

1 Kings 16:29-17:24 (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, folks. My name is Aaron. It's really good to see you. We're going to start with prayer. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word? In Christ's name, amen.

I'm going to jump straight in with a big statement here. The cross says two things. It says two big things about us. It says our sin is worse than we think it is, and we're loved more than we know. So the cross tells us our sin is worse than we think, and we're loved more than we realize. And this idea isn't unique to the New Testament. It's throughout the Old Testament. We see these themes again and again and again. We'll see them in our passage tonight. God takes sin very seriously, but is always reaching out, is always calling us back to himself, is always full of grace. Right then, that's the big idea. Let's get into the scripture for tonight. This won't be a three-point sermon. I'm just going to walk through the story. So as Ben mentioned, we finished up Ruth last week, and you remember

Ruth ends with a promise of a king right at the end, the last verse. So she has a son, Obed. Obed has a son, Jesse. Jesse has a son, David, who becomes King David. So how did that all pan out? Well, let me give you a very quick overview of one kings. So David unites the small tribes of Israel, establishes one big kingdom. He's mostly a really great king. A few dodgy bits, but mostly a really great king. He passes his kingdom on to his son Solomon.

Solomon is wise. He builds a temple. That's all positive. But it all starts to go sideways with Solomon when he starts marrying lots of people. He marries all these women who are pagan, people from different countries who bring with them these pagan gods, these foreign gods.

He also implemented slave labor, which was bad, obviously. He ended up looking more like Pharaoh than a godly king. And Solomon's decisions ultimately led to the country splitting in two.

[2 : 3 9] So David united tribes into a kingdom, and Solomon's actions resulted in the kingdom splitting in two, Israel and Judah. And that was huge. And then after that split, there's a series of kings leading each kingdom. And a lot of one and two kings, the books that were, you know, you know in the Bible there, these are stories about the kings. Kings of a northern kingdom, kings of a southern kingdom.

Some of them reigned for a long time, some of them reigned for a short period of time. And mostly, the kings were terrible, like awful. There was a few good ones, but mostly they were awful.

And what does God do about these really awful kings? What does God do? He speaks to them. God speaks. He chooses, God chooses certain people to speak to power. And these people in the Old Testament are called prophets. And in the Bible, prophets are not fortune tellers. They are watchdogs.

They're watchdogs for the covenant. And what do I mean by that? Well, the covenant was God's promise promise that a Messiah would come from this kingdom. And that's just going to be unstoppable.

A Messiah is going to come. That's God's promise. But there was a contingency in this promise that said, if you're loyal to God, you'll be blessed. If you're not, you will be cursed. So when the loyalty of the kings went a bit sideways, God would send his prophets in to warn them, sometimes just to announce judgment, punishment. So the word of God would come, and it would come over the kings, through the prophets, because the kings were supposed to be under God. So in the org chart, the spiritual org chart, prophets ace kings. And of all the Old Testament prophets, Elijah's probably the most important. And we're going to look at his life over the next, I don't know, six weeks, seven weeks, something like that. I think it's seven weeks all the way through to Advent, and it's going to be brilliant. Okay, so we've had a really, really big picture. We've had a kind of a bigger picture, and now we're jumping right in. Okay, 1 Kings 16.

[5 : 05] Before we hear about Elijah in 1 Kings 16, the first person we hear about is Ahab. Ahab. Ahab is one of these kings, and he was the worst, which is sad. He was the worst guy. From the outside, he looked a bit successful because he reigned for 22 years, so there was some stability, stable leadership, no coups. He built some, you know, some political allies there. But verse 33 says, he made God more angry than any other king ever had. That's quite a statement, isn't it?

He made God more angry than any other king ever had. So what did he do? Well, he married this Phoenician woman called Jezebel, which in and of itself is not like, you know, like a major problem, except he took on her pagan worship of a god called Baal, which is a rejection of God, isn't it?

And it wasn't a private matter. It wasn't like he kind of secretly took on Baal and then built a little shrine in his bedroom and stuff and kept them to himself. No. They imported hundreds of Baal priests and they put them on the payroll, on the state payroll. They built temples. They were aggressive evangelists for Baal, a religion that was awful, that promoted child sacrifice. Ahab wanted God's people to be Baal people. Verse 30, Ahab, the son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. So what does God do? What does God do about this? He speaks.

He speaks to that situation through this guy, Elijah. Before we get there, though, I want to point out a really interesting verse that you might just skip over very quickly in the passage. Verse 34, let me remind you of it.

In his days, Ahab, that's Ahab's days, Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Ibaram, his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his younger son, Seagab, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua, the son of Nun. You sort of read it quickly and you're like, I don't understand what's going on there. What's going on there? So here's the deal.

