

Elijah Fights for the LORD

1 Kings 17-18

Key Verse: 18:37

“Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

The time in which Elijah served may have been the darkest time in Israel's history. Worship of the detestable idol Baal and his so-called wife Asherah, the ancestor of Diana and Venus, had become common in Israel. This kind of idol worship incorporated sexually immoral practices of all kinds. It seems that Israel had no hope. Yet in that time, God raised Elijah and used him to turn Israel back to God. We may feel that our times are like the times of Elijah due to idolatry and rampant sexual immorality. There is a popular show brazenly called "American Idol." The U.S. Center for Health Statistics recently reported that among all babies born in 2007, 40% were born out of wedlock. Same sex unions are gaining more and more acceptance. How can we overcome this kind of spiritual darkness? God is still working to turn his people back. For this purpose, God raises and uses servants like Elijah. We may think that Elijah was a spiritual superman, totally different from us. But the Bible says that he was a man just like us (Ja 5:17). God trained him to be a man of great faith and a man of prayer. Then God used him to deliver his people. Let's learn God's undying hope and the challenging spirit of Elijah.

I. The Lord trains Elijah in faith (17:1-24)

After Northern Israel had degenerated steadily under wicked kings, suddenly Elijah appeared on the scene. Who was he? His name "Elijah" means "The Lord is my God." Among idol worshiping people, he lifted the banner of God's truth, saying, "The Lord is my God." One day this man--with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist--appeared before King Ahab and delivered God's message. Look at verse 1b. "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Elijah foretold a drought. This was in fact the judgment of God against Baal, the god of rain and thunder. No one had dared to challenge King Ahab and Jezebel's national idol worship program. Yet one person, Elijah, was willing to challenge them publicly. Elijah wanted his people to know that the God of Israel is the living God and that Baal was nothing. He had a great shepherd's heart for his people. However, even though Elijah was a man of faith, he needed the Lord's training. This is true of anyone whom God uses greatly. How did the Lord train Elijah?

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First, Elijah fed by ravens (2-6). Look at verses 2-4. "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: 'Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.'" God sent Elijah to the Kerith Ravine to hide. Elijah seems the kind of person who wanted to do something, now! Yet he obeyed the Lord without complaining, curbing his pride and passion. His willingness to obey was the quality God could use to train him further. It must have been hard for Elijah to be fed by ravens. They were known as unclean, and they ate dead flesh. Elijah could have worried about hygiene. He could have doubted that ravens would be faithful to their mission. However, Elijah put his trust in God who promised to feed him according to his word. God is faithful. The ravens woke up early every morning and brought breakfast to Elijah at 7:30 a.m. Then they worked evening shift, bringing his dinner at 5:30 p.m. They denied their natural instinct to eat the food themselves and brought it to Elijah. Perhaps they picked it up from Ahab's table. This was not only to train Elijah; it was God's wisdom to hide Elijah. Ahab had mobilized Israel's FBI to find Elijah. If Elijah had been fed by people or by dogs, his adversaries could track down his hiding place. But no one can follow ravens. God who rules nature, even ravens, could keep Elijah hidden in this way.

Elijah began his public ministry with a fiery national challenge to the reigning king. This was like a day in the sun. Comparatively, Elijah spent the next year or so in solitude in a ravine. At that time, he must have prayed a lot and meditated on the word of God and God's purpose for Israel. He must have drawn close to God and deepened his personal faith and love for God. Many people think that being used by God is to do something fantastic all the time. However, God is more concerned that we grow deeper in faith and love for him, like a tree planted by streams of water.

Second, Elijah fed by a poor widow (7-16). Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land (7). The word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food" (8,9). To move to Zarephath from the Kerith Ravine was not a small matter. It was about 75 miles through the desert. Elijah probably traveled on foot, without even a donkey. Furthermore, Zarephath was in Sidon, which was Gentile territory and Jezebel's home country. Why did God send Elijah to Sidon? It was to demonstrate God's sovereign rule and power even in Sidon. God was in control, even in enemy territory.

