

Enter the prophet!

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] If you haven't been coming along, let me just say what we've been doing.

We've been going through the Bible a chapter at a time. It's in 1 Kings, ancient history, and this is the chapter that we've got to.

We do this in the expectation in faith that as we listen to what God says in the Bible, God will speak to us in a fresh and personal and living and direct way.

That's what we believe the Bible is like, and we pray that God will honor that week by week. So we're going to look then at 1 Kings 17.

And here are some questions that the people in the story might have been asking, that you might be asking, that we might be asking.

[1 : 02] And I think the big question is this. Is God really able to save his people, including me? Make it personal.

Is God really able to save his people? That includes me. I'll explain a bit about the context of it in a moment. But what I'm thinking of is things like this.

Why does God suddenly seem to let me down? Everything's gone wrong. Is God really able to save people, people like me? They would have asked that in the story.

You know, for example, I prayed for this job. God gave it to me. Now it's all gone wrong. You know, is God really capable? Is he competent? Why are some things in my life rotten?

Is God punishing me? So salvation, he just doesn't do that. People in the story would have asked that. People nowadays ask that. Why are so many, some, many, most things in my life rotten.

[2 : 06] Is God punishing me? The answer is no. Just how big is God? Is he big enough to answer a prayer?

Is he big enough to do a miracle? Is he big enough? The people in this story, in that history, would have been thinking about their own nation.

And what a terrible mess it was in. Is God able to revive a nation? Is God able to revive a church? Is God able to bring life to the dead?

And the answer is he is very big. But it takes us a chapter to get through to that. And then this question. Okay, you've said these things. Well, how can I be sure about that? Because the one thing I would really like to be is sure.

Or, that's a question in the chapter. And I hope as we go through we'll be able to answer it. We answer it in the same way that the person in the story answered it. So, if I may, I'll just give you a bit of the context of what's been happening as we've been working through.

[3 : 14] It's history. History of kings. History of a kingdom that's split into north and south. So, what you've got on the screen is the southern kingdom, which we're not looking at at the moment.

We're thinking of the northern kingdom. King Jeroboam reigned 28 years. For some reason I have to click this a lot of times. There's a block representing his reign. He introduced this great sin of worshipping the Lord, apparently the Lord, through golden calves.

He said, these are the gods that brought you out of Egypt. These golden calves. Which is a terrible, terrible sin. People worshipped that way.

He was followed by Nadab, who reigned for two years. Then, that dynasty was wiped out. Then, Baasha reigned for 24 years. His son, Elah, reigned for two.

Then, they were wiped out. Zimri reigned for the whole of seven days. And he died. Then, Omri reigned for 12 years. And there was a rivalry with Tibney.

[4 : 18] And then, King Ahab comes on the scene. And he is the worst of the lot. It just gets worse and worse and worse. And he's the worst of the lot. He brings in not golden calves.

But he brings in the worship of a different god altogether. His name is Baal. Which actually means Lord. So, you could see there'd be confusion. And here's a little picture from the Louvre. I think when we went to Paris, we saw this nasty... It's a nasty little statue. This sort of size. Of Baal. You can look it up on Wikipedia.

That's the god that they worshipped. Yeah, that's the god that they worshipped. And you're thinking... Whoops. Didn't mean to do that. Click.

Ah. Oh, it's... Okay. You're thinking it can't get any worse. And it's so bad.

[5 : 18] And what... And this is the point at which suddenly Elijah the prophet comes on the scene. So, chapter 17 follows on from the previous chapter.

And it just says, here comes Elijah. Elijah the Tishbite. So, let's look at the outline of the text. Oh, this is all going wrong. Right. Ah. Right. Let's try that. I wonder if I can undo it in order.

There we are. Outline of the text. Verse 1. The prophet enters. No introduction. He just says there's going to be no rain except by his words.

Let's bring in the prophet. Then he is fed in the Kareth Hareth Ravine by birds. Look at that. Then he's fed in Zarephath by a widow woman.

