

The Faith of Elijah in a Pagan World

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2017

Preacher: Duncan MacPherson

- [0 : 00] I'm not going to focus on any particular verse from our reading tonight, but work our way through it and take the lessons from it.
- And the context that we have is in those final verses in chapter 16, where we hear of Ahab becoming the king of Israel.
- Israel, the northern part of Israel, had been in decline ever since Jeroboam had broken away and taken ten tribes away, separated them off from Judah.
- And Jeroboam had instituted false worship because he was afraid that if the people continued to go to Jerusalem to worship, then their hearts would return to the king of Judah and would leave him.
- But we see here that that led to further evil. And in verse 30, it said that Ahab did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any who were before him.
- [1 : 16] And he considered the sins of Jeroboam, which God considered very serious, to be nothing but trivial. And he did worse than that.
- He married Jezebel of the Sidonians, one of the Canaanites, whom the Israelites were supposed to have driven out of their land and had nothing to do with whatsoever.
- He married her and he brought her religion in, the religion of Baal worship. And he not only set up an altar for Baal, but he built a temple for Baal.
- So a huge amount of work went into this. And we read in chapter 18 that, in fact, there were 450 prophets of Baal in the land.
- And in addition to that, there were another 400 prophets of Asherah. Now, Baal was, in their minds, a male god and he was known as the storm god of that time.
- [2 : 16] Asherah was his consort. So effectively, you're having a god and a goddess being worshipped there with 850 prophets brought into the land to spread this false religion.
- And the key context for these kind of false religions of paganistic or animistic cultures is that if you worship the spirits in the right way, if you appease them by doing sacrifices, etc., then life will carry on as it ought to carry on.
- The cycle of nature will carry on as it ought to carry on. If you appease these gods and goddesses, then they will see that the rain comes in its time and that the harvest comes in its time.
- But all of this was nothing other than an affront to God's glory. His glory and his honor were at stake in this situation. And in effect, the Baals were hijacking his authority.
- And God needed to demonstrate to his own people, the people he had chosen to be set apart as holy, that there would be consequences to their sin.
- [3 : 27] And so I want to look tonight in these verses under three headings. First of all, we'll look at God's word. Secondly, we'll look at God's provision. And thirdly, we'll look at God's mercy in this situation.
- And God's word comes most clearly right at the beginning when he sends Elijah up to King Ahab in verse 2.

Sorry, in verse 1. And he said to Ahab, As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.

What Elijah was saying to Ahab in this situation was, You're worshipping these false gods. And your religion is predicated upon doing the right thing.

And you will have the rain and you will have the harvest in its season. But the God who minds serving, he's going to demonstrate to you that these gods are false. And he is the one who has the control over the natural world as well as the spiritual world.

[4 : 33] It's a very brave thing for Elijah to go to an apostate king and tell him that. But the word of God was in his heart and he knew that was the right thing to do.

That was the job of a prophet, was to tell out the word of the Lord. A second word from the Lord comes to Elijah and says, Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith ravine east of the Jordan.

You will drink from the brook and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there. God told Elijah to leave the place that was his calling.

He was taking Elijah the prophet away from the people of Israel. God wasn't only going to send them a famine as the result of not sending any rain.

He was going to send them a famine of his word as well. And at this time we can think to ourselves, it's almost certain that there were no prophets traveling around in Israel preaching the word of truth.

[5 : 39] And we learn in chapter 18 when Elijah went to Obadiah to tell him that the famine was going to come, that the lack of rain was going to come to an end and he wanted to see Ahab.

Obadiah said at that time there had been a hundred prophets hidden away in a cave by himself. And I think it's almost certain that Jezebel had been killing these prophets before Elijah had gone to Ahab.

She had brought in these 850 prophets from Sidon and she wanted her religion to be the religion of Israel. Her religion to rule over the land.

And she had gotten rid of as many prophets as she could. So here we have also God saying in effect to Jezebel, OK, we'll play it your way. You want there to be no word of the Lord in Israel.

I'll take the word of the Lord away from you and we'll see how you get on. Israel was put through a great trial at this time. But Elijah himself was also put through a great trial.

[6 : 48] Here he was being asked to go away and hide in a ravine. And yet what the word tells us is he did what the Lord had told him.

