in the New Testament.

[4 : 20] The period without reign lasted for three and a half years. So during those three and a half years the people will be making their sacrifices to bale and nothing will have been happening as a result of it.

And this is God speaking clearly into that situation. And God telling the people that there's going to be a famine to come. There was going to be no harvest for three years. And Elijah is the one who is given this message and he sent to this apostate king and his wife to tell them that message. And we can conclude here that Elijah is pretty brave to go and do that when they have set up all their false worship within the country. And here is one man who comes to them and says what the consequences of their sin is going to be. I'm sure they would not have been happy about it at the time. And certainly Jezebel was one who killed many of the prophets of God. So Elijah accepted God's word and he took God's word to the king and declared it to him. [5 : 34] God then speaks to Elijah in verse three and tells him quite simply, leave here and sense him eastward to the Kereth ravine east of the Jordan.

In addition to the being a famine within the land because there's no rain. There's going to be a famine of God's word within the land. These people didn't want to hear God's word. So God had given them for a time being a final word from Elijah and he was now going to take God's word out of the land of Israel and take Elijah east of the Jordan. It's highly likely that Jezebel had killed a multitude of prophets already. So it would seem that there would be no prophets able to preach within the land of Israel at that time. Now Elijah obeyed that word immediately but it must have been quite a trial for him. Because if you think of the prophet himself, what was his role? [6 : 39] It was to receive God's word. It was to wait upon God's word and then it was to declare it to the people. And here is God saying to him, to Elijah, for several years, you are going to be silent. You are not going to say anything to this people. And yet Elijah obeys the word that he is given from God and he goes to that brook. He has no fellowship with other people during that time. And there is that dramatic symbolism of being east of the Jordan, outside of the land, sent away from the land of Israel so that God's word, even if it was dwelling inside Elijah himself, was not going to be dwelling within Israel. And then when the brook dried up, God said to him a second time, go at once to Zaraphath. And we simply see that what Elijah did in that circumstance was so he went. That was his response. God had told him what to do and he went off to Zaraphath. So we see the primacy of God's word in Elijah's life. [7 : 52] Sadly it should have been the thing that was at the forefront of the lives of the people of Israel, but it wasn't. But God was choosing in this way to demonstrate to the people of Israel what would happen in someone's life if they obeyed his word.

And we have Elijah, fearlessly and faithfully obeying God's word, rather than following the ways of the world. That brings us then to the second point, which is that of God's provision. And that's when anyone follows God's word. God is faithful to them and God provides for them. We see in an Elijah situation here, that provision is both natural and it's supernatural at the same time. We see in verse 4, he's ordered to drink from the brook. So he gets his water there through God's natural provision in this world. Even in a time of drought, there's still water running for a time within that brook. Secondly, God sends ravens to feed him. Now God is using natural creatures there, but he's feeding Elijah in a quite unnatural way. [9 : 09] I think one commentator noted that it's not uncommon to see ravens with bits of meat in their mouth as they've been tearing away at carcasses or whatever they happen to find out in the outdoors.

So no one would think twice about seeing a raven with something in its mouth. Whereas they might have thought twice about seeing a man or a woman carrying food into her remote corner to feed the prophet. It's just one of those things that God was using to keep Elijah firmly and distinctly away from where the people of Israel would find him. We see also when he went to stay with the widow, God fed him with flour and oil that was made into bread. Natural things that God provides in this earth through his natural providence. But at the same time, God was multiplying that flour and the oil as we read in verses 14 and 15, when he was able to declare to the widow that the jar of flour and the jug of oil would not run out or run dry for as long as Elijah was with her.

[10:21] God using both a natural and a supernatural provision for his prophet. And we can see here God's choice of and his power over means in this world.

God, because he created everything and everything was created for him, can use anything and everything to serve his purposes. As we were just saying that the Ravens were directed by God. God could have chosen something else. He could have sent men or women or boys or girls to provide Elijah with what he needed.

But instead he directed Ravens. He commanded them to take food to Elijah and then Elijah was fed day in and day out for the whole time that he stayed by that brook.

And then secondly, God said to Elijah, I have commanded a widow and simply states that I have commanded a widow in Zarephath of Sidon to supply you with food.

And here we have a pagan woman in a society that did not recognize God at all. And yet God could state he had commanded her. And as we read, we see in verse 10 that his command is worked out in an interesting way in this woman's life.