We'll look at that. There she is with her little boy. And then the little boy dies. And he prays for the return of life to the widow woman's son. That's the story in the chapter.

[6 : 15] We're going to look at the whole way through that. Some things to notice straight away. If you've been here on previous weeks, you will think, this is a very strange story this morning.

It's a huge jump from the history of kings. Kings politics, national policy. We change to just one bloke in a ravine or one bloke with a woman and a little boy.

The focus changes. I'm glad you noticed that. We had Solomon with his temple and with the priests. We've had the sons of David, the royal family.

And now we come down to this bloke, Elijah. And I think it teaches us something about God's process of salvation. So the temple was not enough.

All that stuff with the temple and the sacrifices. Salvation does not come by sacrifice alone. The priests could not do everything needed to save. And the kings couldn't do everything either.

[7 : 22] The kings had power. But as we've seen, power alone is not a recipe for salvation. They used that power the wrong way in the wrong service.

So salvation does not come by power alone. But we do need the Elijah person, the prophet, speaking the word of God.

And you may know, looking backwards from the New Testament, that Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the perfect redeemer, the perfect answer, is actually all of those things and more. Jesus seamlessly unites the compassionate sacrifice of the priests with the power and nobility of a king and the revelation and truth of the prophet.

Jesus is all these things, a prophet, a priest, and a king together. Well, we're just looking today at the input, or we're beginning to look at the input that the prophet has.

[8 : 23] And it says in verse 1 now, Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe and Gilead said to Ahab, Ahab was this terrible king, As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in these next few years, except at my word.

I think he must have had a bit of a nerve to go to a king to say that. Whether you fancy trying to do a similar thing. In he comes, no introduction, and he gives this solemn formula.

As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives. So he's not saying, this is my opinion. He's not saying, here's a thought for you, O king.

He's saying, as surely as the Lord is God, and he lives, he's the real God, not this made up God. As surely as he lives, there will be no rain or dew in the land. It's a solemn formula. So there he is speaking this to Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel, who herself was a follower of Baal.

[9 : 46] So he says there's going to be no rain. Now, let me just stop and think about that for a minute, if we may, because it's not a weather forecast. Okay, we're all familiar with weather forecasts.

There's, you know, rain fringing in from the south and an anticyclone and all that sort of thing. No, they wouldn't say anticyclone. That would be too sophisticated. Rain, cold air.

It's not just a weather forecast. This is actually a very significant thing to say. Because rain is part of the terms and conditions of the covenant that the Lord has made with Israel.

Right back when God said, you're going to be my people. I'll be your God. I'm going to rescue you. And I want you to belong to me. And this is how it all works.

Right back in those days. So if you were to turn to Deuteronomy chapter 11, which is back in those beginning days, where the terms and conditions of this covenant are spelled out in verse 13.

[10:53] I'll read it to you. The Lord says, If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rain, so that you may gather in your grain, your new wine and oil.

I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle. You will eat and you will be satisfied. That is, if you faithfully obey. Verse 16. Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them.

Then the Lord's anger will burn against you and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. Fix these words of mine in your hearts and on your minds. Tie them as symbols on your hands. Just bind them on your forehead. Just remember that. So this no rain thing goes back to those terms and conditions and Elijah is saying, okay, things have got so bad that those terms and conditions are now coming into operation.

There will be no rain. And interestingly, he says, apart from it, my word. Which is a very bold statement to make, isn't it?

[12:24] Because it's like the Lord is controlling things on earth, including the weather, through this man, the prophet. And it's also, incidentally, one in the eye for Baal who is the fertility god.

We sang about, what did we, riding on the wings of the storm. The Baal worshippers said, Baal did that. He rode on the wings of the storm. But the Lord does that.

And the Baal worshippers says, if we do the stuff with Baal that he wants, if we worship him, then he'll make sure everything's fertile and lush and green and everything. So, apparently, the Lord is saying, you know, Baal, rubbish.

