

As the Lord Lives

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[0 : 0 0] This is so entirely un-Anglican and it may bring the walls down around us, but can we get a round of applause for Paul as he comes to preach for us? It may be un-Anglican, but it's Asian.

They clap and they do all sorts of other things as well. But anyway, it's a joy to be with you and a pleasure to see faces that I haven't seen before and to see faces that I have seen before.

And it's good to be back, but it is cold. And I had thought of catching another plane last night back to warmer weather, but anyway, I'll survive for a few more weeks in Melbourne.

Can I encourage you to open your Bibles at the reading from 1 Kings, page 282 in the Bibles in the pews. And tonight and then next Sunday morning, I'm preaching this passage from chapter 17 and then next Sunday morning from chapter 18 from the book of 1 Kings.

And let's pray. Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we pray to you tonight that your powerful word will speak deeply into our hearts, will correct us, will rebuke us, will teach us and train us in righteousness.

[1 : 4 4] Lord God, open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to your word. For the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen. God is dead. God is dead.

Where you live and I don't. God seems dead in many ways. Ignored, despised, sidelined, kicked out of our schools and assemblies, kicked out of the curriculum.

A waste of time. Even in Asia, where the gods abound on every corner, the idea that the living God of the Bible is alive and is living is certainly not commonly felt.

I've taught in the last 12 months in countries that are Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, communist and secular and Roman Catholic superstition.

[3 : 1 9] And you wonder in any of them, what is the living God doing? Is he really alive? And the way most people live their lives, they may not have thought about it philosophically, they may not have thought in their minds that God is dead, there is no God, that I'm an atheist or anything like that.

But in practice, they live as though God is dead. And even some who own the name of God, in practice, live as though they are God.

And that the living God is something to keep on gathering dust in a book or to keep for a Sunday morning or a Sunday evening perhaps, although that's not very Asian, it seems to me.

But there's nothing new under the sun in all of that. Because wind back the clock nearly 3,000 years to ancient Israel of all people, the people who ought to have known that there was a living God, the people whose heritage was of a powerful God, redeeming them and speaking to them like no other God ever had done before.

Wind the clock back to ancient Israel, the 800s BC. And there was the challenge that the living God of their Bible, Yahweh as he was known, or Jehovah as sometimes it is translated these days, dead, gone.

[4 : 35] He's history. He's ancient even then. And there are other gods for us. At the time of this event or this episode or sequence of episodes in 1 Kings 17, we're in the 800s BC, roughly in the middle of that century.

The people of God has been divided for a few decades into north and south. And the north where this occurs, right from the start, had sidelined the living God of the Bible, put up golden calves to be worshipped, created a completely new man-made fabricated religion and ignored Yahweh, the God of Israel.

He was dead, past history. Let's forget about him. Let's move on. And one of the worst of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel was King Ahab.

And he, as one of the worst kings, had certainly one of the worst wives. Her name still is used for apostate evil women.

Jezebel. And she came not from Israel, but from Sidon to the north, in what is, I guess today, Lebanon, Syria, Mediterranean coastal area.

[5 : 50] And she was bad news because she came to be his queen, and she came with her own God, and she came to enforce her own God over all the northern kingdom of Israel.

And they willingly capitulated. The names for the gods in general is Baal, meaning Lord. But she brought her own particular Baal from Sidon.

The Baals were fertility gods. The Baals were gods that you turned to to get rain, and from rain, crops and life and animals, and also the gods that you would turn to for children.

They were the Baals, the fertility gods. And they were very attractive because they were immoral. One of my thoughts of Western Australian society, I guess, is that one of the reasons why people are attracted to some of the Eastern religions is because it offers a spirituality without morality.

You have a religious experience, but no ethical demands. And that's the attraction of the Baals, it seems. So you could go and have sexual relations with a temple prostitute, male or female, it didn't matter, maybe you couldn't tell, and that was to help try and bring about rain or children or animals or crops, etc.

[7 : 10] Immoral spirituality. And of course, Israel at this time is doing relatively well politically. It's stable on the whole.

It's not a world superpower, far from that, but relatively prosperous. And so when our lives are prosperous, let the reader hear or let the listener hear, we often think, well, God is blessing us.

We're okay. We can continue doing what we're doing because this is a sign of God's blessing. And so what happens is that hearts and eyes and ears and everything else gets hardened and closed to the truth of the living God.

And that's what was going on in ancient Israel. And then out of the blue, in the middle of this situation of relative political calm and relative prosperity and certainly widespread apostasy and idolatry comes this strange man, Elijah, a Tishbite, wherever Tishbe is.

We assume he's Israelite, but maybe not. Maybe, in fact, the fact that he's from Tishbe, wherever that is, and not an Israelite is in some ways even more of a condemnation of Israel.