When Elijah came to Zarephath he may have expected a delicious hot meal prepared by a rich widow. But as he arrived, he saw a poor widow gathering sticks

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and called to her, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink? And bring me, please, a piece of bread." Elijah was polite to the widow. How did she respond? Look at verse 12. "'As surely as the Lord your God lives,' she replied, 'I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die.'" To Elijah's surprise, the widow was very poor; she and her son were on the verge of death from starvation. She must have been as skinny as a piece of cardboard. At this moment, Elijah could have doubted God's love, thinking, "Does God want me to squeeze the last bit of food from this poor widow? This is too much. I want to resign as a prophet." However, as Elijah listened carefully to the widow, he discovered that she had a seed of faith in the God of Israel. Perhaps it was the fruit of God's training through the famine. Her small mustard seed of faith had great potential to be used by God. Elijah said, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land'" (13,14). Elijah challenged the widow to serve God first and to believe God's promise of provision. This may be why God sent him to this widow. God wanted Elijah to learn challenging spirit by faith in God's word. When Elijah spoke the word of the Lord by faith, a miracle happened. There was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family (15). Elijah experienced God's mighty power and became a source of blessing to the widow's family. Most of all, Elijah learned challenging spirit that depends only on God's word of promise.

Third, Elijah raised a dead boy by faith (17-24). Everything seemed to be going well for Elijah. However, one day the son of the widow became sick. He grew worse and worse and finally died (17). To the widow, it was unbearable. When her son died, her hope also died. Her faith began to fail, due to sorrow, and she hit rock bottom. So she cried out to God's servant Elijah, saying, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" (18) She was under the power of sin and the power of death.

When Elijah heard the widow's cry he was filled with compassion. He had become a spiritual father to the Sidonian widow and her son. So he took the boy from her arms, making this problem his very own. Then he went to his room to engage in a battle of prayer. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Elijah understood the widow's situation deeply and brought her anguished cry to the Lord.

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Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!" Elijah believed that the Lord is the living God who can even raise the dead. He believed that the Lord is sovereign over life and death.

The Lord heard Elijah's compassionate cry and the boy's life returned to him. In the Bible record, this is the first time that someone was raised from the dead. It was the son of a Gentile widow who had a small seed of faith in the God of Israel. Later, our Lord Jesus recognized this woman's faith (Lk 4:25-26). This miracle was the fruit of Elijah's compassionate heart. It was the fruit of Elijah's crying out prayer. This kind of prayer is the most powerful weapon in spiritual conflict. Through this event, Elijah experienced God Almighty who raises the dead. Now he became a man of faith and prayer who could challenge even the power of death. The widow recognized him as a man of God, saying, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth" (24). Elijah received an A+ as his final grade. Now he was ready for the battle on Mount Carmel.

II. Elijah challenges Baal worship (18:1-46)

First, Elijah meets Obadiah (1-16). Look at verse 1. "After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: 'Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.'" Elijah knew he was wanted "dead or alive" by Ahab. But Elijah was not afraid of the king. He had learned to trust in God's word and to have faith in God who raises the dead. So he went to present himself to Ahab. At that time the famine was so severe in the land that the king and his most trusted official Obadiah were diligently looking for grass to feed their animals. Who was Obadiah? He had served the Lord faithfully from his youth. Now he was working as a high official under the wicked king Ahab. It would be politically correct for him to engage in Baal worship. However, he kept his faith; he did not compromise. He believed in God wholeheartedly. The Bible calls him a devout believer in the Lord. No devout believer in the Lord wants to serve a wicked and ungodly person like Ahab. Many people want to quit their jobs instead of working for wicked bosses. Obadiah must have struggled very much to overcome himself. But he kept his position, and when he did so, he could use his power to protect 100 prophets of the Lord by hiding them in caves and giving them food and water regularly. In this way he was used greatly by God to save God's servants. He was like Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah who served the Lord wholeheartedly even under ungodly bosses. May the Lord raise many devout people of God like Obadiah.

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Second, Elijah reveals the true God to Israel (17-46). When Ahab met Elijah he was furious and called him the troubler of Israel (17). Elijah was not intimidated at all. Rather, he challenged Ahab saying, "I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (18,19). When Elijah had faith in God's word and a challenging spirit, he could overpower the king and take the initiative, having spiritual leadership over him. The king suddenly began to obey Elijah and sent orders to gather Israel at Mt. Carmel, including all the prophets of Baal. On one side was Elijah the prophet of the Lord. On the other side were 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. It was 850 to 1. But Elijah welcomed the challenge. What great faith! What challenging spirit! We need this kind of faith and challenging spirit to fight against idolatry and immorality in our times. Without a challenge, nothing happens. In order to challenge we need faith in God's word. When we challenge by faith, then God will work. We should not just sit down and complain about the adverse situation like spiritual paralytics. We must rise up and challenge by faith.