He was obedient to God's word despite the difficulties it would cause for himself. For the next three years he was to be in a time of famine.

And he was not going to be preaching God's word. He must dwell upon that word himself. Spend his time in meditation upon it and learn from it.

Even while the calling which he had in his own life was to be subdued. He was to have no fellowship with other prophets or other believers. And possibly worst of all, he was told by the Lord to go east of the Jordan.

If you remember when the Israelites came into the country, they crossed the Jordan. That was the way they came in to Israel. And now he's being told to leave via the Jordan.

[7 : 50] And in Old Testament times, often the idea of travelling east was symbolic of moving away from the presence of the Lord.

After Cain had murdered his brother Abel, he went east to the land of Nod, away from the presence of God. But far more importantly and frighteningly here, what we have is the Lord saying to the people of Israel, I am taking my presence away from you.

I am taking my word away from you. And this must have been in Elijah's mind and in his heart through all the time that he was away from them.

And yet he did what the Lord asked him to do. He obeyed the word of the Lord. The word came to him a second time in verse 9, Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there.

I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food. And verse 10 simply says, So he went to Zarephath. There he was being told to go to Sidon.

[9 : 02] To stay with this woman whom the Lord had commanded to supply him with food. Just think about it for a minute. You are in the midst of a famine.

There has been no rain for a couple of years. Where he was staying, the water had dried up. There was no food to be had. And he had to move on.

In normal circumstances, if we were in terrible trouble and we were looking for food, the last place that we would go to find food would be a widow's house. Because a widow would be amongst the poorest in the land.

Not able to provide for herself, far less other people. The place to go would have been a wealthy person's house. They themselves would have more resources. And yet the Lord was saying to Elijah, Elijah, go and stay with this widow.

And Elijah simply went. He trusted in the word of the Lord. Even though God's word seemed to be, to the rational mind, be saying something that just did not make sense.

[10 : 07] God's word was there. Elijah listened to it. And Elijah obeyed it. That leads us on to our second point, which is God's provision.

And just carrying on from where we were, we can see quite clearly that God's provision is contingent upon our obedience. God had given his word to Elijah.

And the provision that we see in this chapter comes from Elijah believing and obeying God's word. And God's provision here is both natural and supernatural.

First of all, he sent him to that ravine. And he provided him with water from the brook, a natural supply. He provided him with shelter in the ravine itself.

He would no doubt find a place of shade there from the heat of the sun. And he sent the ravens to feed him morning and evening, bread and meat.

[11 : 06] Elijah simply had to sit there and wait for the ravens to come and feed him. And then secondly, when he was sent to Sidon, he was provided with flour and the oil that the widow had in her house.

That was natural to start with. But then supernatural behind that was God's multiplying of what that woman had. So that as long as he stayed in her house, it was provided to him by God.

But at the same time, he was benefiting from the shelter of the woman's house. And he was benefiting from what she was doing in making the food for him. So God's provision there was natural and it was supernatural.

And what this shows as well is that God himself has the choice. Both the choice of the means and the power of the means by which he provides for his people.

The ravens were directed by God. God didn't send friendly believers with food over to Elijah.

[12 : 25] He didn't send animals. He sent ravens. A.W. Pink makes the comment that maybe he sent ravens. Because no one would think it odd to see ravens carrying meat in their beaks and flying by.

Whereas if they'd seen people going into this remote area, they'd have wondered what was going on. And perhaps Elijah would have been found out. Possibly that's the case.

But whatever the case, the Lord was directing the ravens. They would normally gorge themselves on whatever food they found themselves. Would certainly never bring anything to a man.

But day, morning and evening, for years, they took this bread and this meat to him each and every day. And God also said to him, I have commanded a widow to feed you.

Here we have God disposing of the woman's heart and directing her to help Elijah in this time.

[13 : 27] We can see in verse 10 that God inclined her heart towards him. He went to Zarephath. He came to the town gate. And he met with the woman there.

Now that was the first woman he met, the first widow he came across. He would not have been sure, is this the widow that God wants me to accept food from?

So he asked her first of all, will you give me a little water? And she said, no problem, I'll go and get that water for you. So there it was. He was as a representative of the living God, a prophet, in the place of Sidon.

And here she was, taking pity upon him. Interestingly, he then says, please bring me a piece of bread. And that then brings out the story, which we'll look on in a minute.

