

A faithless king and a faithful God

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[0 : 00] Our reading is taken from 1 Kings chapter 16 verses 29 through to chapter 17 verse 24. In the 38th year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel.

And Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria 22 years. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him.

And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbal, king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him.

He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

In his days, Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram, his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son, Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua, the son of Nun.

[1 : 13] Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

And the word of the Lord came to him, Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.

So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening.

And he drank from the brook. And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him, Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.

Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks.

[2 : 19] And he called to her and said, Bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink. And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.

And she said, As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering up a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.

And Elijah said to her, Do not fear. Go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me. And afterward make something for yourself and your son.

For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth. And she went and did as Elijah said.

And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

[3 : 24] After this, the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe, that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, What have you against me, O man of God?

You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son. And he said to her, Give me your son. And he took him from her arms, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed.

And he cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, have you brought calamity, even upon the widow, with whom I sojourn, by killing her son? Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.

And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him to his mother.

And Elijah said, See, your son lives. And the woman said to Elijah, Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. Well, good morning, everyone.

[4 : 32] Hi to those on Zoom as well. Well, I think you'll find it helpful to have 1 Kings 16 and 17 open in front of you. If you've got a Bible, I think don't rely just on the screen. Much better to have it in front of you.

And hopefully people have printed off that handout as well, which, again, will be helpful as we go along. Shall I lead us in prayer as we begin? Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

We thank you, our Father, that your word is truth. We thank you that in a world of fake news, gossip and spin, we can trust what you have to say to us. And we pray, therefore, this morning, that you would give us greater confidence in your word, that we might believe it and obey it.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Is God absent? Has he forgotten his promises?

Is he powerless even in the face of the seemingly ever-expanding religions of materialism, secularism and pluralism? There are questions we might well ask in our own day when both the wider church and society as a whole at best ignore God and his ways revealed in the Bible, and at worst ridicule them and those who seek to follow them.

[5 : 57] And there are questions that might well have been asked also during the reign of King Ahab, where we'll find ourselves during the next few Sundays at Grace Church, days during which loyalty to God and his will seem not only dated, but dangerous.

We're picking up the story of 1 Kings near the end of chapter 16, a few chapters after where we left it a few months ago at the end of the reign of King Solomon. You'll remember how things had started well, but gone progressively downhill under Solomon as he slipped into the perennial sin of Israel's kings, combining worship of the God of Israel with that of the gods of the nations.

And in the five chapters since, things have gone from bad to worse. During the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the kingdom of Israel is ripped apart by civil war and tragically divided into two kingdoms, the smaller southern kingdom, Judah, centred on Jerusalem, and the larger northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel, but was shut off from Jerusalem and its temple.

And in the ensuing chapters, we're given a history of the first few kings of both kingdoms, who seemingly seek to outdo each other in their wickedness, with the writer giving us the ominous refrain of how king after king walked in the sins of his father and the people did evil in the sight of the Lord.

It's a grim read, a true, horrible history. And yet, just as our society today seems to move further away from biblical teaching in each generation, things still hadn't reached rock bottom.

[7 : 40] And so we pick up the story in the northern kingdom of Israel, at the beginning of the reign of perhaps the most notorious of all the kings, the bloody Mary, perhaps, of Old Testament history, King Ahab.

And the writer's verdict on Ahab is given to us right at the start of his reign. But before we look at it, it's important to note that secular historians would have given Ahab a very different write-up.

Indeed, in the world's eyes, he might well have seemed like something of a success story, at least for much of his reign. Verse 29 of chapter 16 tells us he reigned for 22 years, a pretty good innings for Israel's kings.

He formed a lucrative alliance with the king of Sidon by marrying his daughter, Jezebel, and engaged in various building projects, most significantly, the vanity project of rebuilding the ancient city of Jericho after many years.

Like 21st century London, Ahab's Israel looked prosperous. But God's verdict on Ahab's reign could not have been more different.

[8 : 51] Have a look at verse 30. Ahab, the son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. A pretty impressive effort given their sins.

And chief among Ahab's sins, if you look at verses 31 and 32, was his marriage to Jezebel, a foreign princess, and his subsequent worship of her gods.

Two things which always go hand in hand in defiance of God's explicit commands. So the writer summarizes verse 33, Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel before him.

And verse 34, which gives us a snapshot of the kingdom during his reign, tells us his great vanity project was itself an act of deliberate rebellion against what God had said.

You see, the root problem, the cancer, at the heart of all the nation's wickedness, is revealed in the very last words of verse 34.

[9 : 55] Hyle of Bethel, the Christopher Wren of his day perhaps, like his king, rejected the word of the Lord. To his great cost, he failed to heed what God had spoken in the days of Joshua, perhaps assuming it no longer had any relevance in the present day, or could be reinterpreted in a more enlightened era.