Elijah began by challenging his own people, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." However, the people said nothing (21). In their minds, they wanted to follow the Lord as their God. But in reality, they feared Ahab. So they followed Baal. They remind us of those today who suffer under peer pressure. Inwardly they want to worship the Lord as their God. But they fear the social consensus and give in to the pleasures of sin. They are trying to stand in the middle. But there is no middle ground in the spiritual world. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). We must decide to believe in Jesus and stand as Jesus' disciples. Otherwise Jesus will be ashamed of us when he comes again (Mk 8:38). Only Jesus can forgive our sins and give us eternal life. The Apostle Peter grasped this truth and stood for Jesus in times of intense persecution. He said in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Are you wavering between two opinions? Let's decide today to believe in the only true God and his Son Jesus Christ. Then we can have eternal life and heavenly joy and peace under God's blessing. It is true that we will be persecuted. But this is for our good, to purify our faith (1 Pe 1:7).

Elijah set the terms of the contest to determine which God was the true God. The prophets of Baal were to offer up a bull for sacrifice. Elijah would do the same.

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They were not allowed to set fire to it. Instead, each side would pray for their god to answer by fire. The one who answered by fire would be recognized as the true God. The prophets of Baal began to tremble and wanted to run away. But the people said, "What you say is good." Elijah had caught the prophets of Baal and now they were in a duel from which they could not escape. It was a public confrontation between the Lord God and Baal, between good and evil. It was the time to show who was the true God. Elijah allowed the prophets of Baal to go first. So they began to call on the name of Baal. They cried out from morning until noon: "O Baal answer us." But there was no response; no one answered. So they began to dance around the altar. "At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened'" (27). Then the prophets of Baal began to shout louder and, as was their custom, slashed themselves with swords and spears until their blood flowed. This went on for hours. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention (29). It is because Baal is not a god but a manmade idol. He cannot speak, see, hear, smell, feel, walk, or utter a sound (Ps 115:4-7). Now it was Elijah's turn. He called the people, saying, "Come here to me." They came to him. The first thing he did was to repair the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins. Then he took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob. With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Elijah showed the people that they must return to the true God by repairing his altars. Then Elijah dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold a many gallons of water. He had four large jars filled with water and drenched the sacrifice. He had this done three times until the trench was filled with water.

Look at verses 36-37. "At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.'" Elijah called the Lord the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. Elijah wanted to remind the people of God's history. They were God's chosen people. Elijah helped them to restore their spiritual identity. He also taught them that God is the living God. He was not just a God who worked in the past. He was still living and working among them. The living God hears our prayers and answers our prayers. There are many so-called gods in the world, such as hedonism, materialism, or technology, and many manmade religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. But they are nothing but idols. They cannot save us from the power of sin and death, or lead us to the kingdom of God. So we should not trust them. We must realize that only the

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Creator God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the true God--the only true God. We must turn our hearts to the Lord and worship him only, from our hearts.

What happened? The fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord--he is God! The Lord--he is God!" (38,39) Only the true God can hear and answer our prayers. In this way the Lord revealed his glory.

The people came out of their spiritual stupor. They were ready to cowork with Elijah. They seized the prophets of Baal, and slaughtered them in the Kishon Valley. Suddenly there were no more prophets of Baal. Now the score was man of God: 1, prophets of Baal: 0.

After this great victory, Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of heavy rain." So Ahab went off to eat and drink. But Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel, bent down and put his face between his knees. He was praying to the Lord for rain. At first, nothing seemed to happen. But when Elijah prayed persistently a small rain cloud formed, and then the sky grew black with clouds and a heavy rain came. Then the power of the Lord came upon Elijah and he ran sixteen miles, all the way back to Jezreel. He ran so fast that he outran the chariot of Ahab.

When Israel seemed overrun by Baal worship, God intervened by raising Elijah. Elijah stood up by faith and challenged the situation. Then he humbly received God's training, obeying God's word absolutely. So he could grow as a great man of God, a man of faith and prayer who was full of the Spirit. He was not overpowered by worldly influence, but he challenged the power of Baal worship. Then God gave him great victory and delivered his people. God wants to deliver young people from idolatry in our times. We need this kind of challenging spirit like Elijah. Let's pray to God for the deliverance of this generation and learn the challenging spirit of Elijah.