[11:51] Because it wasn't an audible voice to the woman herself to serve the prophet, but it was through God's spirit and climbing her heart through circumstance to look after him.

We see in verse 10, Elijah asking her, would you bring me a little water and a jar so that I may have a drink? And then in verse 11, he then called and bring me please a piece of bread.

She was first of all willing to give him the water. And she was happy to do that. But then he was really willing to test her by asking for a piece of bread at which point she tells him the truth about her situation.

And in that situation, Elijah was required to be humble. You can imagine him asking, you know, the natural response in his own mind would be, and to be provided for by a widow in ancient Israel, as in many cultures widows would be in a really precarious situation.

They may well have lost the land that the husband owned. They had no one to work for them, to care for the family. They had children to bring up and would be living on a lot of the time on charity and quite possibly on the edge of destitution.

[13:16] And yet that is what God had decided for Elijah. And here we have Elijah, God's holy prophet, and God saying, you're going to be cared for by a pagan woman.

What would that have felt like in his own mind? And worse than that, a bail worshiper. God has some remarkable and strange thoughts and commands to his people.

And yet we are told simply that Elijah went to Zalaphath to be cared for by her. I think the most remarkable of all really is the actual place that God sent Elijah to.

We have Jezebel in Israel murdering the prophets. Jezebel bringing her false prophets into the country to teach people false religion and worship there.

So where does God decide to go and protect his prophet? He sends him to Jezebel's hometown to hide right under the nose of her own family, or perhaps even to live in the open in front of her family without her knowing about it.

[14:27] I always think that God has a wonderful sense of humour when he deals with people. And here we have God dealing in a remarkable way by putting his prophet in what was probably one of the most dangerous places in human terms.

And yet Elijah was perfectly safe in that situation. But in that situation Elijah was required to be humble and to trust in God's word and God's provision for him.

And finally he might have even asked himself, well if I am to be cared for by a widow, why not an Israelite widow? But it just sums up the fact that God has a sovereign choice and God has a sovereign purpose in what he does.

His choice and his purpose was based around this pagan woman living inside him, which reveals to us our final point, which is that of God's mercy as he was at work in this situation.

God was righteously and quite rightly bringing judgement upon Israel, and at the same time bringing judgement upon the people of Sidon as the drought covered not just Israel but Sidon as well, and quite possibly other lands too.

[15:48] There was no rain coming and everybody was suffering. But within that context God was happy to show mercy to an individual woman, and in this case to a Gentile rather than to a Jew.

And we have a beautiful picture of God dealing with her in this situation. We find Elijah coming across her as she is gathering sticks to cook her last meal.

She must have been very much at the end of her tether, knowing that this for her was the end. But then one of these remarkable coincidences happens that some authors would describe as a God incidence.

Where God comes in always in the nick of time at the last moment, God didn't tell Elijah to leave his brook until the brook actually dried up, and Elijah only moved when God told him to move.

And we have Elijah arriving just as she comes to the end of her food supply. But we see there that her heart is inclined towards Elijah, so she gives him water.

[17 : 02] When he mentions about making her some bread, he said, she reveals the truth of the situation and says, I've got enough flour and oil to make a last loaf of bread for myself and my son.

And after that it's nothing, and we're going to starve to death. So Elijah sets her a real challenge here in verse 13 of chapter 17.

Don't be afraid, go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.

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.

What did Elijah do? He said to her, go home and make me a loaf of bread. In that instant that woman was faced with a choice. She could go home and make a loaf of bread and feed it to herself and her son, or she could go home and make that loaf of bread and bring it back to Elijah.

[18 : 11] Elijah deliberately stayed outside the city waiting for her to bring that bread to him. I think if I'd been in a similar situation, I'd been very much inclined to follow her all the way home, so I would know I'd get that little bit of bread.

But he sets her that test and she is asked to take a step of faith. Is she going to believe the word of God or is she not? The reality of course is that she did.

She made that bread and she brought it to him, and as a result she was greatly blessed and that she had a continuous food supply right throughout the rest of that drought and that famine.

But not only did she have food for her body, she had food for her soul as well, because Elijah stayed at her house and undoubtedly he would have shared the word of the Lord with her.

So in the time of that great famine, when nobody wanted to hear the word of the Lord and the word of the Lord was taken away from a rebellious people, there was at least one person who was hearing the word of the Lord and being blessed by it.