But the interesting thing is that he said to her, simply to go home, to make him that bread and bring it to him. I was thinking if I was in that position and I was needing to be fed, I'd be very inclined to follow the widow home.

[14 : 36] Stand over her while she made me that bit of bread and then eat it. And I would thank the Lord for it. But there would be that element of doubt that it was the Lord's provision. But Elijah had confidence in the Lord that if he let that woman go, either she would come back with the bread for him or the Lord would send him another widow who was going to provide for him.

Elijah's trust in God at this time seems about as total as you could possibly get. And as a result, he was greatly blessed.

Elijah was also required to be humble in these circumstances. Can you imagine him thinking to himself, why has God asked a widow to provide for me?

Why is somebody so poor? And worse than that, it's a pagan widow. Worse than that still, she's a Baal worshipper. I've been called to speak against the worship of Baal.

I've been called to pronounce judgment on the people of Israel because of Baal. And here God is sending me to live in a place where a woman who worships Baal is going to serve me.

[15 : 49] And further than that, in Jezebel's home country, the woman who brought this disaster upon Israel, why is God sending me there? But we don't have those questions written down for us.

We don't have any sense that Elijah put those to God. But he simply trusted that God was going to keep him and protect him in accordance with his word.

He might have asked further, why not an Israelite widow? There were lots and lots of widows in Israel at that time. Why not one of those? And the simple answer is this.

It was God's sovereign choice. And it was for God's sovereign purpose that he would go to that place at that time. And that brings us on to our third point in terms of God's sovereign purpose.

And that is God's mercy in this situation. Here we have God extremely angry with the nation of Israel for their Baal worship. He had pronounced judgment upon that nation that there was going to be no rain for three years.

[16 : 56] He took his word away from the people. And yet at the same time, here he was working to be merciful to a Gentile individual.

One who seemingly was outside of the covenant that God had made with his people. God is a merciful God. And we see here how all of this came to be when she went outside.

And she was simply outside gathering sticks in order to cook the last meal for herself and her son. And one of those wonderful God incidents is where he brings people together.

Seemingly as a coincidence, but as part of his own plan for people's lives. Elijah simply comes up to her and asks her for a glass of water. And she says, fine, I can give that, no problem.

Her heart was inclined towards this man, even though he was a foreigner. She was happy to help him out. But it's when he asks for the bread that it reveals the truth of the situation.

[18 : 05] And she replies to him, as surely as the Lord your God lives, I don't have any bread. Only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I'm gathering a few sticks to take home.

And make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it and die. Here is the situation that she faces. A pretty dire one indeed. A very good.

And all she can do is think, I'm about to die and you're going to take the last meal from me. A.W. Pink mentioned that the only thing she could see at that time was what she was looking to.

And that was the barrel which had her flour in it. And that was her lot in life and what she was looking to for her provision. She wasn't looking to at that instance, the Lord, to provide for her needs.

And yet Elijah comes in and he says to her, Don't be afraid, go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me.

[19 : 12] And then make something for yourself and your son. This is some remarkable challenge that Elijah was putting before her. She said she had enough food for a meal for herself and her son.

And Elijah says, first of all, you make me a cake of bread with what you've got. What Elijah was saying is, give me everything you've got in the world. And trust in what I've got to say and then you'll have food for yourselves.

And the choice was there before her. Will I go home and ignore that man and eat what I have and then hope that somewhere further down the line I'll find some food.

Or do I trust what this man has got to say? Do I trust what he is saying is the word of the Lord? Use up everything I have. Put it at the Lord's disposal. And then get his provision.

And as we see that she took that step of faith. She believed what Elijah said to her. She went away. She made him the bread.

[20 : 18] She brought it back and fed it to him. And she found exactly what Elijah had promised. That the jar of flour would not be used up. And that the oil would not run dry.

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. There we have.

She took that step of faith and she was blessed as a result. She gave everything that she had to the service of the Lord. And she got the Lord's provision.

Not only in terms of food. But also in terms of his word. Can you imagine having Elijah in the house for a long time?

Who knows? It could have been months. It might have been a year or more. Every day. And as she cooked food she was reminded of the Lord's provision for her. And Elijah would be there at mealtimes.