The rain comes at my word. I withhold the rain. I send the rain. So, here we are.

Things seem to be going from bad to worse to worse. Actually, that's not a correct English expression. A powerful king propelled by a ruthless queen who worships Baal.

[13:40] And Elijah confronts them with this word. What happens next? Verse 2. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah. Leave here.

Turn eastward. Hide in the Kerith ravine east of the Jordan. Here we go with God's answer to this terrible situation.

It turns out that we're going to read that God's answer to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and all their Baal stuff is this very unlikely secret weapon.

A prophet, just one prophet, with the word of God assisted by a widow. She's in a bit of a state at the moment, so we'll come back to her in a minute.

It's interesting the secret weapons that God uses. He doesn't... The heart of his work is not what people think is cleverness and is not what people think is power.

[14:51] He uses very unlikely methods and the most unlikely of all is Jesus dying on the cross, which it doesn't look clever at all.

It looks foolish. The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. And it doesn't look strong. A dead... A dead bloke on a cross.

But that apparently weak thing is God's, if you like, his secret weapon. God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

That's God's answer for us. This most unlikely thing of Jesus dying on the cross. And we might ask the question, just going back to the text, why do we have all this business here of confrontation and of prophets hiding in ravines and things?

Why doesn't God just say, you've sinned, that's it. Just go into exile, forget about the whole lot.

Because he could do. And I think the answer to this is that God shows that he is remarkably patient.

[16:13] He is remarkably gracious. Even with ridiculously stupid and evil people, he gives Ahab another chance.

and another chance actually. That's remarkable, isn't it? Would you and I be as patient with Ahab? We'd say, you blaspheming, malevolent man, just go away.

But God engages with him. I don't know if there's anybody here who's thinking, I am too far gone for God to be interested in me.

I think you could take encouragement from this. God is remarkably patient, absolutely remarkably patient. You might say, well, I'm not getting the hang of this at all.

Well, you know, God is patient. It's an encouragement, isn't it? So let's take Elijah to the ravine of Kareth, or Heretha, however you want to pronounce it.

[17:17] Please notice what he's told to do. Leave here, turn eastward, hide in the Kareth ravine, east of Jordan. You will drink from the brook. I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.

So leave, go east, and hide. So he did what the Lord had said. He did according to the word of the Lord. He went to the Kareth ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there.

You notice exactly what he was told to do. He did, which is a refreshing change from all the other examples in Kings of people who have told stuff.

Take no notice, but in precisely what he was told to do. I mean, it wasn't hard, was it? Leave here, turn east, anybody can turn east, hide in a ravine. I think that's not totally impossible, but he did what he was told to do.

And notice that God says, I have ordered the ravens to feed you there. Now, there's the ravine, there's, oh look, I wish I could get them to fly in downwards, but I couldn't.

[18:20] So they, and they're dropping bread and bits of roadkill, which is presumably what he did according to the word of the Lord. And it says, the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook.

So he did what he was supposed to do. The ravens did what they were supposed to do. I don't know whether the ravens knew they were supposed to do it. Presumably, God's ordering them was a sort of a sovereign thing that he just made sure it happened.

And he, and there's Elijah in the ravine. problem. Okay, verse 7, till sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

Now, I find this an interesting development because we've had a miraculous provision, but the miracle seems to run out of steam because the water dries up.

So this particular provision doesn't last. So we have a problem. in all of these bits of the story, there's a problem that crops up. And the ravine turns into a dry ravine.

[19:39] So what's happening here? Well, I can give you some comments. Number one thing, here's a prophet hiding in a ravine. And you might say he's not actually much use there in a ravine.

And I tend to agree. I mean, prophets are supposed to be saying stuff, but he's just there quietly in this ravine. It's a judgment, isn't it, on a nation when the word of God is hidden away and nobody can hear it.

Isn't that right? So you go to a church and you sit down to listen to the word of God and you just get sort of psychobabble or something like that.