[7 : 33] So hundreds of years before this, God's people entered the promised land. And in order to inhabit that though, there was this hulking great fortress city called Jericho. And that had to be dealt with.

Jericho had to be dealt with in order for them to inhabit the promised land. So how did they get past it? Well, some of you might know the story. God sorted it out. God said, just march around the city and blow trumpet seven times. And they did that. And the walls came down. Amazing. Fantastic.

After this happened, God spoke through Joshua, who was there and saw the walls come down. God spoke through Joshua. And in Joshua 6, 26, I'm just jumping to another book of the Bible now. God spoke to Joshua and said this, cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn son, he will lay its foundations. At the cost of his youngest, he will set up its gates. So God wanted Jericho to stay rubble. He wanted the walls always to be down, to remain this visible testimony to God's strength. So God speaks through this rubble. And he says, I did this for you. That's what the rubble, the rubble cries out. And it says, I protected you.

I saved you. I will continue to protect you. Leave the stones alone. Leave them on the ground. These stones cry out and they say to you, you receive this land by grace. Leave the stones where they are. Hundreds of years later, Ahab defies God, defies his word, wants to rebuild Jericho.

Ahab wants to protect Israel by the power of Ahab. Let me read again Joshua 6. Written hundreds of years before one Kings. Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho.

[9 : 35] At the cost of his firstborn son, will he lay its foundations. At the cost of his youngest son, will he set up the gates. Let me read 1 Kings 6 verse 34, the passage we just sort of go over quite easily. 400 years later. In his days, he of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Ibaram, his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son, Segu.

These fallen walls, they should have been a source of comfort to Ahab, to God's people. God put us here. God's going to keep protecting us. But Ahab defied God's word. The consequence was death. Ahab was supposed to be leading this nation towards God. He was leading them away, and there were consequences. Which leads to the next section. Chapter 17. Elijah just comes out of nowhere. We don't know where. We don't know who was. Is he married? We don't know anything about does he have hobbies? We know nothing, right? Like he's just there and he's confronting Ahab.

He's nose to nose with the most corrupt king God's people have ever known. And he has a message for Ahab. And the message is this. As the Lord lives, it's not going to rain until I say. So this is Elijah announcing punishment for this Baal worship. And the punishment is a drought, which is a terrible thing, drought. But it's not a random thing. It's not a left field punishment. No, this is an attack on Baalism at its theological center. Okay, here's a picture of Baal. Is it up there? Okay. So, found in 1932. It's from the Bronze Age. It's currently hanging in the Louvre. And you can see there's Baal. He's the bigger person. There's a little dude at the bottom there. That's a king. And you see in his hand there, the hand that's reaching downwards, it's holding a thunderbolt. And the thunderbolt appears to be sprouting leaves. Okay, what's the significance? Baal was the god of rain, amongst other things. The god of rain. And rain was needed for harvest. And the symbolism of the lightning bolt is a storm, rain, and leaves coming out of the thunderbolt is like a harvest, sprouting plants. So the Lord is saying, I'm shutting off the rain. A bit like a competition. God says, there's going to be no rain over to you, Baal.

Now, the Lord wants them to see. Baal is a fiction. There will be no rain. Why? There's no Baal. Baal can't help you in this situation. We'll learn later that the drought lasted years. Now, why would the Lord do that? Well, he's punishing them and giving them space and time to repent. So Elijah confronts Ahab, the worst king God's people have ever had. And then Elijah disappears in the wilderness.

Verses 2 to 7. And what do we see there? It's a really wonderful story. But first, why did Elijah leave? Well, this was also part of the punishment. It wasn't just Elijah needs a bit of space and he should protect himself. It's not just that. God speaks to them and then removes his word. In Romans 8, sorry, Romans 8 and Psalm 81, both talk about God just letting people do what they want.

[13 : 29] In the Bible, when God removes his word, it's part of the punishment. So let me read Psalm 81 to you, just a little snippet of it. This is the Lord speaking. My people did not listen to my voice. Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own counsels. God steps back and lets people live with their own consequences. And that's what's happening here in our passage. God sends Elijah away. It's part of the judgment on their people. God's word is removed. This is very significant.

When God's word is removed. When God's word is removed, his counsel is removed. That leads to darkness. Because without God's word in your life, think about this big picture. Without God's word in your life, what do you have? You've got opinions, right? You've just got opinions.

Removing the word, creating people experience what that is like with the hope that they would return to God. So Elijah leaves and God provides for him in miraculous ways. And let's just go 40,000 feet again for a moment here. If you want to describe the movement of passage so far, so far what we've heard is sin leads to death. Real death, spiritual death. But that's not the end of the story because the second half of our reading is all about God's kindness and his provision. So remember at the start I said the cross tells us our sin is worse than we think, but also we're loved more than we can imagine.

