

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Elijah: Elijah - The Champion of God

We come today to the third in our series of talks entitled "Lessons from the life of Elijah", all taken from the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. Just briefly to recap, the first talk was headed "The prophet of God" and covered 1 Kings 17:1-7 in which Elijah comes, apparently from nowhere, to confront the wicked King Ahab and to convey the message of God's judgement; there were to be years of drought which would come to an end at a time decided by God. Elijah was then instructed by God to go and hide by the brook Cherith and God commanded the ravens to take food to him. In that talk we considered Elijah's fearlessness in taking God's message to Ahab, his obedience to God's instructions and his dependence on God for protection and provision.

The second talk was headed "The man of God" and was based on 1 Kings 17:8-24. We heard about Elijah being sent by God from Cherith to a place called Zarephath. There he met a widow woman who was coming to the end of the food that she had for her son and herself. God made that woman's remaining food miraculously not run out. (1 Kings 17:8-16) Later the woman's son (1 Kings 17:17) died and God used Elijah to bring him back to life again. (1 Kings 17:19-23) The woman acknowledged that Elijah was a man of God. (1 Kings 17:18, 24)

Our talk today covers the events recorded in 1 Kings 18. If I was asked to provide my personal list of a half dozen thrilling events in the Old Testament, Elijah versus Ahab and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:20-40 would be in that list. This is not a dry, academic story but a dramatic unfolding of God's power over people and events. It's my prayer that we are left with a heart-stirring impression of Elijah's faithfulness in apparently impossible circumstances and of the unlimited power of God.

Our heading today is Elijah, the champion of God. We will divide 1 Kings 18 into three sections:

- 1 Kings 18:1-21 - Elijah's stand for God;
- 1 Kings 18:22-40 - Elijah's confidence in God; and
- 1 Kings 18:41-46 - Elijah's expectation from God.

Elijah's stand for God.

Let me start by reading 1 Kings 18:1-2, reading from the Authorised Version of the Bible. "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. And Elijah went to shew himself unto Ahab. And there was a sore famine in Samaria."

It was over three years earlier that Elijah had last seen King Ahab, when Elijah told him of God's judgement by way of a drought (see 1 Kings 17:1). Now God had decided that the drought would come to an end and He would make it clear that He was instigating the renewal of rainfall. The Scriptures show that Ahab was not a kind or forgiving person and yet here God was instructing Elijah personally to deliver a message to the powerful Ahab in whom three years of resentment will have built up. Instead of showing any hesitancy, Elijah immediately obeys God and sets out to find Ahab. Any believer wanting to stand for God must show obedience to what God says. Today, we have the Bible, as God's instructions to us and every Christian should obey what God says in the Bible. We may not be called to be involved in dramatic events like Elijah in the book of Kings, but we should adhere to Bible instructions.

In 1 Kings 18:3-16 we meet a man called Obadiah who was the governor of King Ahab's palace. 1 Kings 18:3 tells us that "Obadiah feared the LORD greatly". There is no doubt that Obadiah was a follower of God but in my view he is an example of some who misguidedly think that they can still serve God while being linked to the world. There is a helpful note in my *Schofield Reference Bible* which says: "Obadiah is a warning type of the men of God who adhere to the world while still seeking to serve God. The secret of the Lord, and the power of the Lord were with Elijah, the separated servant".

1 Kings 18:5-6 tell us that at this time of famine and suffering for his people, Ahab's priority was to find grass for his horses. In the Old Testament we often find that times of famine were sent by God as a judgement for sin and unfaithfulness to Him. That was the case at the time we are considering and yet there is no indication at all that Ahab was reflecting on the likely reason for this famine. His horses were more important to him than God!

Ahab and Obadiah were searching the land to find grass for the horses. Elijah met Obadiah and told him to tell Ahab that Elijah wanted to see him. Obadiah was not keen to carry that message fearing that Ahab would kill the messenger who brought the news of the whereabouts of Elijah, for whom Ahab had spent three years unsuccessfully searching. Of course, during that time God had been protecting Elijah, as He does all His servants and God did not allow Ahab to find Elijah until God permitted it.

Obadiah eventually agreed to relay the message and Ahab went to meet Elijah. Let me read 1 Kings 18:17-18: "And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed [Baal]". I should add here that Baal was the chief male god of the heathen Canaanites.

