



HG199: Elijah & Elisha 'Standing For God'
Keep The Faith

1 Kings 17:1-24

Home Group Study Notes

10 May 2020 - James Van Cleef



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon

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Introduction The stories of Elijah and Elisha are flush with challenging errant behaviour, contesting unfaithfulness, and demonstrations of the power of Yahweh. Elijah and Elisha are men of deep faith who are taken to the edge in order to learn what it means to keep the faith. From these stories there is rich teaching and challenge for us as we walk in the way of Jesus in the twenty-first century. We will explore the first story of Elijah under the headings of Darkness, Seclusion, and Challenge.

Darkness The darkness is expressed in 1 Kings 16:30: Ahab was the notorious king of Israel who *'did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him.'* From where did this darkness come? If you read the Bible from Genesis up to this point, you wouldn't be surprised that Israel was chasing after other gods; they've been doing this since the Exodus. They continued to do it when they were ruled by Judges, and though they cried out to God to forgive, and though they would return for a while, they wandered still!

In 1 Samuel 8, Israel demands a king, one who would fight their battles for them. Plus, having a king would make them like the other nations. Samuel was against this, but God lets them have what they want. The people who were led out of Egypt by God wanted to replace God for another. Instead of finding their identity and life in Yahweh, they chased after a shadow...

So, instead of God being their king, Ahab is their king. And along with Ahab comes Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king. (Cue Elvis Presley singing Hard Headed Woman!) This marriage was a political alliance to strengthen friendship between Israel and the Phoenicians, but spiritually disastrous for Israel. Jezebel was a tireless promoter of Baal worship, who also persecuted the prophets of Yahweh, including Elijah.

For the Phoenicians, Baal was a storm god of rain, and rain results in an abundance of crops. And there was considerable Baal worship in the land, for it needed rain. But this also brought considerable conflict as Elijah (*'Yah is my God'*) squares up to Ahab, who is dominated, it seems, by Jezebel, whose name likely means, *'Where is Baal the Mighty, Where is the Prince, the Lord of the Earth.'* Elijah verses Ahab. Yahweh versus Baal. (As an aside, Hebrew scribes were not overly fond of Jezebel, and with a 'slip' of the pen her name became *'Where is the dung?'*!)

The stage is set. Into the darkness comes Elijah and declares to Ahab, *'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain for these years, except by my word'* (v 1).

This is the beginning of challenge and conflict. But with it there is also hope. And hope comes through seclusion...

Seclusion That there would be no rain should not have been a surprise to Israel, for Deuteronomy 11.16-17 declares: *'If you worship other gods, I will shut up the heavens so there will be no rain...'* Further, Deuteronomy 28.23-24 tells of the consequence for disobedience, *'The heavens will be bronze, the earth iron, and the rain dust and powder.'*

But what seems to be a surprise is that God tells Elijah, after delivering his word to Ahab, to go and hide. Run away. *'Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan'* (v 3). Does this sound like a good formula for learning to keep the faith? Declare God's word. See his power. Run away and hide. Oh, and by the way, unclean birds will feed you (Leviticus 11.15). And the brook will dry up because there is no rain...

God is directing Elijah outside the box. God wants him to confront unfaithful Ahab. This he does. Then God wants him to make himself scarce. That doesn't seem fair, does it? Why isn't Ahab having to make himself scarce? And, to top it off, God will use ravens whom the Law calls unclean to bring him food. Will that not make the food unclean? If he eats it, will he be unclean? So, put yourself in his shoes (or sandals!). How would you respond if God calls you to act in a way that seems contrary to what you have accepted as the way to be faithful to your belief system?

However, before we decide that God's ways are bizarre or illogical, let us not forget something we find throughout Scripture, Church history and the experience of genuine faith: God calls. God equips. And when God calls, he will take us to the edge, for he always calls us to move beyond ourselves. God is beyond our limitations, and to have genuine trust we have to be moved past our ego. And when God equips, we must note how he does so: **not** according to our expectations, or even within the tidy boundaries of our doctrine, but according to his promise and love.

If you would like further examples of this, think about Abraham: called to leave his homeland for an unknown destination. Called to be a father of nations when he was childless. And called to sacrifice Isaac, the son of God's promise. Surely this stands out as God taking his people to the edge. But further still, when we meditate on Jesus—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we see God acting fully not according to our expectations, but fully in line with his love.

To keep the faith is to trust God even if it means stepping outside the confines of what we think we know about God. God is so much more than the sum our theology, no matter how sound we think it is. Indeed, our ideas about God are no guarantee that we will trust him.

But walking in relationship with God, the maker of the heavens and the earth, does. As we walk with him, we learn him, we become intuitively aware of his movements, of his love, of his will, of his beauty, and power. We encounter his holiness and know through experience that he will never be faithless toward us. And in walking with him we hear him say, 'Here you are, my beloved child!'

(A digression. ‘Here you are, my beloved child,’ is the opposite to God calling out to Adam, ‘Where are you?’ If we are walking with God, our being, our identity, is found in him. ‘Here you are’ expresses positively God’s joy in our being with him. Conversely, ‘Where are you?’ reflects his angst when we are apart. If God is asking us, ‘Where are you?’ it is indicative that we are not finding our life in him. Likely, we are looking for substitutes, hoping that they will give us the meaning and purpose that only God can give. End of digression!)

