

Elijah, a Widow and her Son

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Date: 16 August 1998

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 16th of August 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Elijah, a Widow and Her Son. And it's from 1 Kings chapter 17 verses 1 to 24. Well let's pray. God we pray that your word may be truth in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory. Amen.

God is dead. So proclaimed the atheist German philosopher Nietzsche last century. Stupid words of course but words that were influential.

Not only in the philosophical world but theological world as well. His God is dead philosophy sadly resulted in the rise of Nazism and fascism in Germany earlier this century.

[1 : 08] In theological circles it's led to many sceptics and liberals not believing that God even exists in some cases. And in the affluent West in which we live it's all too obvious that for many people their daily lives reflect their belief that God is dead.

Irrelevant. Unimportant. Outdated. Obsolete. Absent. Past history. Absent. Well nothing new is under the sun.

That sort of thinking is very old in fact. The idea that God is dead especially in a prosperous nation was there in the Old Testament in ancient Israel.

In about the 860s BC. A long time ago. Israel at that time under King Omri and then King Ahab was prosperous and powerful.

It was not just a little tin pot kingdom in the Middle East but rather a significant nation. But for them in their daily lives God was dead.

[2 : 21] Absent outdated past history. Now the God I'm talking about is often termed in the Old Testament Lord. And when you read in the Old Testament Lord in capital letters that's the name for God.

Strictly speaking it's the name Yahweh or Jehovah as some older English translations have it. But I'll sometimes use the word Yahweh. It's just the name for God that's given in the Old Testament part of the Bible.

Now at this time I'm talking about Ahab the king is the worst of all of Israel's kings. The nation's been going for a hundred or more years and he's their worst king.

We're told that in the end of chapter 16. Verse 30. Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. So what's happened for a bit over a hundred years is that the nation has been in decline morally.

Not necessarily economically. Not necessarily as far as its land is concerned. But certainly morally. But even worse than King Ahab was his wife Jezebel.

[3 : 33] Jezebel came from Sidon in the north in modern day Lebanon. Outside the land of Israel. And there in Sidon another god was worshipped by the name of Baal.

When Jezebel became Ahab's wife she brought with her the worship of Baal. But not only that she didn't just worship him privately in her own queen's chamber. But she was really the stronghold of the monarchy.

And she instituted and began the worship of Baal publicly in Israel. And Ahab followed suit. So we read again at the end of chapter 16 verse 31.

And as if it had been a light thing for Ahab to walk in the sins of one of his predecessors. Jeroboam son of Nebat. He took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal 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. The capital city if you please. Ahab also made a sacred pole part of the worship of Baal.

[4 : 36] And did more to provoke the anger of the Lord. That's Yahweh the God of Israel. Than had all the kings of Israel who were before him. Now the God of Baal was a fertility God.

And those who worshipped him believed that he controlled the rain. He brought rain to make the crops grow. He brought fertility for animals.

He brought fertility for people so that their children were a sign of blessing from Baal. He also therefore was the God who in the end brought wealth and prosperity.

Now who in Ahab's day would question the worship of Baal? After all Baal's come along.

Everybody's worshipping Baal. And the nation's going very well. Thank you very much. We're prosperous.

We're powerful. The borders have been extended. The capital city has been fortified. Indeed Samaria the capital city of this day was a very very plush place. Archaeologically they've found all sorts of ornate things from Samaria at this time.

[5 : 41] That show just how wealthy the nation was under King Ahab. Abruptly Elijah comes on the scene.

Usually Bible heroes are introduced from their birth almost. Jesus was, David, Samuel, Moses and so on. But Elijah comes on the scene without preliminary announcement.

Chapter 17 simply begins now. Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe and Gilead said to Ahab, that is the king. And what happens now breaks the flow of the book of one king's.

What's been going on for chapter by chapter is this king became king and these are the things he did. And then so and so became king and then so and so became king and so on. But now that sequence is broken.

So important is Elijah that several chapters are devoted to him. This prophet and servant of God.

Now what does he say? His first words there in verse 1 begin, As Yahweh the God of Israel lives.

[6 : 49] Not Baal the God of Israel. No, you've got it wrong Ahab. It's Yahweh the Lord who is the God of Israel. Baal's an imposter. But not only as Yahweh the God of Israel, but as Yahweh the God of Israel lives.

