

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elijah

Lesson 1: Elijah – Decision time

Reading: 1 Kings 17:1-6

James tells us that Elijah *'was just like us'* – he prayed and it didn't rain for 3 1/2 years. I find that a rather disturbing comment. I look at Elijah and shrink back. Here was a man full of courage, faith, determination, passion and action. I look at my life and can hardly discern those qualities. So how can James say that Elijah *'was just like us'*?

Probably because James recognised that Elijah was human. In fact, as you consider Elijah's life in greater detail, you will notice there is a lot of humanness about him. He experienced highs and lows, victories and, seemingly, defeat, fear, discouragement and loneliness. And yet there is something special about Elijah that sets him apart from people like me. He had an incredible faith in God. Somehow or another he had an experience of God that became all consuming to him – and I'd like to suggest it took place before our reading of today.

As we read the history of Israel after the death of Solomon, we find it is not very encouraging. It records the moral decline of a nation as it increasingly turned its back on God in order to embrace the gods and idols – the false religions – of the surrounding pagan nations. However, the rot set in even before Saul was anointed king. It began when the people of Israel told Samuel *"we want to be like all the other nations."* God had set them apart as His 'special possession' but they rejected that position and demanded to be the same as all the other nations.

So Israel descended to the point where she was indeed like all the other nations – with child sacrifice, occult practices and sexual deviation. However, King Ahab wanted to do even more detestable things. He wanted to be seen as the pioneer of tolerance and the freedom of expression in every lifestyle and family, and he encouraged everyone in their experimentation.

But God sent Elijah. Elijah – the one 'just like us' – to try and stop the rot. Elijah's opening salvo was – *"There will be neither rain nor dew for the next few years unless I say so."* Wow! How would you like to be given the task of delivering that message to your Prime Minister, ruler or Minister of Agriculture? Most of us would back away quickly and hope that God would forget what He wanted us to say, even though the ramifications of saying such a thing would not, potentially, have the same fatal consequences that Elijah faced. Elijah, nevertheless, delivered the message despite the life-threatening backlash it would create.

I'm sure he had felt many times – just like us – *"What can I do to make a difference? Nothing. The apathy I'm up against is far too strong. I'll just go with the flow and grumble that I don't know what this world is coming to."* But somehow, somewhere, he had an encounter with God that changed everything. He decided that with God nothing is impossible and so determined to do something about the situation.

The challenge for us is that we face similar situations to those of Elijah and the question we should ask ourselves is: *Am I just like Elijah?*

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elijah would say to us today...

You must stand for something or you will fall for anything.

Prayer

Father, as I start this New Year, please help me remember that there is more to life than my job, my salary, my home and my health. Please show me how I can use my life to bring Your Kingdom to earth. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Proverbs 1:1-7
- Philippians 4:4-9
- Micah 6:1-8
- James 5:13-18

Questions

1. What are the values you will live by this year?
2. What issues do you feel you would make a stand about?
3. How will you help bring in the Kingdom of God this year?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2: Elijah – Fed by ravens

Reading: 1 Kings 17:7-24

Elijah, having delivered his natural order changing message, was instructed by God to hightail it away over the Jordan and to the brook, Kerith. I love how God described the conditions that awaited Elijah there. Elijah would drink water from the stream and God would order the ravens to feed him. I shall never forget one speaker referring to this episode and saying, in effect – *“Hello, ravens feed on carrion – road-kill, if you prefer. What do you think they would bring Elijah – ham sandwiches?”* – the realities of being an Old Testament prophet became even less attractive from that moment on.

After Elijah’s dire warning, it was no surprise when the stream dried up. However, that had come as no surprise to God either. God instructed Elijah to move on once more, leave Kerith and go to a village called Zarepheth, where He had commanded a widow to look after him.