What a straight statement by Elijah! He showed no fear in stating God's message to the powerful king and he did not shirk from pointing to Ahab's personal responsibility for disobeying God's word and for following false gods. No mistaking this message! Would that Christians always made God's message "clear and plain", as one old hymn writer once put it.

Elijah then told Ahab to instruct all the people of Israel and the 450 prophets of the false god Baal, to congregate at Mount Carmel, which is near the Mediterranean coast. Elijah addressed the congregation with these words recorded in 1 Kings 18:21: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him". 1 Kings 18:21 then ends with the statement: "And the people answered him not a word".

Elijah made his stand for God at Mount Carmel in front of Ahab, the prophets of the false god Baal and all the people. Elijah knew the power, the holiness, the faithfulness of the true God, his God, and he did not hesitate to speak out in front of this huge audience. Elijah gave them a choice, either to follow the true God who had been faithful to Israel over hundreds of years or to follow the false god, Baal. The people would not choose God. In the presence of evil, idolatry and unfaithfulness, Elijah stood for God. In this our time and in our country, we need to take a similar stand.

Elijah's confidence in God

This brings us to the second section of our chapter, 1 Kings 18:22-40, which we are calling his confidence in God. The people had not responded to Elijah's demand that they choose between God and Baal. Elijah now issues them with a challenge which is contained in 1 Kings 18:22-24 as follows: "Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken".

So Elijah was standing alone against 450 prophets of Baal in a contest to see whether God or Baal could bring fire down to burn up a bullock. Impossible, we would say. But then, the contest was not really between Elijah and the 450. It was between God and Baal. Elijah's name means 'my God is Jehovah'. Elijah had complete confidence in his God, Jehovah the Eternal One. In this extreme circumstance, alone in front of so many people, Elijah's confidence in his God never wavered. I ask myself, does my confidence in God ever waver? Do I ever doubt the absolute promises of God contained in the Bible, such as "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28) or "My God shall supply all your need" (Philippians 4:19)? The fact is that if God can fail then He is not God. The possibility of God failing never entered Elijah's mind. May my confidence in God always be equally strong!

And so the contest began. It lasted all day. The crowd was huge and gripped by the dramatic events on display. The 450 prophets of Baal started the contest. They chose their bullock, prepared it, placed it on the wood and started to pray to Baal to bring fire to consume the bullock. They prayed all morning without any result. At midday Elijah mocked them as recorded in 1 Kings 18:27 "Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked". In response to Elijah's taunts the 450 prophets shouted to Baal even more loudly and cut themselves with knives. This continued all afternoon but still the body of the bullock lay on the wood with no sign of fire or anything else from Baal.

Towards evening, Elijah effectively said: "You've had all day to demonstrate the power of Baal and without success. Now it is my turn to show the power of my God". The champion of God started by building an altar of twelve stones in the name of the LORD. Round the altar he dug a trench. Then he put wood on the altar and on top of the wood he placed the pieces of bullock. Next he instructed that four barrels of water be poured over the meat and the wood. Then another four barrels. And a further four barrels. Then he topped up the trench with more water. You can imagine the crowd not believing what they were seeing! All day they had watched 450 prophets of Baal pleading with Baal to send fire on the meat and wood, but with no response. Now here was Elijah soaking the wood, meat and

surroundings with water, the last thing someone does when fire is wanted. Perhaps they thought Elijah was mad! He was either that or he had unlimited confidence in God.

Elijah then proceeded to pray, using these words recorded in 1 Kings 18:36-37: "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 all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again".

God immediately answered that prayer from His servant. 1 Kings 18:38 tells us that the fire of the LORD consumed the meat, the wood, the stones and dust and the water in the trench. Nothing was left! God's power and the power of faith and the power of prayer were all evidenced in dramatic fashion.

And what of the effect of all this on the watching crowd of people? They had seen 450 prophets of Baal produce no result all day, whereas one prophet of God brought a result in a short period of time. The key was the Person in whom Elijah believed. Baal was a false god with no more power or life than the pile of stones and wood. Elijah's God was alive, an all-powerful Creator God who had sustained His people ever since they left Egypt.

Whereas the people had had nothing to say when challenged earlier by Elijah to choose between God and Baal, they now twice said: "The LORD, he is the God". (1 Kings 18:39) All of the prophets of Baal were taken and killed.

That acknowledgement of God, inferring repentance on behalf of the people, cleared the way for God to come out in blessing. Now in the next section of the chapter, reference can be made to the return of rain. It is the Old Testament pattern of God's judgement, repentance by the people and then God's blessing. And God wants to bless and not in half measures; 1 Kings 18:41 will tell us of "abundance of rain" and 1 Kings 18:45 of "great rain".