[8 : 21] That it's a foreigner whom God raises up to be his prophet. We're not told anything of his background or anything of his origin. He just appears at the beginning of this chapter.

Elijah, the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead. Well, that's outside the promised land. So maybe technically he's not really an Israelite. A slap in the face.

And God has raised him up. And his opening words are, As the Lord, or Yahweh that is, the God of Israel lives. He's alive is what he's saying in his opening words.

He's not dead. As Yahweh the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain three years, except by my word.

His announcement is that Yahweh lives. Not the Baals, not these foreign imported gods, but the real living God of the Bible.

[9 : 23] He lives. He's not dead. Whether you think that theoretically or live it practically, Yahweh is alive. And notice the challenge that's being set by Yahweh in these words.

No rain except by my word. That is, he's going right to the heart of what the Baals are all on about. He's going right into their temple territory, so to speak.

They're the gods for fertility. They're the gods for rain. But Yahweh throws down the gauntlet, the meteorological gauntlet.

No rain except by my word. As Yahweh lives. That is, we'll show who is God.

We'll show who is the living God. The challenge has been set. Elijah says, before whom I stand. That is, I stand to serve.

[10 : 26] I'm his servant. A theme that will come up in chapter 18 that I'll preach on next Sunday morning as well. Elijah's thrown down the gauntlet to the people, and he's thrown it down to the king.

It's like dropping a hand grenade in enemy territory, I guess. Certainly makes Elijah persona non grata. He's not going to be particularly popular in the king's eyes, you can imagine, when he brings this drought for the days that lie ahead.

Oh, here is a prophet of God, surely another doom merchant. You can imagine the columnist's writing in the paper, should we be listening to this guy? He's just preaching doom. What sort of God is just going to be on about judgment and doom and gloom?

Ignore him. Send him away. And he goes into hiding. Hiding for what turns out to be three years. You see, you can imagine the commentators say, we're okay.

We're politically okay. We're economically okay. Not brilliant. Bit of a global financial crisis on the horizon, but we're okay. God is really blessing us. God is looking after us. The Baals are our gods.

[11 : 38] Don't listen to him. But underneath it, you see, Elijah sees through God's eyes, the immorality and the idolatry of ancient Israel. He sees their child sacrifices.

He sees their sexual prostitution in the temples, all under the name of religion. And desperate times call for desperate measures. No rain. But of course, if Israel knew their word, their Bible, which presumably they didn't very well, they'd also recognize the clues in what had been said.

Yes, it's a challenge to the Baals because they're regarded as the gods who bring rain, et cetera. But way, way back in the time of Moses, who bears striking similarities with Elijah, it turns out, we found very clearly from God's law that if you do not keep my words, if you do not keep my laws, then amongst the things that will happen, no rain.

The sky will be like bronze, not because it's a beautiful piece of artistic sunset, bronze because it's dry and hard. And no rain.

So the announcement of no rain here should at least alert us, even if it didn't penetrate to their minds. This is God bringing the covenant curses on his people as punishment and as warning because the climax of the covenant curses is ultimately their destruction.

[13 : 11] Elijah and through him, God is declaring that this Baal religion is fake. It's nothing. It's an imposter. And the challenge is set.

The climax of the challenge will come in the next chapter. But before then, we get three episodes, three little contests, we might say, between God and the Baals.

That is, in the middle of this drought, in the middle of a time of no rain, in the middle of a threat of death, day by day, come three extraordinary provisions of life.

Firstly, in the first paragraph of chapter 17, Elijah is fed by ravens. Ravens don't normally feed you.

Ravens will get food for themselves and ignore you. They're a bit like the seagulls at the MCG. How many seagulls do you see sort of bringing you a 4 and 20 pie while you're sitting in the grandstand?

[14 : 18] Not many. Well, ravens are like that. They don't feed you. But these ravens fed Elijah morning and evening. Bread and meat, what's more?

Maybe with a bit of chili sauce if they were Asian ravens. This is a miracle, that is. It's clearly a miracle. It's not a coincidence. It's not an oddity. They feed him.

And what's more, it's beyond the Jordan River, to the east side of the Jordan, by the Wadi Keret, outside the technical boundaries of the Promised Land, maybe close to Elijah's home area of Gilead.

But there is also drought there. That culminates in verse 7, when the river or the Wadi dries up. Wadis are sort of like Australian creeks. They're dry for most of the year, but when the rain comes, they become rivers.

And at the moment, there's water in it, but it dries up after some time. That is, here is a miracle. Here is the living God providing food, and therefore life, in the middle of a drought, for this servant of his, called Elijah.

[15 : 23] The living God is providing life. The living God is the God who brings life, and fertility, and all the things that people thought belonged to the Baals.

And Elijah can abundantly eat, not just odd scraps of food found on the ground, not eating sort of weeds and grass and those things, but even meat.