You can imagine Elijah’s surprise, when he arrived and announced that he had come to stay for a while when she immediately replied, *“Have you now, well let me tell you – I’m just about to cook up my last supplies so my son and I can eat it up just before we finally starve to death.”* However, the initiator of the famine was able to reply, *“Don’t worry, cook something for me first, then for you and your son because your supplies will not run out until the famine is over.”* Remarkable woman that she was, she went and obeyed Elijah’s instructions and found that, just as he promised, she was able to feed everyone for the full duration of the famine.

Nevertheless, there was an even greater challenge facing Elijah. The widow’s only son died. He was her only means of support in her old age; the one she lived for and the only one who gave her any meaning for her life. She had after all lost her husband through premature death already. She had done all she could to keep them both alive prior to Elijah’s arrival, and was undoubtedly exhausted and emotionally drained. Her son’s death was for her the last straw. No wonder she released all her pent-up sadness, fear and frustration at Elijah.

For her, Elijah had caused the hardships in the first place – by praying for a drought. Now they were all just surviving through her providing meals for them. He had happily come along and thoughtlessly thrust himself upon her, expecting her to look after him first, and then to cap it all – her son died. Here she was ‘helping God out’ by looking after His prophet/servant and yet all the ‘reward’ she got was to see her only son die – she was frankly not impressed.

However, because of her obedience, selflessness and faithfulness, she was about to receive the most impressive miracle she has as yet seen. Elijah prayed for her son and he was miraculously restored to life.

Jesus remarked later about this very incident – that she was very blessed as there were many widows alive at the time of the famine but God only sent Elijah to her. Maybe it was because the Lord knew that she would be obedient to Elijah’s request and so she was able to receive the miracles that followed.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elijah would say to us today...

Miracles follow obedience.

Prayer

Father, please help me first to be obedient to Your Will for my life before expecting to see the miracles follow, which You long to release for me. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Exodus 14:10-31
- Matthew 14:22-33
- Joshua 3:7-17

Questions

1. Have you any resentment towards God for expectations He has not met for you?
2. Do you feel that God should give you more than you are receiving right now?
3. How do you handle disappointment with God?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3: Elijah – Confronts the false prophets

Reading: 1 Kings 18:20-45

Elijah was an amazing man, wasn't he? He was determined to re-establish the Creator God, Jehovah, as the God of Israel. Ahab, encouraged by Jezebel, had done all he could to eliminate Jehovah from the minds of the people and to outlaw their faith and practice. To the extent that both had killed all His prophets – all, except that is, of course, for Elijah.

Elijah had caught Ahab's and the people's attention by asking God to stop the rainfall – which God had done for over three years. Famine was rife and the people were dying of starvation.

Elijah felt the time was right to confront the false prophets and so had an audience with the king. He invited the prophets of Baal to a contest to find out who was the real God: Baal or Jehovah.

Knowing that Baal was nothing, Elijah determined to prove that Jehovah was alive and well and capable of thought, hearing and action. So the contest was initiated for the prophets of Baal to try and convince the people by talking to Baal and asking him to respond. However, nothing happened – because idols are dumb and only figments of our imagination. However, Elijah allowed the prophets all the time he could and taunted them to work and shout harder to get Baal to respond. All that achieved was for the false prophets to start self-mutilation – part of their religious ritual – but there were still no signs of life from Baal.

Elijah waited until it was time to perform the usual Hebrew sacrifice. Then, not content with making the normal sacrifice, because he had invoked God to cause fire to fall from heaven, Elijah made it even harder for God by drenching the sacrifice and altar in water. The people probably thought he was even more mad than they thought he was in the first place.

But Elijah knew his God, and as soon as he prayed, God sent the fire, which consumed the sacrifice and all the water in the trough around it. Naturally enough the people exclaimed that Jehovah was God and God alone – the only true God. Elijah had made his point and proceeded to eliminate all the false prophets. That completed, Elijah prayed once more for rain and he was able to tell Ahab to return home and celebrate, as rain was about to fall.

A great story and one we love to recount as it proves once more how great our God is. The challenge remains, however – Is the God of Elijah, Jehovah, your God too? If so, is He able to do that again in your lifetime – for you? Is He able to prove Himself to be God, to the satisfaction of your community? Is He big enough in your eyes, for you to tell your friends, neighbours, and work-colleagues about? Is Jesus so real to you that you long for all your friends and relatives to know Him too?

