

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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

Today, we begin a series of four talks on the prophet Elijah. Our subject, today, is Elijah - the prophet of God. In the next three talks, God willing, we will look at Elijah - the man of God; Elijah - the champion of God; and finally, Elijah - cast upon God. We will discover, I trust, that although Elijah lived some 2,800 years ago, he can still teach us lessons that are relevant in our 21st century. Elijah had to learn to trust God for himself before he could encourage firstly a widow, and then a nation to trust God. We need to learn that same lesson!

Today, then, we will look at:

- Elijah's fearlessness
- Elijah's obedience
- Elijah's dependence.

Before we begin, we need to be clear what we understand by the term 'prophet'. Prophets in the Bible had a two-fold function. They were to bring the word of God to His people, especially in times of need, i.e. they were to tell forth God's word. But sometimes they would be enabled by God to speak of future events, i.e. they would foretell what was to happen. Today, God has given us a complete revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus, the living Word, and in His written word, the Bible. No further revelation as to the future is needed. But we still very much need those who are able to tell forth from God's word His message for the moment.

Elijah's fearlessness

In 1 Kings 17:1 we read, "And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.'"

We need to look at the background to this amazing declaration. Ahab was then king of Israel. 1 Kings 16:30 tells us: "Now Ahab ... did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him." Not a record to be proud of! As part of his defiance of God, Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). The people of Tyre and Sidon were worshippers of the heathen god, Baal. Ahab lost no time in moving the nation away from the worship of Jehovah, the true and living God, to this heathen idol, Baal. So we read, "Then [Ahab] set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:32-33).

It was not only Ahab who defied God. Throughout the land, there seemed to be a spirit of disobedience toward God. So we read, "In [Ahab's] days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation with Abiram his firstborn, and with his youngest son Segub he set up its gates, according to the word of the LORD, which He had spoken through Joshua the son of Nun." (1 Kings 16:34) You may remember that Jericho was the first city to be captured and utterly destroyed by the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land.

At that time Joshua commanded that that city should never be rebuilt and warned that the man who did so would pay for it in the death of his sons (see Joshua 6:26). Now some 500 years later, Hiel suffered that judgment of God for his deliberate disobedience in the death of Abiram and Segub, for that is what these verses mean. It is hard to imagine that Hiel would have been able to embark upon this major undertaking without the knowledge and approval of the king, Ahab.

It is remarkable that only 60 years had elapsed from the death of Solomon, when the nation of Israel was at its greatest before God to this landslide of departure from God in the time of Ahab. There would be those living under Ahab's reign who had known something of the glory and splendour of Solomon's reign. And yet some of us have lived long enough to recognise that a similar departure from God has taken place in our own land in less than that time! Some churches have had to close because of falling attendances. The laws of our land have been changed so that things which were prohibited because God's word did not sanction them are now encouraged.

What was God to do in a day of such massive departure? Thank God, He had His man, Elijah! Interestingly, Elijah's name means 'Jehovah is God'. Did his parents realise as they looked upon their baby son, as the evil began to raise its ugly head even then, that here was one who would stand for God? Perhaps in faith, then, they gave him this name Elijah. Would to God that in this our day, He might raise up men and women to stand for Him, perhaps even amongst the listeners to this broadcast!

Yet what could one man do against such a tide of evil? James lets us into the secret: "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (James 5:17-18). Notice two things that we learn from these verses.

Firstly, Elijah was no superhero. He was "a man with a nature like ours". What God could do for and with Elijah, He can do for and with you and me!

Secondly, "he prayed"! Elijah was sufficiently in tune with the mind of God to recognise the warning that Moses had previously given the people: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the LORD'S anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you" (Deuteronomy 11:16-17). In his longing that the Israelites might yet turn back to God, Elijah prays that this judgment of God would come as a warning to them. Notice also that this not a one-off prayer - Elijah prayed for three and a half years!

And so, in the confidence that God would honour his prayers, Elijah comes into Ahab's presence. Notice again his challenging statement: "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand..." (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah might be standing in the presence of Ahab who had the power to have him executed, but what mattered to Elijah was his relationship with his God. Ahab and the nation of Israel might worship the dead idol, Baal, but Elijah had to do with the living God! Fearlessly, then, Elijah warns Ahab of the coming drought.

Hamilton Smith has remarked, "Elijah could stand before the wicked king because he had knelt before the living God!" (*Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord*). Do we know what it is daily to come before the living God in prayer and to learn the mind of God by daily reading His word? Paul could write to the young Christians at Thessalonica, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven..." (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

His obedience

In His own good time, God would use Elijah to recall the nation of Israel to Himself. That's the subject of a later talk - see 1 Kings 18. But before God could use Elijah in that very public way, He has some very private lessons to teach His servant. So we read: "Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan" (1 Kings 17:2-5).