The word of God is hidden. That's a judgment on a land, isn't it? Isn't it a blessing that the Gideon Bible's testaments are available?

If you go to a place where you say, I couldn't get a Bible for love nor money, that would be a judgment on such a place. So here, I think there's an element of judgment, that if they don't listen to God's word, God will hide his prophet away somewhere.

[20:49] He'll keep him, but he's not working in public. God's prophet is provided for. There's a lot of provision going on here. But interestingly, he's not totally insulated from the effects of God's judgment.

Why is there no rain? Because of God's judgment on the land. Whom does this affect? Well, it affects everybody, including believers, including this prophet. Believers are not, we're not immune from, we're not immune actually from death, are we?

Believers die, even though our sins have been paid for. The wages of sin is death. Believers die. Believers get ill. God doesn't insulate us from the realities of this world, and so it was with Elijah.

Let's take him on now. So the Lord, verse 8, then the word of the Lord came to him, go at once to Zarephath in Sidon and stay there. I have ordered, I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.

So same sort of thing, not quite the same wording, arise, go to Zarephath and stay. But the wording of this sentence is exactly the same, I have ordered a woman to feed you.

[22 : 11] So strike out ravens, insert woman, is exactly the same sentence. And I wonder, did the woman know? The ravens presumably didn't know. Did the woman know that God was going to use her in this way?

I rather suspect not. It doesn't mean that God couldn't use her, but I don't think she was as yet conscious of this. So he does what he's told.

go at once to Zarephath, stay there, have commanded a widow in that place to supply with food. So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, behold, it's there in the original, it isn't in our translation, it's a nice word, oh look, isn't that amazing?

Done what God said and there is a woman. Behold, a woman gathering sticks. There she is, she's gathering sticks. And he calls to her and asks, would you bring me a little water in a jar so that I may have a drink?

Now, actually the word please is in there. Let's put it in. Please. You think this is rather, what are we to make of this conversation?

[23 : 25] Because you probably wouldn't do this. I don't think I would do this, go up to a strange woman and ask her for food like this. But he does do it politely. So let's give him credit for that.

Please, would you bring me a little water in a jar that I may have a drink? So it's a polite and understandable request. And then as she was going to get it, he says, and please, we've got the please?

NIV does have the please, and bring me, please, a piece of bread. So not a loaf, just a piece of bread. So it's probably not as abrupt, not quite as abrupt as you think it is.

And she replies, interestingly quoting the name of the Lord, as surely as the Lord your God lives, so she's now being serious, I don't have any bread.

And she uses a word for quite a lot of bread. You know, what do you think you're asking me for? I haven't got, I don't know, you think I've got a full meal for you here? All I've got, she says, is a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug.

[24 : 39] A handful of flour and a drop of oil. And what I'm doing is I'm gathering two sticks to take home, make a meal for myself and my son, so that we may eat it and die.

So this is going to be our last supper. That's what we're going to eat together. And it is, with these little conversations you try and pick up what's the emotional tone of this.

I think this is downbeat, isn't it? I'm just picking up two sticks and I'm going to go back. Rather than just use up our flour a teaspoon full at a time, we're going to blitz the whole thing and have one pancake and then that will be our last meal, we're going to die after that.

So, I feel rather sorry for her, don't you? So, Elijah says to her, oh, did I do the flour and the oil? There's the, you've got the little markers on how much there is left. So, it's right down at the bottom. Enough to make one meal, but no more.

[25 : 53] so, Elijah says to her, don't be afraid. That's a rather nice thing to say, isn't it? Don't be afraid.

It's going to be okay. It's one thing to say that, it's another thing to be able to make good on it, isn't it? But he says to her, don't be afraid, go home and do according to your word.

There's quite a lot about words in this chapter and doing according to words. You do according to your word. But first, make a small cake of bread for me, from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.

This seems to be a very challenging request. I think he must have had a lot of nerve. Do according to your word. Now, what I want you to do is first make some cake of bread, one of those flat bread things baked on a probably hot stone or something like that.