Challenge Our first story of Elijah is also a story of challenge. God sends Elijah to Zarephath, in Sidon, to a poor widow for his provision. This widow has only enough to make a bit of bread for her and her son to eat before they die. Elijah asks her to take what she has to feed him, with the promise that she will not lack flour or oil until the rains return. She obeys the word of God (v 16) and the flour and oil do not fail. The widow and her son are taken to the edge, and now this Gentile woman has faith to keep...

Tragically, her son dies, and this confuses her. She obeyed God, and now her son is dead. What sin had she committed for this to happen? Elijah, likewise is confused: ‘*O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?*’ (v 21). Now Elijah and the widow are seemingly beyond the edge... Elijah’s sole recourse is God. He prays, and the LORD restores the boy’s life. And he keeps the faith. For whom, then, is this story a challenge?

First, for Ahab. There is no rain in Israel despite his devotion to Baal, and this begs the question, ‘Why is Baal not providing the rain?’ Yet a poor widow living in Jezebel’s homeland is being nourished by God’s word. How can Ahab trust Baal over Yahweh?

Indeed, another encounter will bring this to a head when Elijah faces down the prophets of Baal, and Yahweh answers by fire. But you could well imagine Ahab sulking, perhaps to Jezebel, ‘Why is there no rain? We are doing all the Baal things right aren’t we? So why no rain? And why does a widow get help?’ When will Ahab click, and understand Yahweh is challenging him directly?

Second, for the widow. She is a Gentile witness to Yahweh’s excellence. She has nothing, yet the flour and oil do not fail. Her son was dead, but is now alive. All by God’s word. Yahweh’s. Not Baal’s. In a land devoted to Baal, she declares her trust in Yahweh, and that his word is true (v 24). So now she will have to live as light in darkness. She will have to keep the faith, to keep trust in God...

There is no doubt that the people who lived around her would be aware of her status, and also that the flour and oil are not running out. No doubt she has told people. And that makes her a witness: she is declaring that Yahweh provides, and because of her trust, she is also presenting a challenge for others to believe. ‘Yahweh’s word is true, for it is by his word that I am provided for.’ You could also imagine her calling others to believe...

Third, for us. How is it a challenge for us? Let’s go to Luke 4, and let Jesus give us insight. Jesus is in Nazareth, and on the Sabbath he reads from Isaiah 61, which speaks of Messiah’s mission, and when he finishes, he sits down and declares, ‘*today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*’ (Luke 4.21). There was some discomfort among the listeners.

But Jesus goes on: *‘No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.’* A little more shifting in their seats before he purposefully agitates: *there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s day but it was to a widow of Zarephath that he was sent to bestow God’s blessing.* For those listening, Jesus caused outrage because of the claims he was making about himself, and also how he challenged their nationalistic myopia. Messiah will not conform to their expectations, and God has a heart for the lost, the least, and even the Gentile—a universal declaration of salvation!

That still doesn’t explain how it is a challenge for us. Question: What governs our decisions: *our* politics, *our* security, *our* family, *our* denomination, *our* views of God? As soon as one of these becomes more important than walking with God, we will have our own shortsightedness challenged. The Spirit blows where he will, and the Spirit will work in us to dismantle any ‘thing’ that limits God and hinders our walk with him, even if they seem to be good things. (If I were to really push it, I would suggest that Jesus is not as interested in a fraction of the things we get worked up about within churches, for they do not necessarily lead to trust in God.)

But it also shows what we are to be like as the people of God. To follow in the way of God is to stand against the disorder the spirit of this world brings; living up-side right in an up-side down world is challenging! God has bestowed on you his blessing. God has called you into his life, which means we will have to live as lights in darkness, as cities on hills, neither of which can be hidden. So, as we live in the truth of Father, Son and Spirit, we dismantle any claim that veils the Gospel, regardless of whence the veiling comes.

Keep the Faith As followers of Jesus we are not called to curate religious museums and safeguard sacred texts that sadly are often used to delineate who is in and who is out, but to live according to the staggering truth that the image of God—the creator of the universe, the eternal Trinity—is within us all, even if we acknowledge it or not.

Faith in this God will take us to the edge. He will take us beyond ourselves, beyond our beliefs and strongly held convictions, even beyond our religion, and show us where he will manifest his presence. In Christ, we become ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, declaring and living his truth in an environment that cannot, or chooses not to hear the magnificent message: the whole of creation belongs to Father, Son, and Spirit; that humanity’s real identity is found in him. All else is a shadow.

To keep the faith, to keep trusting God, you first have to trust him. Do you trust he is good? That he is generous? That he is forgiving? That he accepts you, and transforms you? The second thing we need to do is stand aside; put aside your ego. Find your true identity in him. Put aside your mask. Breathe in the breath of God and live! And God will take you to the edge so that, like Elijah, you may know the abounding love of God and share it with all. ***Amen.***

Emmanuel Church Text for 2018

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship. And by him we cry ‘Abba Father.’

Romans 8:15



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. We are made in the image of God. What do you understand that to mean, and what difference does it make in your life as a follower of Jesus?

2. Share when God has provided for you in testing circumstances.

3. Which do we find more difficult: seeing God work outside the boundaries of our traditions, or changing our traditions to follow wherever God leads? What makes it difficult?

4. The Spirit blows where he will (see John 3.8). What are things we can do to be more aware of the Spirit's leading?

5. Discuss ways the Church (universal, and not just Emmanuel) can live up-side right in an up-side down world.

6. Our temporary lockdown has caused us to change our usual ways of living, even how we function as a church. As a result of this, what would you say is essential to being church?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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