

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 3 January 2010

No. T0606

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

Today's talk is on Elijah, the man of God, one of the most important of God's prophets. He lived during the ninth century BC and was active in the reign of Ahab, Israel's most wicked king, and Ahab's son, Ahaziah, who was really no better. Elijah came from Tishbe in an area called Gilead, which was on the east bank of the River Jordan. His name means "the LORD (or Jehovah) is God." In the Bible, we read about him in 1 Kings 17-19 and 21, and 2 Kings 1 and 2.

We are going to concentrate in this talk on that aspect of his life and character which earned him the description of "Man of God." This was what a number of people called Elijah when they came in contact with him. We should say what is meant by the expression "Man of God." It is used in the Old Testament to describe prophets in particular, and in the New Testament the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:11, says, "But you, O man of God, flee these things (that is, the evil results of the love of money) and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness." From these, and particularly from Elijah's stand against idolatry and evil, and his speaking the word of God, we get the definition of a man of God as a person who stands for God in an evil age. Since today's world is evil in many ways, there is a lesson and an example here for us.

Let's see what aspects of Elijah's life and character made him a "Man of God." Let's also see something of the wisdom and power of God in raising up such a man as Elijah.

The Bible says nothing about him before we first read of him in 1 Kings 17, where he suddenly appears on the scene and tells Ahab the king, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor any rain these years, except at my word." (1 Kings 17:1) His bold confrontation of Ahab, his relationship with God, and his astonishing assertion that there would be neither dew nor rain until he said so mark him out immediately as a most remarkable man, even for a prophet. And it did not rain in Israel for three and a half years.

1 Kings 17:3 has an expression which is one of the outstanding features of Elijah's ministry: "then the word of the LORD came to him." Elijah was supremely a man whose life was driven by his relationship with the God of Israel and this gave rise to his obedience to God. Many, though not all, of the actions we read of Elijah taking start with these words and are followed by an expression such as: "so he arose and went." (1 Kings 17:5) There is an obvious lesson here for us, isn't there? Are our lives controlled by the Word of God? Are our movements governed by God and our relationship with Him as they were with Elijah? Of course, Elijah did not have the complete Bible as we do today, and God had a particular message and work for that moment in history rather than a general message for him. We have God's Word, the Bible, for every aspect for our lives and God shows His will for us as individuals. We do not have the time to go into that now; the main point is whether our lives are shaped by God's word as Elijah's was.

Another point which shows Elijah's special position came next. God told him to go the Brook Cherith (1 Kings 17:3), which was probably not far from his home of Tishbe. There God preserved him from the evil intentions of Ahab, who was always an enemy of anyone like Elijah. (1 Kings 18:1-19) We read later on that Ahab's desire to get hold of Elijah actually led him to send messengers to other countries to hunt for Elijah. But more than that, God kept Elijah alive by miraculously providing food for him when everyone else was starving.

First of all, at the Brook Cherith God sent ravens with bread and meat morning and evening. (1 Kings 17:6) This is not natural behaviour for ravens, as far as I am aware. They are more likely to take food than to bring it.

Secondly, when the Brook Cherith eventually dried up, God sent him to a place called Zarephath, which was in Sidon, a foreign country. (1 Kings 17:8-16) There, not only was he kept alive by a widow, but she was kept alive by God's miraculous provision through Elijah's presence in her house because God ensured that her little bit of flour and olive oil did not run out until the rain returned. She and her son would have perished from starvation, along with all the rest of the people, had Elijah not been with her. She shared what she had with him but he shared with her God's protection and provision.

Another miracle occurred in the widow's house during Elijah's stay. (1 Kings 17:17-24) This was the restoration of her son back to life. He had died and Elijah prayed for the child's soul to come back to him. God granted this request. So

we see that not only did Elijah listen to God and obey Him, but that God listened to him and answered his prayers - surely another mark of a man of God. Indeed, the widow said to him, "Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth." (1 Kings 17:24)

However, before the boy was raised, his mother had said to Elijah, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and kill my son?" (1 Kings 17:18) In other words, the effect of Elijah's godly character was to give her a bad conscience which only came to light when her son died. The Bible does not say that he had ever mentioned her past life and it gives not the slightest hint what that sin might have been so we won't try and guess. Again, there is a lesson for us. Is our relationship with God such that it has an effect on other people without our necessarily witnessing directly to them? Of course, a direct witness to the Lord Jesus is very necessary but at work, for instance, the opportunities for witnessing may be very limited. But people see our character and whether our words and actions match what we say about our faith in Christ. There was a happy consistency in Elijah's life. May we all, wherever God has placed us, have the kind of effect on people that Elijah had.