First, do that. Let's give him the credit of seeing what else he says. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, the jar of flour will not be used up, the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.

[27 : 16] So he's got a promise. as a promise but he says the way you access this promise is by first making what I've asked then for your son.

According to the word of the Lord, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says. And at this particular point she's faced with a choice, isn't she?

Because he's saying first give me what you have and then I will give you what you need. I think we take it that he's speaking in the Lord's behalf really.

He's not just speaking as a private individual. I think that's a big ask, isn't it? You've just got enough for one meal. What I want you to do is give that first to me as the Lord's representative and then you have then for your son and yourself.

And it does say verse 15 she went away and did as Elijah had told her. She went away and did according to the word of Elijah.

[28 : 38] So I think something's happening there. I think there's an obedience going on and it's an obedience which presumably is based on her saying okay if God says it won't run out that's what he's saying the flour will not be used up the jug of oil will not run dry if he says that I'm willing to give it a go.

Get the idea? It's a little bit like later on walking on the water where Jesus walks on the water and the thought is will Peter walk on the water too?

I mean how do you go about a miracle like that? How do you do it? Do you sort of put your foot in and go is it solid? Or do you just say okay here goes and you get out and walk on water?

You've just got to do it haven't you? That's the way faith works. Certainly in this case she just had to do it. There's another verse in the New Testament which says seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things will be added to you.

It's a question of putting first. I don't know many other things. things of life where this crops up not exactly in the same form.

[30 : 12] What shall I do? Shall I first make sure I'm alright or shall I first do what God wants me to do and trust that he'll make it alright for me?

It's very much the thing with time isn't it? Shall I first make sure that I've had time with God or shall I squeeze God in at the end when I've made sure everything else is alright things like that.

She does what she did according she went away and did as Elijah had told her and there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.

It's an interesting miracle because it doesn't happen all at one you don't get it all at one go do you you don't get a sort of weekly shops worth of flour and oil it just comes a bit at a time each day there is enough which is why I chose that song morning by morning new mercies I see sometimes that's the way the Christian life is he doesn't give us the whole thing you know in one great big lorry load you know one scheduled delivery he he gives us a little bit at a time as we need it isn't that right so we're left of the question well we're not left because I've answered it but here is the question will she or won't she we already her to feed Elijah in some sense that's fixed God has sovereignly decreed it but there is a decision that she's making will

I will I make this for this strange bloke first or what well she does according to the word of Elijah and it did work out as God had said can God save people in situations like that can God provide apparently yes let's go on verse 17 some time later the son of the woman who owned the house now that's literally the mistress of the house it's a word that's only used three times in the Bible because it's the feminine form of Baal twice it's used in a very negative sense and only in this occasion is it not but I just found it interesting that she's referred to as the mistress so it just reminds us in case we'd forgotten that

[32 : 59] Baal is in the contest here she's the mistress of the house the Baalah of the house and it says the son of this woman became ill he grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing so she's now upset about that very understandably and perhaps we could imagine the conversation where she has a go at Elijah what's this all been about as a Hebrew way of saying what's been going on here what's this between you and me what's been happening here I thought you'd come to save us I thought you'd come to help us but really you came to remind me of my sin and kill my son is that what's really been happening now you see what's happened here because things have been going along very well and now events in

God's hand seem to turn completely the wrong way that happens doesn't it sometimes you think God is blessing and then something comes out of the blue and it looks as though God's completely changed his mind blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his works in vain so let's not give in to first impressions is is this really what it is that you've come to condemn me and punish me it's a good question isn't it is that really what prophets do is this really what the plan of God is about is it just to trick people is it just a sort of sick joke is the real thing is the heart of what you're trying to do Elijah just to make people guilty to bring to mind their sin to bring punishment on them is that what it is the answer is no what does