He's not dead. He's alive. He's still sovereign. He reigns. You've got it wrong. But even more than that he acknowledges that he, Elijah, is the servant of God before whom I stand, we read.

But that's an idiom to mean I am his servant. I serve in his presence. Then he goes on with this rather shocking statement.

There shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word. Neither dew nor rain. What an extraordinary weather prediction that is. What extraordinary power he's claiming to have.

Is this some incredible prediction of the future? Well, yes, to an extent it is. But it's something more than that. Baal was meant to be the God of rain.

[8 : 03] Baal was meant to be the God who provided the rain to provide the crops so that people could eat and be prosperous and wealthy. But Elijah's statement, a statement really from Yahweh, is that there will be no dew or rain for some time to come, according to God's word.

Elijah has thrown down the gauntlet, if you like, to the worshippers of Baal, the false gods. It's like throwing a hand grenade into enemy territory. And we see the response that's given to Elijah because God then tells him to go and hide himself.

No doubt his life is under threat. He's persona non grata in the country. Imagine how people would have responded when they heard this. Oh, shut up, Elijah. Why are Yahweh's prophets always so full of doom and gloom?

Why are they party poopers all the time? And many people think that of God's prophets. Why are they not? Isn't Elijah just typical of God who says stop having fun?

But you see, Elijah sees the nation as it really is. It's not at its heart prosperous and secure after all. Rather, he sees the moral and religious condition of the nation and he sees that it's empty and hollow, perverse even.

[9 : 24] You see, the worship of Baal was not a legitimate form of worship at all. The worship of Baal was immoral. It was sexually promiscuous.

In order to engage Baal's attention, people would go up to their temples and shrines and engage in sexual activity with paid temple prostitutes. Perhaps even worse, it would involve child sacrifice.

The end of chapter 16 gives us an example of that. It was a mercenary religion, paying lots of money corruptly to the priests and so on.

But Elijah's words are not just a made up idle threat either. When he says, no dew nor rain will come according to my word, Elijah is reflecting his knowledge of the Old Testament or indeed the early part of the Old Testament because way back 600 years before Moses had said, if you disobey God's word, then he will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain.

Deuteronomy 11 and 28 says as much. Elijah knows that. He knows his heritage. He knows what Yahweh has said in the past and he knows that Yahweh still lives so that his word still stands.

[10:48] And what Yahweh said would happen, would shut up the heavens, Elijah now proclaims and announces to the nation. The implication you see is it's because you've disobeyed Yahweh's word that Yahweh now will shut up the heavens and there will be no dew or rain these years except by my word.

There's an irony here, even a mocking of Baal, the gods, the god that the people were worshipping. Rain is his domain, but no, says Elijah, Yahweh is sovereign.

You've got it wrong. Baal's an imposter. He is in fact nothing, a no god. Elijah is declaring that all their worship was a deceit, a sham, a lie.

It was empty. Had no power to it. Their god was no god at all. And when I read this, I cannot but help think of the modern Western world, which also is prosperous and wealthy.

Our own state is an example of that in Victoria. And yet we see at the same time what looks to be things going well economically and ambivalence at best towards morality.

[11:56] We see the emptiness of humanist secular humanism. What we see is a pursuit of prosperity. But an indifference to morality and God.

Cannot help but ask the question, is God's view of our society, much like it was in Elijah's days? Is he just biding his time, waiting for judgement?

Well, Elijah's opening words set the challenge. Who is God? Baal, as you claim? Or Yahweh? My God, whom I claim and serve?

The climax to that question comes next week. But in this chapter there are three incidents or episodes to give us a clear understanding of the answer to the question, who is God?

It is clearly Yahweh. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt 600 years before, through the wilderness and into the promised land, even though the people have turned away from him and thought that he is dead, or at best absent, or impotent.

[13:06] The first incident is when Elijah is fed by ravens. God tells him to go and hide. Clearly his life is under threat. He goes outside the land, across the Jordan River, and by the wadi keret he hides from Ahab.

Some time goes by. This is not just for a couple of days. This whole chapter spans the course of three years. Elijah is hiding from Ahab. And at this wadi, a wadi is a river that flows only when there's rain and when the rain stops the river just dries up, a dry riverbed and so on.