Or are you afraid to talk about Jesus as God? Are you afraid to stand up for Biblical principles because your god is too small to make any difference?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elijah would say to us today...

How big is your God? Whilst you don't have to stand up for God, Jehovah – He can look after Himself – will you stand up in His strength and confront the non-negotiable issues of your faith? Are you prepared to say without reservation – the Bible is true and is the Word of God?

Prayer

Father, please help me to recognise those things that You care deeply about. Show me how and what I should do about them. Help me respond in a firm way but with a gracious attitude. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Leviticus 20:12-26
- Matthew 23:1-38
- 1 John 4:1-12

Questions

1. What causes us to feel afraid to confront issues?
2. What are the issues we should take a stand on as Christians?
3. How can we become bolder for Christ's Kingdom?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4: Elijah – Jezebel’s response and God’s reply

Reading: 1 Kings 11 – 21

There is no doubt Elijah was on a high after he had exposed the prophets of Baal to be nothing but a sham and seen God answer his prayer – not just for fire to consume the sacrifice but also through rain to break the drought and ease the famine.

Whilst Ahab seemed to have been persuaded that Jehovah had proved Himself to be God, Jezebel was not so gullible. She hadn’t been there at the confrontation and so dismissed the failure of her prophets as mere human impotence. She was going to stand up for her god regardless, as it was the reason for all she did and held dear. Furthermore, she was not going to stand idly by and see the outrageous Elijah defy her royal throne and diminish her power over the people. So she threatened to kill Elijah within the following 24 hours.

Such was the vehemence of her message that Elijah cringed and ran away in uncontrollable fear. He escaped to the desert and collapsed under the shade of a tree and asked God to end his life there and then. However, God knew that His plans for Elijah had not been completed, so He sent an angel to feed him – bread rolls and water. Elijah relished them and went to sleep. However, the angel woke Elijah up again and told him to eat, as the journey he was undertaking was a long one. He travelled for almost six weeks on that meal alone.

Once he arrived at Horeb, God came visiting. *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* God asked. (Not because God didn’t know – but so Elijah could enunciate the issues and so begin the journey to his recovery.)

Elijah thought he knew God and he certainly did to a great extent from a human standpoint. However, what Elijah was about to experience would bring a whole new perspective to all his preconceived ideas about God.

God sent a storm to blast through the mountains in a demonstration of awesome power. But it was just sheer force. Then God caused an earthquake to shake the very foundations of the ground on which Elijah stood. But there was no ‘life’ in it. After the earthquake God sent fire, which consumed all in its path. But, again it didn’t reveal who God really was.

Finally, God quietly whispered on the wind and Elijah recognised His voice and emerged from the cave. God repeated His earlier question – *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* and Elijah told God exactly how he saw things and how he felt.

God didn’t remonstrate, nor did He accuse Elijah of his lack of faith or dismiss Elijah’s concerns. On the contrary, God revealed His plans to share Elijah’s burden with others. God told Elijah to anoint Hazael as the King of Israel, Jehu as the king of Judah and Elisha as the prophet who would be his successor – *“and by the way, I still have 7000 devoted followers – so you are not completely on your own.”*

I have to admit I am in no way qualified or able to judge Elijah for his actions – as I have felt similar emotions. No, I haven’t killed any false prophets but I have experienced those amazing moments of faith and divine spiritual blessing followed by feelings of doubt, loneliness, inadequacy and hopelessness. I guess once you have witnessed a tiny portion of the awesomeness of God and His amazing grace and power, it leaves you feeling totally drained, human and finite.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Fortunately, God doesn't leave us there. Maybe He allows us to go through those times to remind us how much He loves us, how much He longs for us to experience His awesome power and His Kingdom coming to earth. Yet, at the same time – He will not give His glory to another. We can facilitate for others to have an encounter with God through prayer or by inviting the Holy Spirit to come and do what He likes – but we must never forget that we are not 'the healer'; we did not perform the miracles – it was God and His Sovereign work of grace alone.