Elijah say he he he he says give me your son Elijah replied he took him from her arms carried him to the upper room where he Elijah was staying and laid him on his bed so again I think this is a difficult thing that he is saying to her give me your son because she's holding him look he's not well look has he died at this point has he stopped breathing stopped breathing and she and he says give him to me you leave go of him give him to me it would be a difficult thing to ask give up what you cherish to receive it back from the Lord and he takes the boy what does it say he took him from her arms laid him on his bed he cried 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 tragedy the word tragedy there is is the word which is we have been looking at previously as evil remember they were evil evil evil more evil worse evil and he says have you brought evil on this family is that what you've done you brought evil on this family is that is that it so he prays why have you brought this evil on this family and again God's people are not immune from God's judgment on sin we don't have a sort of get out of jail free card that means that we don't suffer losses and crosses because we do what does he do verse 21 he stretches himself out on the boy three times and cries to the

Lord so three times he stretches him seeming to impart the life that he represents to the child and he prays oh Lord my God let this boy's life return to him and the Lord heard Elijah's cry and the boy's life returned to him and he lived he started off as sure as the Lord your God the Lord the God of Israel lives and the woman had said as the Lord your God lives and now this boy lives the Lord seems to give life that is within himself and Elijah picks up the child carried him down from the room into the house he gave him to his mother and he said look your son lives your son is alive who he lives your son lives fantastic wonderful so having given her son to the prophet again

[38 : 46] I think in faith she now finds her son returned to her alive his life returned your son lives and the woman says do you know at the beginning I had lots of questions lots of things I was learning but now I've got to the point where I can say verse 24 now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth or is firm is reliable is dependable totally reliable that's the point I've got to the Lord did not come to trick those who trust him maybe that's something we need to think of today maybe you're thinking about whether to put your trust in the Lord and you're wondering if

I do that will he abuse that trust will he just make fun of me will he let me down and the answer is no he won't no he won't the Lord is able to bring good out of!

that's a fantastic thing isn't it because there's lots of evil in this world and the natural cause is just evil gets worse but the Lord is able to bring good out of evil and the Lord is able to make sons return from the dead and the people who first read this perhaps if they were in exile would have thought that's so relevant to us because our nation is dead we're supposed to be the sons of God but we're not we're dead remember how Ezekiel had a sort of picture of the nation of Israel as dry bones and the question was can these bones live can the sons of Israel stand up as a mighty army can this little boy live yes he can the Lord can do that the Lord who lives is able to make others live also and the woman is saying do you know

I took it a step at a time first of all it was whether I would make that meal and then it was the next day and it day and in the end I had to give my son but I gradually found each time I have taken a step of faith and I ventured upon the word of the Lord and this is how I have come to find it's true and I want to recommend that to you because you might be thinking how can I become a Christian how can I get this certainty these Christians have I I that's the next step or maybe there's something that you you've been given to read you think well it's probably

I won't understand it's mumbo jumbo, well maybe that would be the next step. But it's by taking those steps that you come to the point of saying, now I know.

[42 : 19] So here was the question, is God really able to save his people, including me? Well, yes he is. Look at all the things that we've learnt. He's able to control circumstances, purposes, ravens, meeting the right person at the right time, even death itself, according to his word, to progress his purposes. And he doesn't do it using the normal channels, the people, the big important people, the kings, the politicians. He used this woman, and actually she was a foreigner. Jesus comments on that. There were lots of widows, but God used this foreigner. He doesn't do it by deserving, he does it by grace. He's able to keep people going, sometimes just a day at a time. Well, a day at a time is all we need.

How does faith work? It works by taking the next step of trust and looking to God to provide according to his promises. And we've also learnt that when God seems to be against us, he is actually for us. The clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and will break in blessings on your head. And the Lord who lives is able to solve this deepest problem of all, the problem of death. The living Lord is able to make others live. Many centuries later, a man was standing in front of a paralyzed man and he said to this man, arise. And in comment on it, the man is Jesus. It was said, a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear the voice of Jesus and come out. And there is the Lord of life. Let's sing together.