

ELIJAH: PROPHET OF COURAGE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

1 Kings 18-19;
Matthew 17:1-13

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[Elijah] answered, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.” (1 Kgs. 18:18)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Mar. 22	Mark 9:2-8	Elijah with Moses and Jesus
T	Mar. 23	Mark 9:9-13	John the Baptist, the New Elijah
W	Mar. 24	1 Kgs. 18:1-4	Elijah Sent to King Ahab
Th	Mar. 25	1 Kgs. 18:20-26, 30-33, 36-39	Elijah Challenges Baal Prophets
F	Mar. 26	1 Kgs. 19:1-8	Elijah in the Wilderness with God
Sa	Mar. 27	1 Kgs. 19:9b-15	God Commissions Elijah for New Work

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

First Kings dates to the fourth century before Christ and lays out the highs and lows faced by Israel’s leaders. It surveys history to see where things got off-kilter. God’s people realized that their relationship with God and with their neighbors was suffering and needed healing. But King Solomon stopped acting faithfully. He gathered massive wealth for himself and found glory in his 700 wives, 300 concubines, palaces, army, and piles of gold and silver. We read about Solomon’s faithlessness to God in the second half of 1 Kings. After Solomon died, things got even worse. God’s people were divided into two kingdoms, and the successive leaders were no better. Religious life reached a true low point under the reign of King Ahab. God sent Elijah, a trusted servant, into a situation in which Ahab and his wife Jezebel had instigated worshipping a Baal, a false god worshiped for his ability to determine the weather. God sent Elijah to prove that only God had power over the elements. During the previous three years, Jezebel had attempted to eliminate the worship of Yahweh. Elijah returned to challenge Baal. Either Elijah or the prophets of Baal would have to call on their god

to produce fire. In the end, Elijah won the challenge. His god was God; Baal was nothing. But the people are not convinced for long, and they returned to worshiping idols and following Jezebel. Forlorn, Elijah escaped to the desert and heard God speak in the same place God spoke to Moses.

Gracious God, give us the courage to follow you when the forces around us would mock that decision. Empower us to trust in your omnipotence, as Elijah did. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 Kings 18:5–18

18:5 Then Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.” ⁶So they divided the land between them to pass through it; Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

⁷As Obadiah was on the way, Elijah met him; Obadiah recognized him, fell on his face, and said, “Is it you, my lord Elijah?” ⁸He answered him, “It is I. Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.” ⁹And he said, “How have I sinned, that you would hand your servant over to Ahab, to kill me? ¹⁰As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to seek you; and when they would say, ‘He is not here,’ he would require an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. ¹¹But now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.’ ¹²As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where; so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have revered the LORD from my youth. ¹³Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred of the Lord’s prophets fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water? ¹⁴Yet now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here’; he will surely kill me.” ¹⁵Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.” ¹⁶So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

¹⁷When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” ¹⁸He answered, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.


ELIJAH

Today's story includes several main characters: Ahab the King, Elijah the Prophet, and Obadiah. Ahab is the son of an earlier king, Jeroboam. He married Jezebel, who worships the god Baal. Elijah comes on the scene suddenly. He is simply called "Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead." We first heard of Elijah back in 1 Kings 17:1, when he told Ahab that a drought would begin and end at God's word and at Elijah's announcement. The story continues to build throughout the next two chapters as Elijah defends God's case. In 1 Kings 18:1-2, God calls Elijah to make himself known to Ahab after the drought had gone on for several years. After many days the word of the LORD comes to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth." This call for Elijah to show himself was the antithesis of God's earlier instruction for Elijah to hide himself. As was his practice, Elijah obediently follows God's command. His life as a prophet was at the service of God's command.

In verses 3-14 of that same chapter, we are introduced to Obadiah. We meet him when he is out looking for pastureland for the animals; their former feeding grounds have been devastated by the drought. When Obadiah encountered the prophet Elijah, Obadiah recognized him and immediately feared for his own well-being. Obadiah remembered that King Ahab had searched high and low for Elijah. Ahab wanted to make Elijah pay for the drought his prayers had brought on Israel. Obadiah was afraid that if he admitted to the king that he came across Elijah, Ahab would severely punish him for enabling Elijah to escape. Elijah understood Obadiah's reticence and assured him that he was going nowhere and could stand up to Ahab. Elijah said, "As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today" (v. 15).

We meet Ahab in verse 17. As Israel's most cowardly and ungodly king, he blamed Elijah for all of Israel's problems. Had Ahab stopped persecuting God's people, God would have stopped the drought. Instead, Israel's worst king decided to blame the godly prophet instead. Ahab's steadfast belief in Baal was a result of the government's promotion of Baal worship and his personal theology. Because of Ahab's beliefs, worshipers of God had to be persecuted, and Elijah was the worst of them for angering the sky-god Baal. To Ahab, Elijah was the reason Baal was withholding rain, and the rains would continue to be withheld until

Elijah was punished. However, Elijah felt empowered instead to challenge King Ahab to gather the prophets of the idols Baal and Asherah for the Mount Carmel meeting.