To summarise, what spiritual lessons can be taken from this second section of 1 Kings 18? I suggest that these might include:

1. God's power is unlimited.
2. When in a minority or even all alone, the fact that there is a large opposition does not mean that they are right or that they will win.
3. When faced with evil, don't compromise on God's standards.
4. Prayer to God is powerful.
5. Idols can be attractive but are useless.
6. God will put down all evil in His timing.
7. Elijah built an altar in the name of the LORD. God's name incorporates His fame. Let us always honour His name.

Elijah's expectation from God

The final section is 1 Kings 18:41-46 which we are calling Elijah's expectation from God. I would like to read some of those verses. "And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain. So 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, And said to his servant, Go up now, look towards the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand... And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain".

From these verses, first of all consider King Ahab. Earlier in the chapter we thought about Ahab's prime concern at this time of drought and famine being finding grass for his horses. (1 Kings 18:5) Now, having seen the dramatic display of God's power and the execution of the 450 prophets of Baal, Ahab hears Elijah talk of the promise of rain returning for the first time in 3½ years. Is there any sign of repentance by Ahab, any suggestion that he acknowledges, as the people did, that "The LORD, he is the God" (1 Kings 18:39)? No sign at all! Despite what he has witnessed, Ahab thinks of nobody but himself and utters not one word of repentance toward God or acknowledgement of God's greatness. Ahab has no spiritual consciousness at all and therefore cannot hear God speaking.

Now compare this with Elijah! Far from relaxing after the demands on him set out in this chapter, Elijah immediately goes with his servant to spend time with God on Mount Carmel. Elijah and every servant of God needs time with God, not just before and during a time of service, but also afterwards, in commending that service to God and asking for His blessing upon it. I ask myself whether I spend as much time in God's presence after a time of service as I do before it.

Ever since Elijah so abruptly appeared on the scene in 1 Kings 17:1 he has been shown to be a man of prayer. We learn that from James 5:17 where it says that “[Elijah] was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain...” Earlier we saw that Elijah prayed for God to send down fire on the sacrifice. 1 Kings 18:41-46 give details of Elijah’s praying on Mount Carmel. First we see that this servant of God went to be alone with God so that there could be communion between heaven and himself. Church prayers and family prayers are of great importance and value but for an individual servant of God time spent alone with God is also of great importance and value. In the Gospels we read of Jesus spending lengthy time in private prayer with His Father. (e.g. Mark 1:35) What a good thing for us to tell the Lord all about our service and to seek guidance, encouragement and direction.

Then we note in 1 Kings 18:42 that Elijah “cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees”. His approach to God was one of humility and reverence. Elijah wasn’t taking any credit for the defeat of Baal. He was acknowledging that he was in the presence of the God of power who alone had wrought that recent miracle. Today, we have the great privilege as Elijah never did, of knowing God as our Father, with all the nearness of relationship which this brings; but never let us forget as we approach Him that our Father is still God, worthy of all reverence and honour.

Thirdly, we see that Elijah was persistent in prayer. He did not give up praying when his servant had been to the top of Carmel six times and still not seen the slightest sign of any approaching rain. (1 Kings 18:43) Was God testing Elijah’s faith in this? I don’t know, but certainly Elijah did not stop praying. I find this challenging as I reflect that over the years I may not have been as persistent in prayer on particular matters as I might have been.

Lastly, I note that Elijah was so spiritually minded that he was able to detect God’s full response to his prayer by the smallest sign from heaven. On his seventh visit to the top of Carmel the servant reported that “... there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man’s hand”. (1 Kings 18:44) All of the rest of the sky remained clear blue, but Elijah, man of God, man of faith, man of prayer, knew from this tiny cloud that God was giving a sign of His answer to prayer, a sign of great things to come. The sky was soon black with clouds and there was a great rain. The drought was over, in God’s timing. God was demonstrating His control through these miraculous events.

Again, Elijah’s example causes me to reflect whether I am sufficiently spiritually minded to know when God is giving me a sign, maybe through an apparently small event, that He has answered prayer and He is going to do great things in the future. Those great things may or may not come as quickly as the great rain followed on the sighting of the tiny cloud, but come they will if God is in it.

I do trust that this thrilling chapter is both a help and challenge to every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The power of Elijah’s God, the only true God, is no less today. What a God we Christians have!

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