[19 : 23] So there we have her in that situation with Elijah taking with his presence, providing her with all the food that she required through desperate times and desperate struggles.

But then what we have is her faith being tried. Verse 17, her son became ill, he grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing.

There must have been a terrible thing indeed to lose a child suddenly is a terrible thing for any parent. But we see her response to Elijah, what do you have against me, man of God?

Did you come to remind me of my sin and to kill my son? We have her there remembering her own sin and thinking, here it is that God is punishing me for my sin in this situation.

It's interesting the very fact that she uses the word sin had Elijah been teaching her about sin and its consequences. Almost certainly he would have done in relation to the period of time they were now in and him explaining why indeed he was now her house.

[20 : 38] And her first thought in this instance is that God was punishing her for her sin. And how common it is for us to think when bad things happen in our lives that, oh this is God punishing us for particular sins that we have done.

So she's going under a real trial at this point and she accuses Elijah. But Elijah's response is something a bit more sanctified.

We read that he took the boy away and took him to the upper room where he was staying. I think it was likely that upper room was basically just a little hut on top of the roof of the house.

And he would have taken him away from his mother for a few minutes there.

Now you know any mother in such a situation would almost certainly not want to be parted with the body of her dead son. And yet she lets him go and she stays down at the bottom of the house.

[21 : 45] And I just wonder whether Elijah deliberately did that so that he might force her to pray to God in that instance. And that having seen what God was doing in his word through Elijah, she was willing to trust that Elijah could do something that could potentially save her son.

And it's interesting in Hebrews 11 and 35. That chapter which has the list of people who did great things by our experienced great things, when by faith they trusted in God.

So many people are mentioned individually there, but in verse 35 it simply says women received back their dead. And there is no other record in scripture, certainly in the Old Testament, of women receiving back their dead just like this woman's case here.

This was the very first time such a thing happened. And it's a wonderful and a remarkable story to think of God's word being fulfilled and God's word being demonstrated as written in the Hebrews as it works out in the life of this poor woman in this situation.

We have Elijah's faith is also tried because of the fact that nobody had been brought back from the dead before this. We simply see in verse 20, Elijah cries out to the Lord, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow?

[23 : 35] And he cries out to the Lord and then stretches himself out on the boy three times. I don't think we should read too much into himself stretching himself out on the boy, it's probably just something symbolic.

But the important thing is that after crying out to the Lord, his life returns to him. And Elijah, he had no direct word from God in that situation.

He, we have, he was a prophet who was used to receiving a direct word from God. And yet in this circumstance, there was nothing came to him, but yet he himself still cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard.

And he granted Elijah's request. The woman's faith was tried, but Elijah's was too. And the result was the boy came back to life.

God allowed his spirit to return to him. And the consequence of Elijah exercising his strong faith is that we see the woman's faith is strengthened in this situation.

[24 : 37] She can declare quite strongly in verse 20, 24, sorry, now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

Those two words I know are really crucial for anyone who is believing in God and following Christ. And it is I know.

Can you say I know God? Can you say I know Christ today? Paul in his letter to Romans Romans 8 28 said, we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

That had just been demonstrated in this woman's life. What had appeared to be a complete tragedy was used to powerfully strengthen her trust in the living God.

And each and every one of us has many trials in our lives and we can use them to turn against God. Or we can use them to see God's providence and God's will in our lives and to trust more strongly and more powerfully in him.

[25 : 56] Do you know today that you are saved? Do you know that Jesus really is Lord and do you know that God is the living God?

These are all truths that are spoken of in scripture and yet if they are just in our heads they mean nothing. But if they are in our hearts they mean everything. And here we have that woman saying, now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

The truth truly was in her heart. And there she was, one woman in the midst of a pagan nation declaring that God's word is truth.

Wonderful encouragement to her and no doubt it would have been a wonderful encouragement to Elijah. But the fundamental thing remains and that message continues down to us today.

Each and every one of us needs to know this truth. Otherwise we will be left like the rest of that nation of Israel at that time.

[27 : 05] Bereft of the word of the Lord and lost and hungry and seeking to fulfill that hunger in all sorts of other ways.

The one place to be filled and to be full is by feeding upon God's word and as the woman could say God's word is truth.

Amen.