

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from Bible Characters: Elijah – Witnessing to God

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*.

We shall continue with the series, begun last week, on lessons from Bible characters. Today we shall be looking at Elijah, a man who suddenly appears upon the pages of Scripture with no introduction, yet a man who dominates the scene whenever he is present. In Luke 1:17 the spirit and power of Elijah is emphasised as a characteristic of John the Baptist. I trust that we shall learn, as we go through the events of Elijah's life, that, just as the Baptist witnessed to the Lord Jesus, Elijah bears a witness and testimony to his LORD God.

The first mention we get of this man is when he storms into the presence of Ahab, the King of Israel, declaiming against the idolatry of the court. That scene, however, will be considered in a few minutes for we need to examine something more of the man himself before we consider his words and witness.

All that we know of his background is contained in the phrase from 1 Kings 17:1 where it states that Elijah the Tishbite was one of the inhabitants of Gilead. His name, which means "Yah, (or Jehovah) is my God", might be a clue to the faith and desire of his parents. Perhaps they hoped that their son would prove to be a faithful worshipper and follower of Jehovah, the God of his fathers. As the Scripture record shows, the purposes of God meant that Elijah became a fearless and zealous prophet of God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reigns of Ahab and Jezebel and then Ahaziah.

Ahab reigned for around twenty two years and, along with his wife Jezebel, presided over the moral decline of Israel, as he infected the religious life of the nation with the worship of Baal. From a study of the names of his children it would appear that he did not completely abandon the worship of Jehovah, but rather tried to ally traditional beliefs and practices with false worship of strange gods such as Baal and Ashtoreth. His troubled indecision can be seen in his neutral attitude when the prophets of Baal were slain on Mount Carmel.

In this dreadful corruption the worship of the LORD was tainted and soiled by the building of altars to Baal and the endeavours of at least four hundred priests of the groves who organised worship of a nature goddess. The influence of Jezebel dishonoured the LORD and depraved the worship of His people, even to the slaughter of His priests. The situation needed a strong and courageous voice to counter balance the power of this Canaanite queen who, if Ahab had been true to his faith, should never have jointly occupied the throne. The appearance of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 demonstrates that God had his man in readiness. The years of Elijah's preparation are hidden from us, yet the New Testament hints of the times of communion and fellowship before this stark confrontation with the perpetrators of evil. The Apostle James, in James 5:17, tells us: "Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months." How deeply the superficial nature and false worship of the king's court must have vexed the soul of this good man. Why did he pray as he did? Others have pointed out that Elijah prayed for a drought because he was aware of God's Word in Deuteronomy 11:16-17: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and then the LORD's wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you." Drought, then, was the method, chosen of God, to discipline His people, when they worshipped idols and false gods and Elijah would be aware of this. At this point can I emphasise that I do not believe that the parts of the world that suffer drought or climatic disasters are being punished of God. This Scripture refers distinctly to God's people in covenant relationship with Him.

It is, perhaps, necessary to emphasise the negative qualities, displayed by King Ahab, that stimulated the confrontation between the prophet and the king. We have not time to read all of the subsequent chapters of 1 Kings that demonstrate the selfishness, cruelty, moral weakness and compromising nature of Ahab. The best summary of his stewardship of the kingdom is found in 1 Kings 21:25-26: "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up. And he did very abominably in following idols, according to all things as did the Amorites, whom the LORD cast out before the children of Israel." From this passage of Scripture we must also note the part that Jezebel played in the king's attitude, making her a major member of the list of wicked women of the Bible.

Elijah's sudden appearance before King Ahab is recorded for us in 1 Kings 17:1: "And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." When he made this pronouncement of judgement there is no record that the people present took any immediate notice. Elijah, however, in making the declaration, had lit a candle that illuminated the holiness of God. Jehovah's people could not depart from His ways with impunity. Led astray by Ahab and Jezebel, they had to learn that their idolatrous actions had consequences.