Elijah would say to us today...

Beware, the valley can be as deep as the mountain was high. God longs for us to experience an intimate relationship with Him. He knows all we go through and is always there beside us.

Prayer

Father, I long to have those mountain-top experiences, but I know that often they are followed closely by valleys. Please help me remember that You inhabit the valleys, too, and You said that You would never leave me nor forsake me. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Exodus 33:17-23
- Mark 9:2-29
- Matthew 14:22-32

Questions

1. What experiences have you had where there appears to have been a backlash from the enemy, hard on the heels of a success?
2. What has helped you come through those tough times?
3. How can we prepare ourselves for those events?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 5: Elijah – Confronts deceit and murder

Reading: 1 Kings 21:1-28

Ahab and Jezebel were thoroughly unpleasant people. Not only did they lead and force the people of Israel to adopt counterfeit religious experiences with idols and occult practices, they induced fear and deceit wherever they went throughout the land.

They were not only capricious, but also jealous and greedy. What they wanted they got, regardless at whose expense it was, and if they were refused, they nonetheless found ways of satisfying their insatiable selfishness.

Ahab was a weak king, which was evidenced by his domination by Jezebel. However, we must remember that he chose to be dominated. He enjoyed being in that situation and loved having her back him up in any of his devious schemes.

Naboth owned a vineyard, which backed on to Ahab's land. Ahab was envious and lustful and so determined to get it for himself. Ahab wanted to turn the vineyard into a vegetable garden. However, as it was a family inheritance, Naboth refused to move, exchange it for another property or sell it to Ahab. So Ahab finally went home angry and sulked. When he refused to eat anything Jezebel enquired what the problem was. Ahab told her his sob story.

She was furious – *all this anger and unhappiness over a silly little vineyard and a selfish neighbour*. Solution? Easy, get rid of the problem – permanently. She hatched a plan – organised a banquet for Naboth and had him falsely accused of treason and murdered on the spot without trial. When she heard of Naboth's death she calmly and brazenly told Ahab to go and claim the vineyard for himself. Ahab left immediately to do so.

However, whilst he was still there, no doubt congratulating himself on his good fortune, he had another visit from Elijah. Ahab greeted Elijah as his long lost enemy. Elijah told Ahab that he knew how Ahab came to own the vineyard and that just as Naboth's blood had been shed on that land so, too, would Ahab's.

Elijah then went on to elaborate on how God would bring an end to Ahab's reign and family line. He concluded by describing Jezebel's end as well. (Incidentally, both came true just as Elijah prophesied.)

It's very hard to sin singly. So often we find once we decide to do something that is wrong, we are bound to do more wrong things as a consequence. As the poet Sir Walter Scott wrote –

*O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive!* (And how we improve with practice.)

Ahab found, just as King David before him, covetousness is a dangerous temptation, which, if not overcome, can end in serious consequences for the one who is envious and, unfortunately, for others who are the innocent party.

King David coveted Uriah's wife and eventually murdered Uriah so he could have her. Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard and Naboth was murdered so Ahab could acquire it.

The tragedy was that in both situations – the owners were murdered and both the kings' families

The Cloud of Witnesses

suffered permanent damage. King David's son, conceived in his adulterous liaison, died shortly after birth and his royal line was extinguished. Ahab was killed in battle, even though he had disguised himself, and his royal line was also extinguished.

God takes the matter of sin seriously. Moses records in Numbers 32:23 – *Be sure your sins will find you out...* I guess both David and Ahab proved it to be true.

Elijah would say to us today...

Be very careful of covetousness – it can lead to more than jealousy – it can lead to murder.