So that was the crux of the problem during Ahab's reign. God's word was rejected. And that's actually the big theme of our passage this morning, the word of the Lord.

Chapter 16 ends by drawing our attention to it, and chapter 17 is bookended by references to it. Have a look down with me. In verse 1, Elijah tells Ahab, As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither June nor rain these years, except by my word.

And the word of the Lord came to him. And look on to verse 24, at the end of the chapter. The chapter ends with the widow of Zarephath acknowledging to Elijah, I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

And in between, as we'll see time and again, it is God's word which is centre stage in this chapter. So that's a great theme of our passage, the word of the Lord.

[11 : 23] As we'll see, even amidst widespread wickedness and apostasy, God's word was still at work and was still certain. Which is the first of three things I want us to notice about his word from our verses.

Three things we also need to hold on to in our own, in some ways, very similar day. And I think the best way for us to tackle these emphases, which each seem to run throughout the chapter, is to do so thematically, rather than by looking at the passage in consecutive sections as we usually do.

So first of all, and we'll spend most of our time on this one as it seems to be the key message of the chapter, the certainty of God's word. The certainty of God's word. Elijah appears rather suddenly with little introduction.

But his name tells us all we need to know about him. Because Elijah means, my God is Yahweh, or my God is the Lord. So in this age of spiritual rebellion, here is a man who is faithful, one who still worships the Lord.

And we soon see, he has good reason to do so. Because the word of the Lord, for which Elijah is a mouthpiece, is certain.

[12 : 41] For one thing, as the author has already hinted at the end of chapter 16, with the judgment against Hile in fulfillment of Joshua's prophecy, it's certain in its pronouncement of judgment.

Because the declaration in verse 1 that there would be a drought wasn't merely a case of Elijah being the Michael Fish or Carol Kirkwood of his day, an ancient weather forecaster.

No drought was a sign of God's judgment against his people. Back in Deuteronomy 28, God promised that if his people turned away from him, he would close the heavens and dry up the earth, leading to famine.

So we're to see what's going on here as a sign of divine judgment against the king and nation who were rejecting God's word. And true to his word, God did indeed stop the rainfall.

His word is certain. Look on with me to verse 7. We're told, and after a while, the brook dried up because there was no rain in the land.

[13 : 48] I think we're actually supposed to have a wry smile here because Baal, the god to whom Ahab had built altars, was supposedly the god of fertility, meaning that part of his job description ought to have been to bring rain.

With altars to Baal, rainfall should have been plentiful. But God's word is certain and the rain stopped. But notice God's word is certain not only in judgment but also in salvation.

You see, this famine was perilous for Elijah himself. How would he survive these days of drought, particularly given, as we'll see, that he was public enemy number one and unlikely to receive any handouts from the state?

We'll look back to verse 2. The word of the Lord came to Elijah this time. Depart from here and turn eastwards and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.

You shall drink from the brook and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there. So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook.

[15 : 05] Now this would have been a curious command for Elijah to hear because the brook of Cherith lay in what was normally the driest part of the land. It would be like walking into the Sahara to find food and water.

But again, God's word proved certain and for a while the brook sustained Elijah. And although there may not have been any handouts from the regime, there were handouts from ravens who became God's postmen.

And notice how they offered a better service than the royal mail because they delivered to Elijah twice a day. So God is true to his word and provides for Elijah.

But soon the brook dries up a reminder to us that even God's people are affected by the judgment he executes against his rebellious world. And so the Lord speaks to Elijah again.

Look on to verse 8 and notice once more how the word of the Lord is the dominant theme of this chapter. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah.

[16 : 12] Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you. And if we thought that ravens were unlikely caterers for Elijah, then this widow is perhaps even more so.

As we'll see, she's a foreigner, so has no real loyalty to Elijah. But also, she's destitute on the breadline, as close to starvation as could be.

Her last pennies have run out, the supermarket shelves are empty anyway, the food banks have long since had to close, and the famine looks certain to take another victim. And in verse 12, have a look, she tells Elijah, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug.

And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die. It's a desperate situation as this woman with no husband to provide for her prepares to cook her final meal, before surrendering to the inevitable.

And yet, this is the person to whom God's word sends Elijah in his moment of need. But God's word is certain, and so he provides for his profit in this most unlikely of ways, as if to underscore the power and sureness of his word.

[17 : 40] We haven't got time to look at every detail in these verses, but many of us will know the story. from our children's Bibles. Elijah promises the woman that the few remaining grains of flour and drops of oil will be enough to see the woman and her son through the drought.