 What does this story tell us about the call and empowerment of a prophet?

IDOLATRY

Immediately after God created the universe, its inhabitants felt compelled to worship something other than their creator. In Old Testament times we find idols crafted of wood and metal inspiring temples in which to worship them. If this idea sounds ridiculous, consider the idols around us—technology, power, wealth, and status, to name a few. How must those idols look to God? Every year during the season of Lent, we confess what is getting between us and our honest worship of God. Sometimes things that start out in a balanced proportion, such as work or a romantic relationship, can overtake our hearts and demand us to worship them. That’s idolatry.

To ask why idolatry is so pervasive among human beings is to wonder why sin exists. Perhaps a better idea is to look at the characteristics of idolatry and try to figure out where it starts. For one thing, idolatry is simply more convenient than worshipping God. Money, power, jobs, children—in many ways they do save us. They provide us with avenues for meeting basic human needs and give us someone or something to love. It’s easy to slip into believing that these parts of our life are spontaneously generated, rather than gifts from God. Inevitably, these idols will disappoint or confound us. In these cases, we go searching for our true God who loves and saves us—even from ourselves.

When we intentionally or inadvertently create idols, we typically choose tangible gratifications to honor. We like to see what we worship, rather than have faith in an invisible being. What is unspoken is the expectation that what we worship will worship us back. This is a very different equation than being loved by God first and responding in obedience and awe. Waiting for God’s will and wondering how to relate to the mysterious are not easy to sell in today’s world. Neither were they in the ancient world. Time after time, God’s people choose to follow their own will and not remain in relationship with Yahweh, as we see throughout the Bible: “You shall not make for yourself an idol,

whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4). “Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made” (Isa. 2:8). “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

The bottom line is that throughout history God’s people would rather *be* God than *worship* God. We all know where that leads—we are left alone in our failure to save ourselves through false idols and alienated from the God for whom we long. Idolatry and repentance are frequently paired among God’s people. We are often diverted to false paths, and God just as often calls us back.

? What idols are the most pervasive in your life? How does God call you to repentance and balance?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In the title of this lesson we have characterized Elijah as a prophet of courage. His courage is inspiring and as believers we are encouraged by the examples of those who speak truth to power. Elijah undoubtedly felt fear. First Kings attests to that fact: “Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there” (1 Kgs. 19:3). Nevertheless, he relied on God’s sovereignty as the focus for his actions. Elijah acted out of obedience to God and out of compassion for God’s people who were being persecuted by King Ahab.

This lesson particularly resonates in our modern world, where so many people and factions speak in the “name of God,” claiming to have a corner on the market of God’s desires. The Bible is often used today as a weapon to beat others up. Religion itself seems to have become an idol. The ability to discern God’s will, as opposed to choosing to grind one’s ax, is rare. We get so lost in the ways that the people of God define themselves that we lose touch with the source of our faith. By contrast, Elijah and the other prophets seemed to have God on a sort of speed-dial. Being a prophet must have been tough, but at least God was speaking directly to you; you could hear God’s plan directly, even through the noise. “God is still speaking,” as the United Church of Christ proclaims. Who are the prophets in our world?

All this is not to suggest that Elijah was a “model prophet” all the time. Like us, he had his moments of clarity and times of doubt. In chapters 17–18 Elijah gives strength and sustenance to those in need, is fearless in confronting Ahab, and triumphs over the prophets of Baal in spectacular fashion. In chapter 19, he is fearful, despondent, and powerless to sustain himself. The change evokes the theme of the fragility of God’s messengers, seen earlier in the man of God in 1 Kings 13 and more distantly in Moses’ despondency over the burden of leadership (Num. 11:15). Is it bad news to find out that Elijah faltered? Not so much! It is more a relief that we can somehow relate to this prophet, not merely admire him.

Elijah experienced the power of God in a plethora of ways. In the trial on Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenged the prophets about their allegiance, but they failed to answer him. Then, the skeptics became believers after the theophany of fire. God’s presence became known through earthquakes, wind, and fire but Elijah did not yet know the true power of the Lord. Soon after, God presented a unique gift to Elijah—one of the Old Testament’s most beautiful moments: Elijah was blessed with “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kgs. 19:12).

? How are we like Obadiah—in the presence of God’s word, yet afraid for what it will cost us to declare that presence?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. Elijah prophesied in the ninth century BCE but became the archetype of all Jewish prophets. Malachi predicted that Elijah would return to precede a closing chapter in Israel’s history (Mal. 4:5–6). Elijah stood as the embodiment of all prophets at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt. 17:2–3). Two witnesses described in Revelation 11:6 allude to the work of the law and the prophets as embodied by Moses and Elijah.
2. While good kings of Judah were described as following the example of King David, evil kings of Israel and Judah were described as following the example of Ahab (1 Kgs. 22:51–52; 2 Kgs. 8:18, 25–27; 21:1–3; 2 Chron. 21:6; 22:3).