Leading on from this, we read that he was reliable. (1 Kings 18:1-19) As the time for the end of the drought drew near, God told Elijah to present himself to Ahab and that He was going to send rain. (1 Kings 18:1) Elijah went and, on the way, he met Ahab's servant, Obadiah. (1 Kings 18:7) Obadiah was trying to find water and grass for the royal horses, which was an indication of how severe the famine was, if even the royal household was affected by it. Normally, the rich and powerful manage to avoid the effects of disasters. Obadiah was greatly alarmed when Elijah suddenly met him because he assumed that, if he told Ahab that Elijah was present, Elijah would have disappeared again by the time Ahab arrived. This underlines how effective God's arrangements for Elijah had been, keeping him alive during the famine and safe from Ahab's and Jezebel his wife's murderous intentions. We know from other verses in these chapters on Elijah that Jezebel in particular had killed many of God's prophets.

However, Obadiah's fears were unfounded. Elijah said to him, "As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely present myself to him today." (1 Kings 18:15) A person who knows that he is standing before God, that is, he or she is acutely aware that all that they do is known to God and that they are virtually in God's presence, is not going to tell silly fibs or be anything less than entirely truthful. In fact, Elijah's high moral standards show up through all what we know of his life. How about us? Are we so aware of God's eye upon us that the grubby standards of the world around us find no place in our lives? All too often, there is the temptation to compromise what we know to be correct conduct for a Christian and we can easily fall to that temptation.

Next we come to the climax of Elijah's service for God. (1 Kings 18:20-40) The big moment had come - the showdown between the one true God, the LORD God of Israel, and the heathen god, Baal. Baal means "master," "possessor," or "husband." The Canaanites had many local gods apparently called Baal, and the worship of these false gods posed a constant threat to the spiritual life of Israel. They should have had their attention focused entirely on their God, but instead were drawn away by the idolatry of the surrounding nations, with their perversions such as child sacrifice.

The northern kingdom of Israel, as opposed to Judah in the south, had been beset by an additional religious problem right from its beginning after the death of Solomon when, through the follies of his son Rehoboam, the northern tribes successfully rebelled against rule from Jerusalem. In order to keep the people from going to Jerusalem, the king of the new kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, set up two centres of worship, one at Dan in the far north and the other at Bethel towards the south, with golden calves as the gods which he said had brought the Israelites up out of Egypt. This was completely unacceptable to God and through His prophets He pronounced judgment on Israel. However, Ahab went further. Indeed, the Bible tells us he "...did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him." We read that Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the other kings of Israel. (1 Kings 16:30)

His queen, Jezebel, was from Sidon and she introduced the worship of her god, called Baal-Melqart, the official protective god of Tyre. She promoted this worship and also the worship of Asherah, a female idol. She supported 450 prophets of Baal-Melqart and 400 of Asherah. Not only did she promote her own religion, Jezebel did her best to suppress Israel's true religion, massacring as many of the LORD's prophets as she could. She did not completely succeed; some survived, including 100 prophets who were hidden in two caves and fed by Obadiah, the servant of Ahab whom we have already met. (1 Kings 18:14)

The LORD used Elijah to confront this appalling idolatry and departure from the worship of the one true God. Elijah's keen awareness of the unique greatness of the LORD and of the honour due to His Name is an example to us, especially today, when there is so much antagonism to Christianity, and what passes for Christianity bears little resemblance to what is in the Bible.

When Elijah met Ahab soon after he had met Obadiah, he told Ahab to gather all Israel at Mount Carmel. Such was his God-given force of character that Ahab did as he said, even though Ahab counted Elijah as his enemy. So all Israel came together at this mountain on the coast of Israel, and with them all the prophets of Baal and those of Asherah, 850 in all. Elijah said to all the people, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God,

follow Him: but if Baal, follow him.' But the people answered him not a word." (1 Kings 18:21) Elijah pointed out that he was the only prophet of the LORD. He was very much a lonely figure against so many others who also had the support of Ahab but, of course, his God was with him. Elijah told the prophets of Baal to provide two bulls and that they should take one of them for themselves, cut it up and lay it on an altar with the wood but not to set fire to the wood. He would prepare the other bull but would not put any fire under it either. He then challenged the other prophets to call on the name of their gods and he would call on the name of the LORD and whichever answered by fire would be God. And all the people agreed. It would, after all, be a complete and unmistakable proof of which deity was superior.

So the other prophets set to with their bull and called on the name of Baal from morning to noon but there was no voice; no one answered. (1 Kings 18:26) They leaped about their altar, no doubt frantically as their efforts continued to be completely useless. At noon, Elijah mocked them and told them to shout, suggesting things that their god might be doing, including sleeping and so needed to be woken up. They then started cutting themselves in their efforts to get a reaction out of their god and carried on like this until the time at which the evening sacrifice would have been held in the temple in Jerusalem, but all to no avail.

In 1 Kings 18:30-40 we read that Elijah called the people to him and repaired a broken down altar of the LORD with 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel. He dug a trench round the altar and got the people to pour 12 potfuls of water on the sacrifice. So the altar was soaked with water and the trench surrounding it filled with water too. Next, Elijah prayed to the LORD that He would let it be known that He was God in Israel and that Elijah was His servant. Then the LORD sent down fire from heaven and it burnt up the sacrifice, the wood, the altar and even licked up the water. Not surprisingly, the people fell on their faces and said, "the LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" (1 Kings 18:39) The proof of His superiority over mere idols and foolish, harmful superstition was inescapable. And all the prophets of Baal were killed.