Elijah is watered from the wadi and receives bread and meat morning and night provided by ravens. Now this is a miracle. There's no human explanation for this. Ravens don't provide bread and meat for human beings twice a day.

And in a drought situation, wadis don't even flow. But Elijah has water, bread and meat regularly each day. The point of it is that it is Yahweh, God, the Lord, who's providing.

[14:18] It is God who's the God of fertility. It is the God who controls the elements. It is God, Yahweh, the Lord, who controls the rain. It is God, Yahweh, the Lord, who controls the birds, who provides bread and meat.

It's always also a sense of mocking even to the Baals because meat was a luxury in those days even in a prosperous nation. Most people wouldn't eat meat very often.

Yahweh is in effect saying to Baal, try that one for size, Sonny. I provide meat from the ravens even in the midst of a drought and famine. But there's perhaps more that's to be understood by this because this miraculous feeding of Elijah in the desert in the middle of a drought is meant to remind us of some other incident like that that's already happened in Israel's history.

600 years before in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land for 40 years, God miraculously fed his people. Manna from heaven, bread from heaven, water that came out of a rock, quail that came, birds, meat that they would eat every day so much that some of them even ungratefully complained that they had too much quail.

You see, God, Yahweh, is not dead is the point of this story. It's the same God who did that 600 years before who's now miraculously feeding Elijah. Remember, the real God is in effect the point

of this incident.

[15:48] But even more than that, it not only looks to the past and what's already happened, but this story actually anticipates something even beyond in the future. Another miraculous feeding, also by God, but God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Feeding 5,000 people with bread and fish. Not much to feed them with. But even that incident, that miracle, 2,000 years ago, pointed to something even bigger than that.

Because Jesus said, I myself am bread of heaven. I am the one on whom we are to feed day by day for eternity.

God, you see, still alive and kicking. He's not dead. The second episode occurs after that wadi has dried up.

Not because God's without power, but God just chooses now to move Elijah on. The wadi dries up, no more water, but God says to him, now go to a town called Zarephath.

[16:50] And there a widow, who's poor, we've already seen, has just got enough food for one last meal for herself and her son before there's no food in the cupboards and she will die.

She is commanded to feed Elijah. He doesn't go for her benefit. He goes for his own. Now this miracle of miraculous feeding, because the meal, the barley flour and the oil and water do not dry up.

They keep on being provided day by day by God. This is the most audacious miracle. Because where does it occur? Zarephath is in the area of Sidon, just a handful of kilometres from Sidon.

And Sidon is where Queen Jezebel's from. You see, Sidon is the centre of the worship of Baal. It is the world centre of Baal worship. And Yahweh's saying, go right to the heart of enemy territory, go into Baal's backyard and I will miraculously feed you there.

Very audacious miracle. But Yahweh is demonstrating without any shadow of a doubt that he's alive, he's powerful, he's sovereign, he's the one who's in charge of the rain, the food, the bread.

[18:03] Not Baal. He's a no God. And it's the same God today that we worship, the God of the Bible. The God who keeps providing.

The God who provides for his people sometimes miraculously more often than not, not miraculously. And what God says happens.

He says to Elijah, I've commanded a widow to feed you and it happens. He says through Elijah to the widow that your food will not run out and verse 16 tells us that the jar of meal was not emptied neither did the jug of oil fail according to the word of the Lord that he spoke to Elijah.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who died a few years ago aged in her late 90s. During the Second World War under Nazi occupation she harboured and hid Jews because of her Christian faith.

And the Jews remember her today at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem which is the shrine of remembrance of the Holocaust there is a plaque commemorating her efforts to save Jews in the avenue of the righteous Gentiles.

[19:18] For a time she was incarcerated by the Nazis. She was ill and had just a little bit of ointment left in a jar or bottle. But throughout her entire incarceration that ointment never ran out even though she needed it daily.

A miracle of God she says. God who graciously provides. Now those things are rare. This is not meant to tell us that God will miraculously provide so we never need to go into coals ever again.

But the point is to say that Yahweh God the Lord lives. He is sovereign. He provides. Sometimes miraculously but that's usually in desperate situations and very desperate ones.

But God provides. He's the one who sends the rain. He's the one who provides crops. He's the one who provides children and animals and vegetables and so on. There's perhaps even a little bit more irony about this widow from Zarephath.