And notice the writer's commentary on what happens. It's there in verse 16. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Once more, the emphasis is clear, isn't it? God's word is certain, even when its fulfilment seems impossible. And in case we still haven't grasped the point, the writer gives us a third case study in the certainty of God's word in verses 17 to 24.

Again, time doesn't permit us to look at all the details, but if there's one thing that might look even more insurmountable than being fed by a widow resigned to death, it's death itself.

But in verses 17 and 18, the widow's son dies. And so in verse 21, we're told, Elijah cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.

[18 : 56] And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. It's a remarkable miracle.

But the woman recognises it wasn't primarily Elijah's voice that had raised her son, but that of the God who stood behind him. Verse 24 again, I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

You see, what is it that the author wants us to understand from all these repeated references to God's word? Well, it's what the widow herself understood that the word of the Lord is truth.

That is to say, it's certain. Certain in the judgment of which it warns and certain in the salvation it promises, even in the face of death.

We're so used, aren't we, to words not being certain, whether it's a government issuing U-turns a few weeks after a new policy is unveiled, or the tweet that is hastily deleted, or the last minute text message cancelling a previously agreed arrangement.

[20 : 08] But God's word is written in indelible ink. It always comes true. It is certain. And of course, we need to remember this, in these, in many ways, similar days in which we live.

At the beginning, we ask the question of whether God has forgotten his promises. And this passage reminds us he hasn't. Even in the darkest of days when those promises are widely disbelieved or despised, God's word remains certain.

It's all too easy to doubt the certainty of his warnings of judgment. Will the Ahabs of our world who oppress God and his people, whether in the state or the church, really face God's judgment?

Well, 1 Kings 17 tells us they will. And it tells us we can be certain about his promises of salvation too. As weak as we may feel, as weak as a poor widow perhaps, or as insurmountable as our obstacles may seem, as insurmountable as death may be, God's word is certain.

We can trust it. It is worth holding fast to it. So that is, I think, the great theme of our passage, the certainty of God's word.

[21 : 28] But more briefly, I want us to consider two other things about God's word from these verses, which I think we're supposed to notice. So secondly, the universality of God's word, the universality of God's word.

God's word can be very surprising. And so it is in verse 9. God says to Elijah, have a look, arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.

Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you. God sends Elijah out of the promised land, away from Israel, to be fed. And notice how he commands the widow, as we're earlier told, he commanded the ravens.

His word has authority even outside of Israel, and even birds and Gentiles obey God's word, where Israel has rejected it. Now at this point in Israel's history, Elijah in many ways represents and indeed is God's word to king and country.

So many commentators have I think correctly noted that by him being sent to Zarephath away from Israel, these verses speak of the absence of God's word in Israel, a further sign of his judgment against the nation.

[22 : 43] God is no longer speaking to them, a particularly serious state of affairs given God had promised to withhold rain until his word said otherwise. But I think there's more going on here because the exact place to which God chooses to send Elijah is surely no coincidence.

He sent to Zarephath which belongs to Sidon, we're told. Sidon, where have we heard of that already today? Well back in chapter 16 verse 31 we were told that Jezebel was from Sidon.

So God is parking his tanks, his prophet on the heart of enemy soil and he does so to save a Sidonian woman. Sidon has corrupted Israel as Jezebel has brought her false gods into Israel.

So the true God goes to Sidon and claims one of its people for his own. It's a classic counter-attack I guess. Some of the great modern football teams are happy to sit back and allow the opposition to play the ball in their half.

But having soaked up the pressure they suddenly counter-attack to devastating effect in unguarded opposition territory. And so it is with God here in a way.

[24 : 06] Sidon has infected God's people but he then sends his word to Sidon to find acceptance in Jezebel's home. You see if Israel won't honour their God then God will simply be at work somewhere else.

Indeed the fact that it takes a Sidonian woman to feed God's prophet and to recognise God's voice through him is a sad indictment on Israel and a sign of God's willingness to show mercy to others.

And this was something that didn't go unnoticed by Jesus living at a time when Israel was repeating the mistakes of Elijah's day. So I want us to flick forward quickly please to Luke chapter 4 and the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Luke chapter 4. The context here some of us will remember is that Jesus has just preached his first sermon at Nazareth outlined his mission. Many of us will remember this from our sermon series and growth group studies in Luke.

After which he foretells his rejection by his own people saying in verse 24 of Luke 4. Truly I say to you no prophet is acceptable in his hometown.

[25 : 21] But look how Jesus goes on. Verse 25. But in truth I tell you there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heavens were shut up three years and six months and a great famine came over all the land and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon to a woman who was a widow.

You see God could have demonstrated the certainty of his word by sending Elijah to a poor widow in Israel but instead he sent him to Sidon to Gentile country.