But still there was no rain. Elijah said he could hear it coming but there was no evidence of it. (1 Kings 18:41-46)

When he asked God to send down the fire, it came immediately, but when he asked for the rain, he had to make considerable prayerful and physical effort - he put his face between his knees - and his servant had to go and look out over the sea seven times before there was even a cloud as big as a man's hand to be seen. Why did he have to pray for the rain when God had already promised it? But he did. This energy and persistence in prayer are also hallmarks of the man of God. It is mentioned in the New Testament in James 5:16-17. We read: "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. 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." He is held up as an example to follow. Again, this is a characteristic of the man of God; he is someone whose good features we should imitate.

And then it all went wrong. Elijah had called down fire from heaven; he had precipitated the slaughter of the prophets of Baal; the nation had apparently turned back to their true God; he had prayed for rain; he had run all the way from Mount Carmel to Jezreel, Ahab's capital - what more could he not do in the power of the LORD? However, it only needed one threat from Jezebel and he collapsed. He lost his nerve and ran. (1 Kings 19:1-10) This is the only occasion in his story that we read the words: "When he saw that, he arose and fled for his life." Previously, we read statements like: "then the word of the LORD came to him saying, 'Get away from here...' '...So he went...' Or '...the word of the LORD came to Elijah, "Go, present yourself to Ahab"' (1 Kings 18:1) ... So Elijah went." (1 Kings 18:3) Where was the word of the LORD this time? No, Elijah saw Jezebel's threat and he fled. (1 Kings 19:3)

Filled with a sense of defeat and self-pity, he went into the desert. Even when running in the wrong direction, God followed him up, and His angel provided Elijah with much-needed food and water, which enabled him to go all the way to Horeb (or Sinai), the mount of God where He had given the Law to Moses. But what was Elijah doing there? It was never a place of pilgrimage for the Israelites. It seems he felt the need to go back to the beginning, to a place where he could bring out before God exactly all his misery and self-pity; the apparent failure of the entire venture. God spoke to him (1 Kings 19:11-18), not in the spectacular phenomena which occurred - not the wind, not the earthquake, not the fire - but in the still small voice (1 Kings 19:12), "a sound, a thin silence."

Elijah said how zealous he had been for the LORD and how the nation had forsaken God's covenant, torn down His altars and killed His prophets. But the LORD told him that He had 7,000 who had not worshipped Baal that Elijah seemed completely unaware of. (1 Kings 19:18) God then gave Elijah fresh instructions, the most important of which was probably anointing Elisha to be prophet in his place. This shows us God can restore His servant when he has failed. God can support His servant even when he is going in the wrong direction and has a wrong concept of himself, his service and even of other people.

So there was more for Elijah to do. We read of his confronting Ahab with his complicity in the murder of Naboth, which Jezebel had organized so as to get hold of Naboth's vineyard, and foretelling the demise of Ahab's dynasty and Jezebel's gruesome end - eaten by dogs. (1 Kings 21:23-28, 2 Kings 9:30-37) We read that Elijah turned back the

servants of Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, when Ahaziah sent them to enquire of a pagan idol, Baal-Zebub, after he had fallen through a lattice and injured himself. Elijah prophesied that Ahaziah would not recover from his injury. When Ahaziah sent soldiers to arrest Elijah, Elijah called down fire from heaven on them before going at God's command to Ahaziah and repeating his word that Ahaziah would die, which he did. (2 Kings 1:1-18)

In all these events in Elijah's life, there are lessons for us but not in the last event, his departure from this world. This was unique, because he did not die but was carried up by a whirlwind into heaven. (2 Kings 2:1-18) This shows in what high regard God held Elijah. Just as no one knew where Moses was buried, so Elijah's passing from this world was special and unique. Another thing he shared with Moses was that, when the Lord Jesus appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with His face shining like the sun and His clothes white as the light, Moses and Elijah appeared with Him; one the great lawgiver and the other the one who more than any other strove to bring Israel back to God. (Matthew 17:1-13)

Elijah is also mentioned in the closing words of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:5-6: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." This prophecy was well known at the time of the Lord Jesus. In fact, we read in Matthew 11:13-14 that He said of John the Baptist: "He is Elijah who is to come." Later on, in Matthew 17:10-13, the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes said that Elijah must come first. The Lord's reply made it clear again that John the Baptist fulfilled this role of Elijah.

So we see in the life of Elijah features which characterise the man of God - hearing and obeying God's word, a relationship with God, an awareness of God's holiness and what is due to His Name. The experience of God's presence and God's provision, having a blessed effect on others, persistent prayer, courage, and being acknowledged by God. We are not all called to anything like the spectacular events of Elijah's life but we are surely called to show the other features and to be those who stand for God in an evil age.

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