The bold stand of Elijah meant that, eventually, he was a marked man. Jezebel, especially, was after his blood, as we shall see when we move on. Before we do so, I want to emphasise two points from the Scripture we have just read that illustrate something of the secret of Elijah's boldness. In the phrase, "as the LORD God of Israel liveth", he informs us that he believed, heart and soul, in the living God. That others in Israel might have no true conception of the reality of God did not deter Elijah. His faith in God, and his confidence of Jehovah's presence in His world, carried him through. Secondly, though in actual fact he was standing in the presence of Ahab, he was profoundly conscious that he had been chosen by God to confront this earthly monarch as the personal representative of the eternal God.

In the ensuing judgment, when the heavens were closed and no rain fell, we can trace from Scripture the infinite care of God for the details of Elijah's life, first when he was fed by the ravens, then later by the widow of Zarephath. Chapter 18 records the climactic confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Again we are unable to read the full story from the sacred record. If you are unaware of the details in chapter 18, I urge you to read it after this broadcast is concluded. Sufficient here to state that the contest concerned the God that answered by fire to consume a sacrifice. The people were faced with the question as to who was their God. Was it Baal or the LORD?

From 1 Kings 18:36-38 we gain an insight into the prayers of Elijah: "And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." We can see, from these verses, that the LORD answered Elijah's prayer in a spectacular way to defeat the prophets of Baal, and to reinforce the faith of the people of Israel. When asked the question they answered with a resounding cry, "The LORD, He is God". Elijah's testimony and witness to God had brought the people back again, at least for a little while.

Following this victory the prophet could hear the sound of falling rain, even though it was not apparent to the others. Verse 42 shows us Elijah's intensity as he prays that the rain might come: "Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees." He remained in this posture until his servant returned to say that he could see a cloud on the horizon.

Elijah was praying with great desire and earnestness. In 18:1 we are told that God promised that He would send rain upon the earth. The prophet believed God would keep His promise and so he prayed in faith. I am told that the word "cast" that we have just read in verse 42, only occurs in one other passage in the Old Testament where Elisha raises the dead son of the Shunemite woman. It signifies agonising intensity of concentration on one object. Elijah was confident that God would send rain and complete the demonstration of His power, yet his faith was tested. Seven times he sent his servant to look for clouds. Six times the servant returned with a negative report. It was only on the seventh time that he returned saying he could see a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. That was enough for the prophet. He knew then that God was answering his prayers.

This is a lesson for us. How long do we persevere in prayer? Sometimes the answer might come immediately. Other times we need to continue in prayer. Tennyson, the poet wrote that more things are wrought by prayer than this world ever dreams of. How true that is!

Another thought comes to me from Elijah's prayer, which has practical implications for us this morning. We read in 18:1: "And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth." There is an age old comment or even criticism that asks why we need to pray for something that God has said will happen. There is no slick answer. I can only rest on the fact that it is taught in the Scriptures that we ought always to pray. As we have seen, Elijah prayed earnestly and consistently until his prayer was answered. Ours is a life of faith and without faith it is impossible to please God. Therefore we need to take God at His word and pray as Elijah and all of the other saints of God have prayed.

Despite the demonstration of the power of the living God at Mount Carmel, we read, in the opening verses of chapter 19, that Jezebel was so angry that she threatened to kill Elijah if he did not flee from the court within twenty-four hours. She could have killed him then and there, but her plan was far more subtle. If he ran away he would be discredited in the eyes of the people and she could persuade them all back into Baal worship. So Elijah took off into the wilderness

in despair for his life. His prayers and faith in God had just won a great victory over the false prophets and ended the drought that had troubled Israel for three years, yet we see him running away at the words of the Queen.

It would seem that the success of Elijah's witness and testimony contained the seeds of his failure. 19:10: "And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." This verse leaves us with impression that an element of pride had gripped Elijah making him too conscious of his own importance. Despite Jezebel having been his enemy for years, God had brought him through to this point. Now, in the aftermath of the victory at Carmel, he loses heart, moving out into the desert wishing to die. God, however, had other plans for His servant, as we can read in 19:7-8, "And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat: because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of the God." I would consider that the journey time of forty days is symbolic, as a straightforward walk from Beersheba to Horeb, or Sinai as the mountain is better known, would take about ten days or so. Elijah was kept for forty days and nights as a preparation for a special visitation from God. It had happened to Moses, in the same locality, as we can read in Exodus 34. Instead of dying, Elijah was to witness God's presence in a way that brought him back to a pathway of service that he walked with renewed vigour.