Notice God's command: "Get away...and hide." What a valuable instruction for any servant of God! The time would come when it would be right for Elijah to challenge the whole nation on Mount Carmel. Then God would say to His servant, "Show yourself" (1 Kings 18:1). But for now, in this time of preparation, God's word to His servant was "Hide yourself". Hamilton Smith has written, "Elijah must spend three and a half years in hidden seclusion with God before he spends one day in prominence before men." (*Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord*)

The story is told of a young lad who went fishing. All he could afford was a stick with some string, a hook and some bait. Just further down river was a man with all the latest expensive fishing tackle. As the day wore on, the lad caught one fish after another; the man caught nothing. So the man asked the lad why he was so successful but the man could do nothing. Quick as a flash, the boy replied, "You need to hide yourself, mister!"

Every servant of God needs to spend time first in His presence in prayer and reading His word. Only in that way will he learn what God wants him to do. Moses had to spend 40 years in the obscurity of the desert before he was ready to lead God's people through the wilderness. The Lord Jesus Himself lived for 30 years in the obscurity of Nazareth before beginning his three years of public ministry. The Apostle Paul had learned the secret of "hide yourself". So he writes, "...I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Mrs. AA Whiddington captures that spirit well in her lovely hymn,

*"Not I, but Christ, be honoured, loved, exalted;
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action;*

Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word."

So Elijah was told to go to the Brook Cherith. We do not know anything about the attractiveness of its situation. There may well have been other places which Elijah would have chosen. But God's promise to Elijah was, "I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." (1 Kings 17:4) There, and there only, was the place of God's provision. As east of Jordan but flowing into the Jordan, the brook may well have escaped for a time the drought which fell on the land of Israel.

Beautifully, we read of Elijah, "So he went". (1 Kings 17:5) Is there something God has been saying to you to do but you have not yet done it? Let us learn this lesson of Elijah's obedience. The simple children's chorus teaches all of us an important lesson:

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

His dependence

We read, "The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land." (1 Kings 17:6-7)

Some of us have grown used to the weekly trip to the supermarket to fill up the fridge and the freezer. There can be a certain security in seeing them full up. Not so for Elijah! Each morning and each evening Elijah was brought just sufficient for that meal.

Each evening, as he lay down to sleep, he had to trust God that his breakfast next day would arrive on time! Could these big, greedy, black birds really be trusted to bring food to Elijah? Yes, because Elijah was in the place of God's appointment. Day by day he proved the faithfulness of God in the daily provision of all his need. "I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." (1 Kings 17:4)

The Apostle Paul had proved that same faithfulness of God. He writes, "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." (Philippians 4:11-12) He goes on, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

George Müller was a Christian who founded several orphanages in Bristol during the 19th century. He was a man of great faith who had learned to depend on God for all the needs of his orphanages. But the day came when that dependence was sorely tested. In one of those orphanages, there was no food for breakfast. What were they to do? George had the children sit down for breakfast as usual and gave thanks as usual. Scarcely had he finished when there came a knock on the door. The local baker was passing by when his transport broke down. There was no way now whereby he could get the loaves of bread to his customers. So he left them for the orphans!

But the time came when Elijah's ordered daily existence was to be shattered. No doubt, succumbing to the general drought, the brook dried up. Now what was Elijah to do? Interestingly, the name 'Cherith' means 'cutting'. It really seems as though every prop on which Elijah might be tempted to lean was gradually being cut away from him. Hamilton Smith has written, "The prophet must learn to trust in God rather than in the gifts He gives." (*Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord*)

Joseph Scriven was a Christian who lived in the 19th century. He, too, must have felt that God was cutting away all the props of his life. His bride-to-be was tragically drowned on the eve of their wedding day. He later emigrated to Canada where he became engaged to a young lady, only to lose her to a fatal illness before their wedding day. He is best known for his lovely hymn, 'What a Friend we have in Jesus'. The first verse tells us:

*What a Friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear;
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear;
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

But it is interesting that Scriven wrote these words not to comfort himself in his deep sorrows, though the words, no doubt, express his experience of the grace of God in this cutting process. Rather, the hymn was written to comfort his mother when she was going through a time of some distress.

Without water, Elijah would undoubtedly perish. What was he to do? God had certainly not forgotten His servant and had made provision for his need. What that provision was we shall see in our next talk, God willing. Remember, we started our talk this morning by considering James' description of Elijah: "a man just like us" (James 5:17). May we, too, be characterised by that same fearlessness, obedience and dependence that marked Elijah!

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