

Elijah I – The Word and Prophet

1 Kings 17

Introduction

The account of Elijah in Scripture is full of wonderful and strange signs and miracles, many of which we are at least somewhat familiar with. Elijah was a prophet called to an extreme task of battling idolatry in Israel at one of her peaks of rejecting God. As a man who bore God's word in his mouth, not only his words but also his actions and the way God directed him were signs to the people of Israel. There is much for us to see here as well as we look at Elijah's life through the lens of the work of Jesus and the completed Scriptures.

Context

Ahab was king in Israel leading up to the arrival of Elijah. Ahab did more evil than all the other kings before him (16:30,33). While most of the kings of Israel followed in the ways of Jereboam, making a show of worshipping Yahweh in the golden calf cults (cf. 12:26ff), Ahab married Jezebel, a devotee of the Canaanite idols from Sidon, and built a temple and altar to Baal (16:31-32). Baal was the chief of the Canaanite gods and ruled particularly over storms, rain, and harvest. Things were such in Israel that a man was permitted to rebuild Jericho, laying its foundation and setting up its gates with his eldest and youngest sons (16:34, cf. Josh. 6:26).

A Drought in Israel

Elijah ("my-God-is-Yah") shows up suddenly in Ahab's court and pronounces a drought on Israel (v. 1). This is the first contest between Yahweh and Baal, remembering the things over which Baal was particularly supposed to be lord (cf. Jer. 14:22).

When God brings judgment on a people because of their rejection of Him it affects the land. This has been true since the beginning as the ground came under the curse of man's sin (Gen. 3:17-18). While we may not always know precisely why God is bringing a "natural disaster" (Deut. 29:29), we do know that they are all from Him and part of His plan (Amos 3:6). God often uses physical hardships and calamities to show people what their rejection of Him is doing. God brings a drought upon Israel as a judgment for their idolatry. But He also sends His prophet, the one who speaks the words of Yahweh, into the wilderness to hide (1 Kings 17:3). Israel's real trouble was not that they had a drought of water, but that they had a drought of God's Word. In other Scriptures, God's Word and the teaching of His prophets come upon His followers like rain (Deut. 32:2-4, Is. 55:10-11, Ps. 72:5-7). Ahab and Israel with him rejected Yahweh, and so Yahweh showed what it is like to be without His Word. Elijah the word-bearer departs from the king of Israel to hide in the wilderness where he is fed by unclean birds (cf. Lev. 11:13ff) until the Brook Cherith is completely dried up (vs. 2-7). The Lord then sends his prophet out of Israel completely.

A Gentile Widow

The Lord sends Elijah to a city belonging to Sidon (cf. 16:31) where the Lord had commanded a widow to provide for him (vs. 8-9). Elijah finds the widow in the city and hears that she has almost no food for her and her son. She is planning to prepare her last meager meal and then die (vs. 10-12). Elijah tells her to go ahead and still prepare something for him first because the Lord has said that her flour and oil will not run out

until the Lord sends rain (vs. 13-14). The widow trusts Elijah's word, and the words of the Lord come to pass just as Elijah said (vs. 15-16).

Jesus compares Himself to Elijah, saying that no prophet is accepted in his own country (Luke 4:24-26). When God sent Elijah to the widow in Zarephath, it was not because there were no widows in Israel that Elijah could help in the midst of the famine. Rather, he was sent there as a sign to Israel of what God was doing. God was sending His Word to Gentiles instead of to Israel. Again, the real drought in Israel was of God's Word, of faithfulness to the covenant, and as Israel rejected the Word, God sent it away to a Gentile woman who trusted in it. This all pointed ahead to what would happen in the days of Jesus. The Jews would reject the Word of God incarnate, but the Word would still go out to the nations (John 1:11, Matt. 28:18-20).

Resurrection Proof

While Elijah is still staying with the widow, her son becomes deathly ill (v. 17). The widow petitions Elijah about this, and Elijah takes the lad to his room and asks the Lord if He is intending to kill the widow's son (vs. 18-20). Elijah then stretches himself out over the child three times and prays to the Lord to let the child's soul return to him (v. 21). The Lord answers Elijah's prayer, and the boy revives (v. 22).

This is a resurrection type with close parallels to the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was in the grave for three days, and Elijah covers the boy three times. When the boy is healed, this is proof to the widow that Elijah is a man of God and that the word of the Lord which he speaks is true (vs. 23-24). Jesus speaks of His resurrection as the confirming sign that He is the Son of God, a sign, though, that would not cause the Jews as a nation to repent (Matt. 12:38-41). Paul also states that the resurrection was *the* declaration that Jesus was the Son of God (Rom. 1:4). The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that the word of God is true and that Jesus is the Son of God. This is pictured in the story of the widow. It was a resurrection that gave her certainty in the word of the Lord and His mouthpiece.

The reality of death, the presence of trials, the reminder of our frailty and God's curse on man because of sin should remind us of our own sin (1 Kings 17:18). Jesus teaches us when we see or hear about such things to consider ourselves (Luke 13:1-5). Whether it be a drought or sickness leading to death, God often uses these things to drive His people to turn to Him and repent. The word of God spoken by His prophets (or today by His preachers), and more importantly the Word of God made flesh, both sustains life and grants new life.

Conclusion

James tells the church that the fervent prayer of righteous men avails much, like Elijah's prayer that God would withhold the rain and then again that it would come (James 5:17-18). Do we care for the lost enough and do we care for the righteousness of the Lord enough to pray that God would do whatever it takes to bring repentance? We should. Are we ready to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ as the proof that He is the Son of God, the only way of salvation, regardless of how foolish the world tells us it is? God's Word is powerful, the gospel is true, and it is life-giving and life-sustaining.