She's not an Israelite. She's scum of the earth really. The weakest of the weak. A widow. Landless. A son. Presumably a child that somehow she needs to care for.

[20:30] Widows weren't protected by social security in those days. But the point is she's a non-Israelite and yet throughout this incident of the provision of bread and oil she declares faith in Yahweh.

In verse 12 she says as your God Yahweh your God lives. She acknowledges that Yahweh lives. What irony because all of Israel declares that God is dead that Baal is their God.

But she's saying that Yahweh lives. A non-Israelite declaring such faith. And when Elijah tells her that Yahweh will keep her provisions of food and oil going she goes and obeys what Elijah says and cooks him a meal gives it to him first before she even eats all her son.

That's faith at work. Extraordinary faith from a non-Israelite a Gentile woman. Jesus refers to this incident in his own ministry in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4 when he describes his own ministry as being not just for Jews but for Gentiles.

It's a pattern in the Bible that sometimes God's own people are the first to ignore him reject him. And it's those outside that sometimes respond with the most amazing faith.

[21 : 43] The third incident brings this series to a climax because now it's not just an issue of feeding but an issue of raising the dead. Her son dies not because of hunger for some illness we don't know why it seems that for some time that they've been living happily through this miraculous provision of food and now all of a sudden he dies and she complains to God.

She thinks that God is punishing her for her sin or she thinks that Elijah has somehow brought God's presence to bear in this situation and has troubled her unnecessarily.

Elijah's got no answers. He doesn't tell her why. He doesn't know why. He prays to God that the son will live and God answers the prayer.

The death is not due to the boy's sin or the mother's sin but rather just like the man born blind in Jesus' own ministry in John 9 an opportunity is created by God to bring God glory because it is Yahweh who brings life not Elijah.

Yahweh hears the prayer and brings the boy back to life and again the woman declares faith at the end of the chapter verse 24 now I know that you Elijah are a man of God and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth.

[23 : 07] See it's not the miracle that matters in the end it's the word of Yahweh that's what miracles point towards and again there's patterns here because it's God who's the life giver not just providing rain and food but in the end it's God who provides life in Jesus' ministry he does similar things he raises a widow's son just like Elijah did he raises a man called Jairus' daughter he raises Lazarus from the dead demonstrating his own power as a life giver but in the end this story and those miracles of Jesus are pointing to something even better and bigger of course to Jesus' own resurrection and his words of I am the life God's not dead Jesus isn't dead he rose he lives and God the God of the Old Testament and new lives as well this chapter is a contest between Yahweh and Baal it's a bit like an AFL blockbuster the top of the table clash or top of the ladder clash and in each of the three contests in this chapter

Yahweh has won hands down 3-0 to him the grand finals next week as you'll see not only has Yahweh won 3-0 but he's won on Baal's home ground no home ground advantage for Baal he's won in Sidon two of the matches very clearly and provided miraculously food and life Elijah's part of his cheer squad his own name Elijah means my God is Yahweh it's as though he's wearing the colours of Yahweh on his team he's part of the cheer squad identifying himself with Yahweh here in this big match in our own day and age there are similarities I think people in our day and age live life as though God is dead just like in Ahab's day they thought Yahweh was dead past history same today for so many people that the God of the Bible is outdated irrelevant he's no postmodern we're all postmoderns and all this sort of stuff

God's gone dead but the truth is nothing of the sort for when God speaks and still speaks today his words are effectual they cause what he wants to happen he's sovereign he provides throughout this chapter one of the key expressions is to do with the word of God he commands there to be no rain and at the end of the chapter some many many months later there's still no rain because God's yet to say there will be rain he commands the ravens to feed Elijah and they feed him according to his word he commands the widow to feed Elijah and she feeds him according to his word he promises that the oil and the flour will not dry up and they don't according to his word God's God's word is true reliable dependable faithful and powerful and his word is still reliable dependable faithful and powerful today for us as well who is

God then the one true living God is the God of the Bible the God who in the Old Testament is called Lord or Yahweh but we now know more about that same God whom we call Father whom we call Jesus God lives and speaks Jesus lives and speaks and as Charles Wesley's hymn says he speaks and listening to his voice new life the dead receive that's the God whom we worship a God who's not dead but alive and we respond to his voice and receive that eternal life Amen