And the second half of passage is about that. This is where the story sort of pivots. We learn that not only is God a God of justice, so that he does judge, but also a God of love and he cares for us.

Sin leads to death, but God reaches out to his people to provide for them. And we'll see in this passage three miracles that get bigger each time. So God tells Elijah to leave and hide by a river.

[15 : 50] And whilst he's there, ravens feed him twice a day, meat and bread, which just sounds fantastic to me. Twice a day, meat and bread. It's great. When God wants to do something, sometimes he uses a wild card.

And this is a very wild card. He uses birds to feed him. And I know this story is really strange, but I love it. I love this story because it's a quiet day-by-day miracle. It's a quiet daily provision for Elijah. And it must have been really boring for him. And it must have been lonely. And it must have been excruciating for him because he doesn't know what's happening out there. He's got no idea. He's living in obscurity beside a stream. But God is just quietly providing for him, quietly providing for him. And I love this story, this wilderness story. It helps us because I think when we're feeling like we're living in obscurity and life's hard and we're not sure what God is doing and what's really going on, folks, can I just encourage you to look for the ravens. Look for the ravens in your life. Look for the quiet ways God is providing for you. And that could be an encouraging conversation, an invitation to a meal, a good friend visiting you and speaking some words of life into your life. Look for the ways that God is feeding you daily. God is good to us. He is good to us. Sometimes we just have to stop and look to see where it's happening. And it's often in quite quiet ways. On with the story. Eventually the stream dries up and Elijah has moved on. And then the word of the Lord comes to him and says, go to Sidon.

Which is not a random spot. That is the hometown of Jezebel. So it's the heart of Baalism. So God sends Elijah there and he says, it's okay, a widow will provide for you, which is a bit of an oxymoron in a drought because a widow would struggle to look after herself. So what happens? Well, he goes to Sidon.

He sees the widow. He asks for water. She brings it and then he says, can I have some bread as well? And then we learn how desperate the widow's situation is. She's collecting sticks to make a fire for her final meal. She has just enough bread and oil to make one more dinner for herself and her son.

And then they anticipate that they all die. It's just awful. Elijah says, do not fear. Go make that meal. I'll have the first serving. Which is just outrageous. I mean, to ask, just to bowl up to somebody and say, hey, I'll feed me is one thing. To bowl up to somebody who has only one meal left in them is another thing. To do that and ask for the first helping is like, it's crazy, isn't it? It's a bit rude to say the least. So what's going on here? What's happening here? Well, look at what Elijah says next. And this is why he can make such an outrageous request. Verse 14, the Lord says, 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. So what's going on here? This is a call to conversion. She's been asked to trust a promise of God. This is a God she does not know. She is probably a Baal worshiper. And Elijah is saying to her, do not trust this fiction. Trust the Lord. And she does. And God keeps his promise.

[19 : 31] We read the oil and the flour. Do not run out. This is the second miracle. It's wonderful. You know, each day she would go to the cupboard and to prepare the food and the oil and the jar of flour would just stay at the same level. Another quiet miracle. She trusted a promise. God provided. And then her son dies in verse 17. So she's quite a roller coaster for her. Elijah takes the son.

prays for him, prays for him, raises him from the dead. It's the first resurrection story in the Bible. And this is our third and biggest miracle in our little section. As I said before, these miracles, they're not naked displays of power. They have meaning. They are signposts. And the signpost here reads, God offers life to anybody. Remember the big picture. Sin leads to death. That's been the story.

God offers life, though. He offered it to this Baal-worshipping family. He's offering it to you. He's offering it to me. It doesn't matter where you've come from. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter who you are.

The offer is there. I want to give you life. I'm inviting you to trust me every day. I'm inviting you to trust me for the really big things as well.

Well, I'm going to finish up. So Baal-worship, not a big deal for us. Not a huge deal for us now, is it? Baal-worship. But there are lots of things that draw us away from God. Materialism, selfishness, power, you know, the desire to be cool and be on the inside.

[21 : 18] And that can lead you to do all sorts of silly things. Folks, sin leads to death.

And that death can take lots of forms. Spiritual death, real death, spiritual death. You can cut yourself off from your creator, which is, goodness, what a dark thing. But in this passage, God reaches out and he calls people to trust him.

No matter where they are, he calls Elijah to trust him in confronting Ahab. He calls this widow to trust him when she has nothing left. He calls a whole nation to trust him by showing them that their God, Baal, is a fiction.

Can we do that? Can we do that? Can we trust God? Can we trust God daily? Can we trust God in the big things? The cross says your sin is worse than you think.

But you are loved more than you know. You can trust a God who would go to the cross for you. Don't you think?

[22 : 25] You can trust a God who would go to the cross for you. You can trust him with your whole life. Amen.