You can imagine, roast lamb to have a dinner tonight. Thank you, Mr. Raven. Well, thank you, God, behind the Mr. Raven. But behind this also, here in this drought-stricken area, there are deliberate echoes, a resonance, for those who know their history, winding the clock back from Elijah.

God's done this before. God's fed in deserts before. God's provided food daily before. Manna, quails, water from a rock.

It's not the exact same recipe here. But here is God providing again. It's the same God, you see. It's drawing us back to the living God, who brought Israel out from Egypt, brought them to himself, spoke to them, created them as a nation, and brought them miraculously and powerfully into the promised land, as a unified people of God.

[16 : 42] That is, God is showing us back to the roots through his provision for Elijah here. God is not dead. God lives, and Elijah lives, because the living God, Yahweh, provides life and food for him.

Now, this is a pattern that doesn't only look backwards. But when we come into the New Testament, we see the same sorts of patterns again. How the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, also provides life in the face of death.

How he feeds 5,000 people out of just a few bits of bread and fish. Again, it's a different recipe, but it's the same miraculous power of life behind it.

Well, in the second episode, from verse 8 through to 16 of chapter 17, Elijah is told by God, once this wadding dries up, to move, to move to Zarephath.

Zarephath in Sidon. What's significant about Sidon? If you were paying attention, you'd remember, it's where Jezebel comes from.

[18 : 01] It's the queen's home ground. And so God has directed his servant right into her own hometown territory. And that's where Elijah goes.

And there what happens. He's told to go to a widow, a poor widow, with a son. She's down to her last meal. It sounds a little bit sort of violins in the background when she says, well, I'm just preparing our last meal and we're going to eat it and die.

But there's a drought. There's no rain. It could well be that there are other people down her street who've already died. Who've already perhaps left because they've run out of food.

Food is scarce because rain is scarce, because the Baals haven't done their job properly, perhaps. And to this poor woman, Elijah is directed.

It's fairly audacious, right in the middle of Sidon, still outside the boundaries of the promised land, this time to the north rather than to the east. And the drought is clearly biting hard. And Elijah's command sounds selfish.

[19 : 07] Feed me first. We could summarize. That is, go and make some food, feed me, and then you can eat if there's any leftovers. Well, it can sound selfish. But behind it is an act of faith.

There will be enough, not only for Elijah, but for her and for her son. And Elijah promises her in verse 14, the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.

And it happens. For the year or two or three or whatever it is that lay in the future, God kept his word. It's amazing.

You think, is this a myth? In the Second World War, Corrie ten Boom was a famous, or became a famous, Christian Dutch woman who hid Jews in her house and so on.

And the same thing happened to her in prison where some ointment for some illness that she had was going to run out and it never did through all the days that she was in prison.

[20 : 15] God of life. Providing life in a context of death. Yeah, it's a miracle of God's power. Some might say, oh, surely the woman found other supplies.

You know, look carefully. Look behind your cupboard. Look under the floor. No, no, no. It's a miracle. Again, it's God's hand at work. That's what the text is telling us. See, God lives.

Not the Baals, but Yahweh. And what happens is that this non-Israelite woman declares then that Yahweh lives.

In verse 12, she says, as Yahweh, your God, lives, I have nothing baked. Now, even at that point, she's acknowledging as Yahweh, your God, lives.

As though I'm swearing a solemn statement here, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal. And then in verse 15, she obeys Elijah. So what we see here is somehow, miraculously, some embryonic faith that's flowing out into obedience of Elijah.

[21 : 24] You would think if you were down to your last meal and this strange prophet comes out of nowhere and says, feed me first, you'd say, hang on a minute, mister. We're not a restaurant here. But no, she obeys him.

There is some faith going on here that's inexplicable. From a Sidonian woman, a non-Israelite, outside the promised land, from where Jezebel herself came from.

And again, we find there's a pattern in the Bible. Coming to Gentiles, to this very area of Sidon and Tyre goes along with it, went the very same Jesus later on.

drawing people to an inexplicable faith in the God of Israel. Well, after eating, sometime later, we're not sure how long later, Elijah's still staying with her.

The son, it seems, takes ill. His illness, we're told in verse 17, was so severe that there was no breath left in him. I think it's the sort of way of saying basically he's dead.

- [22 : 36] So she says to Elijah, what have you against me, O man of God? You've come here to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son. And then Elijah, of course, takes the son.

She's blaming God behind Elijah for bringing this judgment on her. She's acknowledging that she's a sinful person, that her sins are being brought to remembrance by this calamity.

It's not unusual to blame God, of course, when things go wrong. Many of us do that as well, wrongly. Elijah has no answers, but he prays.

He takes the boy up onto his own bed and then prays in verse 20, Yahweh, my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying by killing her son?