[21 : 18] Able to tell her more about this living God. The covenant keeping God of the people of Israel. Who would also become her God.

What a privilege it was for her. And the key thing there. Is that in a sense nothing has changed today. If you are outside of Christ tonight.

You're faced with the same choice. That that woman had to face all those years ago. And it's simply this. Will I put everything that I have in this world.

At the disposal of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will I serve him and trust in him for my provision. Or will I keep what little I have to myself.

And somehow hope that I can get on in the world. When in fact you're already at the bottom of your barrel. The world has shown you that it's got nothing of any value to offer.

[22 : 13] That's the choice. That is before you tonight. She had a new faith. But as we all know. A faith that any of us has is eventually tried.

And she finds herself going through a very difficult trial. In verse 17. Sometime later her son became ill. He grew worse and worse. And finally stopped breathing.

To the point that she said to Elijah. What do you have against me man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin? And kill my son? It's understandable that kind of reaction.

Here she had known God's provision. God's blessing. And then all of a sudden. Her son. The most precious thing that she has. Dies. It would be understandable for anyone to think.

What have I done here? Why have you come? Was it really just to prolong my agony. And to make it far worse. By taking my son away from me. So she accuses Elijah.

[23 : 16] She remembers her own sin. And thinks. Is this God now punishing me for my sin? Is he punishing me. For the Baal worship that I.

Was involved in. For most of my life. Until Elijah came. And told me the truth. And that in fact. Is the way we often think. When we have difficult times.

Come upon us from the Lord. And we are inclined to think. Is this because of my sin. That I'm being punished? Is it because of a particular thing. That I've done? Sometimes it can be.

But as often as not. We simply don't know. Why God is doing these things. But in this circumstance. We can say. As with. Jesus said.

Many years later. That this circumstance. Was shown. In order to bring glory. To God himself. And. What we see from Elijah.

[24 : 13] Is what I would call. A sanctified response. He didn't answer her back. In kind. He didn't rebuke her. He just said. Give me your son. And he took her son away. Up the stairs.

To his room. Why did he. Take her son away. Up to his own room. And leave the woman downstairs. Why did he not. As we would have done. If someone collapsed today.

Try and revive them. On the floor. Right in front of the. The person there. Perhaps. It was to send her. To get her thinking. To calm.

Down. To take her away. From the bad thoughts. That she had. And to pray. Herself. There's these wonderful words. In Hebrews 11 and 35.

In the role of faith. That we have. And after going through. The list of many people. Who persevered. By faith. It simply says.

- [25 : 09] Women received. Back the dead. Raised to life again. I'm certain. That it refers. To this woman here. In that.
- If we think about it. There were very few. Resurrections. From the dead. In the old testament. And indeed. Right through scripture. Just a handful of them. One was her own.
- And the other was. The Shunammite woman. In a very similar circumstance. Who was providing. For the prophet. Elisha. Each of them. Lost their sons. But they were raised. Back.
- To life again. The widow of Nain. Was another one. But women received. Their dead. Back to life again. I'm convinced.
- That. This opportunity. Was here. It demonstrates. That. Although her faith. Was weak. Her faith. Was being tried. Yet. She still had. A faith. In God.
- [26 : 07] At the same time. Elijah's faith. Was being tried too. There is no. Account in scripture. Before this time. Of anyone. Being resurrected. From the dead.
- And we see. Elijah. Himself. No doubt. In some distress. Crying out to the Lord. Oh Lord. My God. Have you brought. Tragedy. Also upon this widow. I'm staying with. By causing her son. To die.
- Just. Asking the question. Have you done this? He's not questioning. God's right. To do that. And he's not asking. The question. Why? For which there is.
- So often. No answer. And indeed. He gets no direct. Word from God. In this. And this is the prophet. Elijah. To whom God. Does speak directly. To whom God.
- Has given. Powerful. Messages. To deliver. And strong messages. For his own comfort. Regarding his own provision. But here he goes. To God. And he asked.
- [27 : 00] He speaks to God. But there is no direct. Word from God. But that doesn't stop him. From continuing. To seek God's. Blessing. And God's work.
- In this situation. He stretches himself. Out in the boy's body. For three times. And he says. To the Lord. Oh Lord God. Let this boy's life.
- Return to him. Elijah wants to see. The boy. Coming back to life. And he asked God. To be merciful. And give this widow. Her son back. The one hope.
- That she's got in life. The one. Who would be able to provide for her. In her old age. Commentators say. That Elijah. Lying. Stretching out in the boy's body. Was.
- No doubt. A symbolic. Kind of an action. In terms of the boy's body. Being cold. And Elijah. Wanted to put some warmth. Into his body. That he might.
- [27 : 57] That God might. Bring him back to life. But Elijah's own words. Are quite clear. That there's no sense. That what Elijah does. Is going to bring the boy. Back to life. Because he says. Oh Lord my God.
- Let this boy's life. Return to him. He could see that. Everything. If anything was to happen. There was only one person. Could do it. And that was God.
- The prophet himself. Had no power. To save. And. The Lord. Heard. Elijah's cry. It tells us. The Lord. Heard his cry.
- And he answered. His request. The boy's life. Came back to him. And he lived. He took the boy down. To the woman. And said. Look. Your son is alive.
- And the woman. Said to Elijah. Now I know. That you are a man of God. And that the word. Of the Lord. From your mouth. Is the truth. She had gone through.
- [28 : 53] A time of great testing. But she says. Now I know. That you are a man of God. Reminds me of. Paul writing in Romans 8. 28. We know.