Do we get the point? God's word is a universal word. It is for all peoples. It was in Elijah's day, would be in Jesus' day and is in our own day.

A concern for the nations wasn't original to the New Testament. And of course this is great news for us because most of us are Gentiles and so have no natural claim on the promises given to the nation of Israel.

And what we see here in 1 Kings 17 also I think anticipates a pattern we see throughout the Bible and throughout history. That when God supposed people reject his word he goes elsewhere with that word.

[26 : 45] We saw it in the ministry of the apostles in Acts as they were forced out of Israel and went to the nations. We saw it in our own country when the Church of England closed its doors to the gospel preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley and so they took God's word to the fields instead and preached to those who would never have darkened the door of a church.

We see it today when the pews are emptying in so many traditional church buildings but church plants in warehouses, hotels and school halls are being filled.

And we see it on a far larger scale globally as the Christianised West turns its back on the word of God as Israel did. And the word instead goes to the Zarephaths or the modern world, South Korea, China, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America where that word is so often received with the same remarkable faith demonstrated by the widow of Zarephath.

So let's take heart. God may appear absent in our own country. His word may have departed from many of our churches but he's still at work often in unlikely places to fulfil his purposes across the globe.

His word is a universal word. So we've considered the certainty of God's word and the universality of God's word.

[28 : 05] But finally we must also notice briefly the messenger of God's word. The messenger of God's word. Elijah himself in other words. We've already seen how Elijah speaks God's word but notice how he, unlike Ahab, also obeys God's word himself.

The last few verses of chapter 16 give us a portrait of a man rejecting God's word. Then the first verses of chapter 17 show us a man obeying it. Have a look at verse 5 where we're told, so Elijah went and did according to the word of the Lord.

Or verse 10, so he arose and went to Zarephath in response to the word of the Lord that had come to him in verse 8. Even when God's word seems strange and sending him to unpromising places amidst a drought, Elijah is obedient, a picture of the faithful at a time of widespread apostasy.

In fact, I think the writer specifically wants us to see Elijah here as representative of God's people. Perhaps to show us God was himself remaining faithful to his people even in these dark times.

I wonder if Elijah's experience here rang any bells for us. Because verse 6 in particular is, I'd argue, supposed to recall the miraculous feeding of the people of Israel in the wilderness in Exodus when they too were fed with meat and bread from heaven.

[29 : 37] Two chapters later, Elijah will end up at Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai, just as the Israelites ended up at Sinai after they were fed in the desert. And this pattern in Elijah's and Israel's experience is surely not coincidental.

Because Elijah is now the people of God. And we're to know that God is sustaining him just as he sustained them. God hasn't forgotten his people.

He continues to provide for them. And what an encouragement that is for us. Also, living in the wilderness, outside the promised land of heaven at a time when so many have deserted the Lord.

He's not forgotten his people, even when we feel few. And he will preserve us. But as we close, notice that Elijah is not only a picture of the faithful people of God, but also points forward to the ultimate messenger of God, Jesus Christ.

The books of one and two kings are a futile search for the true king promised in David's line who'd rule God's people with perfect justice and fulfill his promises to restore the world.

[30 : 51] King after king fail in both dynasties, none more so than Ahab. But Jesus, the true son of David, remained faithful where those kings failed. And in Luke chapter seven, a couple of chapters after where we were earlier in Luke, Jesus performs a miracle which echoes the raising of the widow's son in one king seventeen.

In fact, if we had time to turn to it, we'd notice Luke deliberately uses some of the same language as in one king seventeen to link the two stories. But the difference, of course, is that when Jesus raises the widow of Nain's son, he does so himself, whereas Elijah has to pray to God to do so.

And so the people rightly conclude that God has visited his people. So who is it who provides for God's people today, whether the faithful remnant like Elijah or the needy Gentile like the widow of Zarephath?

Well, it is, of course, Jesus himself, the one who feeds his followers miraculously in the desert and who will one day give them resurrection life.

The word of the Lord is truly in his mouth and in a world of opposition and apostasy where being faithful so often feels lonely and difficult and where Ahab seemed to rule without fear, we can trust Jesus to sustain us and take us safely through death into his perfect heavenly kingdom.

[32 : 23] Shall I lead us in prayer? We thank you, our heavenly Father, once again, that your word is certain. We thank you that it is certain in judgment and certain in salvation and we pray, therefore, that you would help us to heed its warnings and to trust its promises.

We thank you that it is a universal word that even reaches us here in Dulwich and we thank you for the way it points forward to the ultimate spokesman of your word, the Lord Jesus.

We thank you that he is able to feed us spiritually and able to take us safely through death into our promised land of heaven. Amen.