Prayer

Father, please protect me from covetousness. Help me recognise any weakness in my life and strengthen my resolve to overcome it. In Jesus' Name, I ask it. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Exodus 20:1-17
- 2 Samuel 11:1-27
- John 12:1-8

Questions

1. What things are you most likely to covet?
2. How can we overcome those thoughts of covetousness?
3. What are you doing to protect yourself from following through on that temptation?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 6: Elijah – Departs this world

Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-11

Elijah had anointed Elisha as his successor. He had trained him to the very best of his ability, and yet right up to the moment of his departure from earth, Elijah wanted to impart as much wisdom and experience as he could.

He took Elisha back to Gilgal. Whilst we cannot be sure of this particular town's location it is reasonable to assume that Elijah was taking Elisha back to a place of surrender to God. It was at a place called Gilgal that Samuel challenged King Saul. Saul had been disobedient to the Lord's command, and when confronted by Samuel just made excuses. Samuel's profound declaration rang forever in Saul's ears: *"Obedience is better than sacrifice"*. Elijah was reminding his student that the first principle in serving God is obedience, regardless of the cost.

The second lesson Elisha needed to learn was that King Saul's battle was against the Amalekites – who spiritually represent the flesh – our carnal desires. They are the ones that have to be totally annihilated. Yes, Elisha had to learn the hardest lesson for young people – the temptations of instant gratification and the indulgence of our sensual natures have to be overcome. Gilgal was also the place the people prepared to enter the Promised Land.

Elisha's next stop was at Bethel – the House of God. It not only represented a place of worship, but also a place of refuge. Elisha would need both in his life. A place not only where he could commune with God in an open intimate relationship but also a place of Divine refreshment and security. Elijah knew that we all need an intimate relationship with God and a place we can set apart to meet with Him. He also knew that life is hard, and if you are totally obedient to God you are going to face severe opposition – in those times you need a refuge and place of refreshment.

Then Elijah travelled on to Jericho – the site of the first offensive in the Promised Land. The first great land battle and the first great deliverance for the people of Israel in Canaan. Yes, the Hebrews had to conquer Jericho, but God did it all for them – all they had to do was to march around the city for six days and then shout with all their might. God caused the walls to crumble and the army to win that battle. Yes, Elisha would have to face opposition but *"The Battle is always the Lord's"*. Elisha must learn to stand on the promises of God and move forward in faith because the victory had already been won. And so must we. Our job, as Paul reminds us, is to *"stand clothed in the armour of God"* – Ephesians 6.

Finally, Elijah led the way to the Jordan. Jordan represented death – it literally means 'to go down'. It was where the Hebrews finally left their old lives behind. Most of those who left Egypt had died in the desert – the rest would forever leave the past behind. Once Elisha crossed the Jordan there was no going back – he would be Elijah's successor, as the prophet of God.

Today the sacrament of Water Baptism represents the Jordan experience for us. Jesus was baptised in the Jordan River. We follow Him down into the water – as Paul says – to our death. Death to ourselves, death to our selfishness and past life so that we may rise again in the power of a new life – empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Yes, Elijah did all he could to prepare Elisha for the task ahead. At each place he recommended to Elisha that Elisha should remain and not continue to follow him – not to get rid of Elisha but to challenge him and his determination. In the end Elisha had the awesome privilege of witnessing one of the most amazing miracles of all.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elijah travelled first class to Heaven – in a chariot of fire pulled by Heaven’s best horses in the midst of a whirlwind. Wow, what an exit! I cannot think of anyone who has ever lived having an exit as spectacular as that. When God honours His servants He does it with style.

As a true follower of Jesus Christ we are all destined for Heaven. I can’t wait to get there, can you?

Elijah would say to us today...

When the time is right to leave this world, I can’t think of a better way to go, can you? But before you leave make sure you have invested your life in your successor. Who are you mentoring to follow you?

Prayer

Father, what a fantastic way You arranged for Elijah to enter Heaven. Please help me look forward to the unending joy of Heaven so much that I no longer worry about how I will eventually arrive there. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Matthew 22:23-33
- 1 Corinthians 15:51-58
- Revelation 5:1-14

Questions

1. What is it that causes us to fear death?
2. How can we overcome that fear?
3. What are you looking forward to once you arrive in Heaven?