And for some reason he stretches himself over the child three times and cries out to Yahweh, Yahweh, my God, let this child's life come into him again. And what happens?

- [23 : 42] Yahweh listened to the voice of Elijah. Elijah doesn't understand why this child has died. Elijah thinks that maybe God has brought this calamity on this woman. But despite all of that, he prays for life for the child.

And Yahweh listened to the voice of Elijah in verse 22. The life of the child came into him again and he revived. And Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and gave him to his mother and then said, see, your son is alive.

And the woman's response, now I know that you are a man of God. She called him that earlier. Now I know that you are and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth.

What a great declaration from this Gentile pagan woman who's come to faith in Yahweh, the living God, seen through miraculous power and seen through the word of the servant Elijah.

Because it's not Elijah who's powerful, it's God who's powerful. Elijah doesn't click his fingers and bring him to life. Elijah prays. The text is driving us not to Elijah but to the God behind Elijah, the God who brings life even in the very face of death.

- [25 : 04] And again, this shows an escalation of what God is doing. He's not just providing food from ravens. He's providing miraculous food to keep alive but then even when there is death he brings back to life.

And again, there's a theme there that we see edging later closer to its culmination in the New Testament. When Jesus, for example, brings back to life another widow's son on a couple of occasions and Lazarus.

But even that is a sign, it's pointing, it's edging us further forward to the resurrection, to the empty tomb, to the resurrection appearances of Jesus himself.

No, God is not dead. He's alive. And Jesus lives. He is not dead either. Oh, it's a long way from Elijah, from the 800s, 9th century BC.

But that's where this theme of who God is and what he's like and what he does and what he's on about is driving us to. He's driving us to a God who's conquered death, a God who really is alive, a God who brings life in the face of death and the God who is the real God, the God of fertility.

- [26 : 27] Three private episodes. These are not public. There's no crowds gathered around. Elijah is in hiding, in fact, in a way, from the king. And as we'll see in chapter 18, the king can never find him through these three years of drought.

But there in these private episodes, three very clear contests, three miracles. the top of the ladder clash, Yahweh three, Baal zero.

But the grand final is to come in the next chapter. Three nil to Yahweh, despite it being the Baal's home ground territory, Jezebel's own home.

And God has, God, Yahweh, has beaten him at his own game. He's brought him life, fertility, in the face of death. No wonder Elijah is called Elijah.

That is, my God is Yahweh, is what his name means. His name is a bit like wearing a footy jumper, you know, with the name of a hero on the back. My God is Elijah.

[27 : 39] Not Fabregas or Messi or anyone else. Oh, sorry, wrong football code. I'm not in Asia anymore. I can't even know any of the players who are playing next, when is it, Saturday grand final.

Gosh, I know the teams but I don't know the players anymore. But anyway, in our day, like in ancient Israel, it often looks as though God is dead.

This text is not telling us to expect these astonishing miracles every day. It's not saying to you lie in bed awake until God tells you to go to some widow's place in, you know, Queensland or something.

No. It's drawing us back to this God who is the same God, alive and powerful. His hand may not always be shown and much of society may have ignored him and turned away from him and in practice lived as though he's dead and gone and pretty much buried.

That he's obsolete and out of date. But the truth is nothing like that. The truth is that this God, the God of the Bible is alive. He is powerful.

[28 : 47] He brings life, he gives life, he recreates life and he's conquered death. And it's his word that powerfully does that through his servant, Elijah.

There will be no rain except by my word. And there was none. It was dry. No rain. Until we get to the end of the next chapter which we'll see next Sunday morning.

This is the same God who speaks to create in the first page of the first book of the Bible. And the same God who speaks words of life. Lazarus come forth and so on.

Towards the end of the Bible. Who is God? Who is the living God? It's very clear. It's not the Baals.

Jezebel's got it wrong. Ahab's got it wrong. All the people who follow them have got it wrong. They're living in their cozy, spiritual, amoral, immoral life. Feeling the economic, political situations.

[29 : 50] Not too bad. Maybe God's blessing us. We're okay. They've got it wrong. Yahweh lives. As Yahweh, my God, lives.

Are the opening words of Elijah. He's the living God. He's the speaking God. Manifest even more clearly in his son who both lives after the grave and speaks.

He speaks and listening to his voice. New life the dead receive. Is that your God? God? Is he your God?

If so, serve him. If so, serve him alone. And don't be seduced by the gods of our world, the gods of our age, the gods of other religions or the gods of none.

God of the Bible is indeed living as he is. Serve him and serve him alone.

[31 : 02] Let's pray. O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you alone are God. You alone are the living God.

You alone are the God of life who made life and gives new life through the resurrection to life of your living son.

may your powerful word correct us, rebuke us, teach us and train us in righteousness so that we may live.

That we may live for you and that we may live for the glory of your son. Amen.