

Elijah and Elisha—Help for Church in Dark Times

1—Standing with God

Elijah is well known to Bible readers. He challenges a whole nation to turn back to God and God remarkably validates his witness with fire from heaven. What is less clear is that he lives in dark days, and that his mission—to turn the nation back to God—does not succeed.

Israel's situation, and ours

Israel (the Northern tribes) began her history by using religion for political purposes. Ahab is going further in this direction than any of his predecessors (1 Kin. 16:29-34).

Israel is now close to a full embrace of Baal as their god. He is thought to control rain and lightning. Those who worship him are wholly concerned with controlling what happens in the natural world. It is a naturalistic religion.

Baal is also the god of fertility, and cult prostitution is thought necessary to ensure fertility of their crops and of life generally.

Jericho has been rebuilt, although forbidden by God. Its rubble was to remain a witness that God gave Israel their land—not their own labour. Israel is now saying, 'We are in charge, and know what is good for ourselves.' The city is built at the cost of his first and last sons—possibly meaning that he sacrificed them the gods to secure the well being of the city.

Our own Western world is largely naturalistic and focused on controlling the natural world with no reference to God. It also believes that sexual desire must be without limits to secure human flourishing. In our own day, the right of parents is sometimes placed above nurturing children, and to that extent, they sacrifice their children to their gods.

We are confronted by the world, but Elijah shows how God confronts the world through us—with poise, power and persistence. We are to bear witness to all nations concerning the kingdom or reign of God.

In fact, the church does give its witness in the Spirit and power of Elijah, as suggested by our being greater than John the Baptist, and by the testimony of the two witnesses in Revelation.

The living God

Elijah knows God is the reason for Israel's life and welfare. 'As the Lord lives...' he says. It is this Lord who has brought Israel into their land, given them victory over their enemies, shown them how to live, heard their prayers and blessed their national life.

But the population is now treating God as irrelevant—or dead. They believe there are other reasons why they are prosperous and other loyalties are needed to secure a healthy future.

King, Ahab, has married the Philistian princess, Jezebel. This may have been to secure some trade deals because the people of Philistia are great mariners and Mediterranean traders.

When Jezebel arrives in Israel, she wants to worship Baal, so Ahab erects an altar for her. But she wants more. She insists that Baal is the god of rain and lightning and responsible for good crops. She pursues her goal aggressively. 450 prophets of Baal are entertained in the royal court (1 Kin. 18:19). She doesn't want rival deities and so the Lord's true prophets are being locked up (cf. 1 Kin. 18:4).

The question is always with us. Does our life come from God and is he the one who secures our welfare? Or, is some other power responsible for this?

We don't have images of idols around us but the world does believe that our welfare depends on what we do. Without the revelation of the true God, we look to our governments, our resources and scientists and other agencies to secure our welfare, define our purpose and even tell us where we come from.

Standing in the presence of God

Elijah also says that the Lord who lives is the one '...before whom I stand'.

- He wants Ahab to know that this interview is not about him but about the Lord; that Ahab is going to have to deal with the Lord, not him; and that God is going to act in accordance with what Elijah says.
- He knows God's promise that if Israel doesn't keep his law, he will send them a drought (Deut. 28:23-24). He prays that God will show them the truth of his word.
- Elijah isn't angry, or impatient, or threatened. He knows God is good and he can see God is being scorned. He wants Israel to know that God is God and that Baal isn't.

We stand with Jesus Christ in God's presence.

- The question of what we trust separates us from the world, but we are not removed from the world. Rather, God has chosen us to stand with him, like Elijah.
- We have been forgiven for our irreverence, have received his Spirit and know God as Father, enjoy his protection and are made strong by his love.
- We have his word in our hearts and have become a prophetic community, anointed by the Spirit to stand with him as his witnesses in the world. This is the import of Peter quoting Joel's prophecy: 'Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...' (Acts 2:17).
- We feel the pain of people not knowing that God is God and that he wants them to know him and receive grace from him.
- We say to ourselves and to the world, 'These things in which you trust are not your God!'
- We pray and look for ways in to act so that our fellow Christians, and our neighbours, will come to see the true God and giver of life.

Elijah doesn't come ready made for all that he must do. God demonstrates his 'Godness' in looking after him and those to whom he is led.

Living by the Word of God

Elijah has acted in concert with God's word by praying for no rain. The word of God shapes his whole being so that he longs for what God longs.

But now, every step Elijah takes is by the word of God (vv. 2, 5, 8, 14, 16). And each episode of this story leads to a further degree of difficulty to overcome.

- ▣ He is in uncharted territory and will become a living case history of how Israel is intended to live. God has let Israel hunger before. ‘...[H]e humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna...that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’ (Deut. 8:3).

Jesus’s first temptation is about this same issue (Matt. 4:4).

- ▣ Who cares for me? Do I only have my own resources? Or the government’s?
- ▣ In the case of Elijah, the word of the Lord is not an alternative to bread. The word tells him where the bread will be found.

God provides in unusual ways

Elijah travels North, and across the Jordan, perhaps close to where he has lived.

- ▣ Water and food is scarce but the brook Cherith is still running.
- ▣ Meat delivered by ravens? What kind of meat is that? One writer quips, ‘Don’t ask. Just cook it well and eat up!’ In fact, it may have been good meat. Certainly, the Lord’s people left in Israel were not eating as well!
- ▣ Living like this is not something you can train or budget for.

When times were tough in Australia some years ago, one article suggested that young people who were asking how they would cope, should ‘ask grandma.’ Her generation had to find meals during a depression and a war. If we are to be God’s prophetic people, all our manuals on thriving, or just coping, may need to be thrown out and we will know more of what it means to live by the word of God.

God takes us to unlikely places

Elijah is led to Zarapheth—part of Sidon, outside Israel, in Philistia.

- ▣ This is the birthplace of Jezebel, and the country whose religion is ruining Israel. This is like saying, ‘The safest place is closest to the fire!’
- ▣ And he is led to a widow to provide for him. Given the poverty of most widows, and as it turns out, this one in particular, how unlikely is that?

Jesus says Elijah is sent here to help, not be helped by a widow (Luke 4:25-26). Her, rather than widows in Israel.

- ▣ God is still the provider, but while many in Israel suffer deeply, God shows his love for this widow, and for his servant.
- ▣ By the word of the Lord, they live, miraculously, for what must be some three years.

God takes us through some grievous circumstances

This widow has ‘hands on’ experience of God’s gracious miracle. But when her son dies, it is her sins that come to mind and she sees God’s messenger as the bringer of judgement.

- ▣ Elijah is devastated. All he knows of God tells him this cannot be. The blessing of God makes rich and he adds no sorrow to it (Prov. 10:22). God would not do this as reward for her being his servant. Elijah invests his whole self in praying for the son’s recovery.
- ▣ Elijah questions God: Is this calamity your actual purpose? It is what has happened, but is it the last word?

- ▣ Here is a man who does not buckle under circumstances but assumes that all of life is the outworking of the plans of a gracious God.
- ▣ He asks for a reversal of what has happened.
- ▣ It is a parable of what he is seeking on a larger scale. He hopes for the restoration of Israel to true trust of the Lord.

'The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah.' Wonderful words! The Lord's word will take us through troubled waters and to troubled people, but the Lord's agenda will remain the same. He wants everyone to receive his blessing and be saved (Acts 3:26).

So, in this centre of false worship, God does his best work. This lady says, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord that is in your mouth is truth.'

We, like Elijah, stand in God's presence. We, like Elijah, want the world to know our God lives. We also, need to live by every word that comes from God's mouth, and the Lord will put in our mouths the word that people need to hear.