That everything works together. For the good of those. Who love God. She had found that. In her experience. In this situation. And although. Her faith at that time.

Had been mixed with doubt. Yet. Now. As a result. Of what had happened. The trial. That she had gone through. She had greater certainty. And in thinking.

In this issue of doubt. It was reminded of. Matthew 28. 28 and 17. Where. Jesus disciples. When Jesus came back. To them.

Having been resurrected. And he stood before them. And it said. They worshipped him. But some doubted. Now. If that's his disciples. With Jesus. Standing in front of them.

[29 : 48] Then. Then. This woman. And ordinary people. Like ourselves. Who can express doubts. At times. Can still have a living. Saving faith. Even though doubt.

Is present there. But praise be to God. He is the one. Who banishes doubt. Particularly. As a result. Of trials. Because at the end. Of the trial.

He will demonstrate. To us. His faithfulness. And his goodness. In our lives. And it's a wonderful. Declaration of faith. That this woman gives.

Now I know. That you are a man of God. And that the word of the Lord. From your mouth. Is the truth. We have here. This poor. Pagan woman.

From Sidon. Declaring. The praises of God. Giving a declaration. Of faith. And truth. That should have come. From God's.

[30 : 42] Covenant people. Of Israel. But they had rejected him. So he had taken his word away. And he had given. His word. And his mercy. To this poor woman here.

What a wonderful story. It's also a warning. God doesn't promise. To keep his word. Coming to a person. A church.

A nation. Forever. He can. And he does. Take it away. The Middle East. Used to have. Incredibly powerful churches. In the early days.

Of the church. And. They all but disappeared. And are only just being. Brought back from the dead. Again today. As people take the gospel. There once again.

There is no reason. For us to. Expect God. Other. Than in his mercy. To keep bringing. His word. To us here. So.

[31 : 37] The call of God. To each and every one of us. Is today. Today. To accept. His offer of salvation. Today. To trust. In his word. Today.

To obey him. Don't wait. Any longer. Trust in Christ today. And declare. Along with this woman. That the word. Of the Lord. Is true.

Let's pray. Father. We thank you.

Once again. For what your word. Has to teach us. We bless you. That those. These events. Happened. Thousands of years ago. Yet. They speak.

To us today. We thank you. Lord God. For the faithfulness. Of Elijah. And hearing your word. In obeying it. Immediately. And knowing your provision. And your blessing.

[32 : 32] In his life. We thank you too. Lord. For this woman. Who. Had known many troubles. In her life. And yet. Was willing. To open her heart.

And receive. Your prophet. And your word. And Lord. We bless you. For your provision. For her. We bless you. For the declaration. Of truth. That she could make.

As a result. Of your work. In her life. And we pray. That each of us. May be able. To confess. The same. That we may be able. To praise. And honour. The Lord Jesus Christ.

In the midst. Of a pagan. Unbelieving world. And we pray. That as a result. You would be glorified. Amen. Amen. Our closing praise is.

Mission praise 173. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.