Before we move on to consider the verses that speak of the experience on Mount Sinai, when Elijah received a new commission, I want to concentrate on some words that we have just read in 19:8, where it states that Elijah "went in the strength of that meat forty days." As believers in the Lord Jesus we move through a world that is at best indifferent and at worst actively antagonistic to the life of faith in Christ. We need therefore to feed upon the food that God would provide. One of my favourite hymns contains the lines:

*"God, thine everlasting portion,
Feeds thee with the mighty's meat."*

This, I believe, gives the sense of what He will do for us today. Some might, with justification, enquire about the location of this food that God would feed us on our journey to Him. I am utterly convinced that God's word ministered and assimilated in the power of the Holy Spirit, will furnish us strength for the day.

Moving on to meet again with Elijah, as he waits at Sinai, we can do worse than consider, for a few moments, that place in the history of the people of God. It was here that the bush burned with fire and Moses had to remove his shoes when the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appeared before him, because he was on holy ground; where God graciously disclosed His name to empower His servant for the tremendous task of freeing the people from the yoke of Pharaoh. Later the Law was given when, as we have seen, Moses spent forty days alone on the Mount. Have we locations that are special to us, because God, through His grace has touched our souls? For myself, I can reach back, over the years, to a spot, on the fringe of Lake Windermere, where I realised that Christianity offers an experience that Paul described as "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ".

Elijah, hiding away in his cave on Sinai, had to learn yet more lessons from God, if he was to be a useful witness to Him again. Isolating himself from the dangers of the court was obviously not where God wanted His servant. In 19:9 we hear the penetrating question that God asked of Elijah: "and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?" We, like Elijah, need to make sure that we are located where we should be as servants of the living God. Often times we are where we are, because we want to be there. Like Elijah, we seek to justify our actions, yet we must always be honest and sincere in our reasoning. If it is through a desire to gratify our own interests, let us recognise the selfish reasons and, in the power of the Spirit, take measures to remedy the situation. God dealt patiently with Elijah, teaching him that He did not always act in a supernatural way. 1 Kings 19:12-13 state: "And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?" Another thing that we must notice about Elijah is that he recognised the voice of God. Oftentimes we miss the message that God would impart to us, because we are not receptive to His voice. We need to know that God does not usually speak to us through the spectacular.

Elijah's service was not over, for God had other matters for him to be involved with. Though he never again reached the heights that he did at Carmel, we must acknowledge that there Elijah stood alone for God. His faith then still stands as an example for us as is pointed out in the New Testament. In Luke 1:17 we read how John the Baptist would be like Elijah: "And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just: to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." So it was that the witness of Elijah was revered for over nine hundred years after his death. The Spirit of God also brought Elijah's name to Malachi, as he penned the last prophecy in the Old Testament, though we have no time to read that Scripture now. When the Lord Jesus questioned His disciples regarding who the people thought He was, Elijah was one of the

two Old Testament characters mentioned by name. When, in that never to be forgotten moment, the Lord Jesus was transfigured before three disciples, Elijah, in company with Moses, was recorded as speaking to the Lord about His death.

These examples are mentioned to reinforce the claim that Elijah's bold and faithful stand before Ahab and Jezebel, when he witnessed to the LORD God, was recalled as an example to be followed. Some might say that Elijah was an extraordinary man, a kind of spiritual superman. Not so states the Scriptures, as we can read in James 5:17. Because I have quoted this verse previously I will only read the first part of the verse: "Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly." Notice that he was a man similar to us. It is necessary for us to witness to the character and faithfulness of God in our world, just as Elijah did in his. Neither must we make the mistake that Elijah did when he claimed that he was alone. God had to impress upon him that He had seven thousand persons who had never bowed the knee to Baal. What a pity that they did not stand openly with Elijah and make a combined witness! May we, in the power of the Spirit of God, be enabled to stand for the Lord whenever the challenge comes to us.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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