

God Hears Elijah's Prayer

FOCUS THOUGHT

God honors His preachers' prayers.

»» FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 17:24

And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.

»» LESSON TEXT

I Kings 17:17–23

17 And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.

18 And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?

19 And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed.

20 And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?

21 And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again.

22 And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.

23 And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth.

CULTURE CONNECTION

BAYOU BARTHOLOMEW

In July of 1989, Jerry Self and his brother-in-law were faced with the reality that in three hours, five-hundred acres of sweet potatoes would be under water. Twelve inches of rainfall had pushed the Bayou Bartholomew out of its banks, and it had reached the edge of Jerry's farmland. In desperation he called his pastors, A. J. and Dwight Fulton, to come pray for a miracle.

Both pastors arrived quickly. The men sat on a log that had floated to the edge of the field out of the bayou, and they began to pray.

After the pastors left, Jerry continued to monitor the water and found it had stopped rising. Believing the water had crested, Jerry checked the water levels north and south of him, only to learn the water was still rising.

Jerry continually checked the gauges and spoke with other farmers, again to receive the same report: the water was still rising. He went back to his fields, wondering what he would find, but the water continually stayed back.

For thirty days the water threatened, but it never rose higher than where the four men had sat and prayed.

Just as God heard Elijah's prayer, He hears the prayers of those He calls to watch over His people.

OUTLINE

I. CRISIS IN THE ERA OF THE KINGS

- A. The Rise of King Ahab
- B. The Rise of Idol Worship
- C. The Demands of Obedience Never Change

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF ELIJAH

- A. A Man of Purpose
- B. A Man of Prayer
- C. The Importance of Spiritual Authority

III. THE POWER OF A PRAYING PREACHER

- A. The Widow First Trusted Elijah
- B. The Widow Was Led to Trust in God
- C. The Importance of Spiritual Integrity

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It is no secret that, in every sector, United States society is experiencing a crisis of authority. From the childhood vaccination debates to the election of President Trump, skepticism of the “tried and true” and “the expert” has gripped the nation. In 2017, secular social scientist Tom Nichols published *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, exploring the troubling aspects of this trend. For Nichols, this “death of expertise” is rooted in “a rejection not only of knowledge, but of the ways in which we gain knowledge and learn about things. Fundamentally, it’s a rejection of science and rationality, which are the foundations of Western civilization itself” (thefederalist.com).

However, Nichols’ analysis, though intriguing, seems to miss the real issue. The ultimate source of this growing skepticism is not a loss of faith in “expertise,” as such, but a loss of faith in “experts.” The crisis of authority is not a crisis of scientific rationality but a crisis of personal integrity.

I. CRISIS IN THE ERA OF THE KINGS

A. The Rise of King Ahab

After the death of the Northern Kingdom's first king, Jeroboam, the nation almost instantaneously plunged into a protracted civil war. Baasha, of the tribe of Issachar, overthrew Jeroboam's son Nadab after two years (I Kings 15:26–28), only to have his own son, Elah, assassinated after two years by his captain Zimri (I Kings 16:8–10). Zimri himself reigned a grand total of seven days before being overthrown by another military captain Omri, who was able to finally bring stability (I Kings 16:15, 23). What is missing entirely in the story of Omri's rise to power is any sort of “prophetic mandate” for his actions. Even the ill-fated Zimri had at least the credible authorization of the prophet Jehu ben Hanani for his attack on Elah. (See I Kings 16:1–4, 7).

Though little is said of Omri in the Bible, his greatest military accomplishment (conquering Moab) is mentioned in the famous Moabite Stone. In other words, Omri and the dynasty that followed him were among the first kings after Solomon to have an international reputation and pivotal role in the ancient Near Eastern geopolitical drama. A key part of the reason for Omri's power and prominence was his alliance with the king of Sidon, which made the Northern Kingdom a vital link in international trade, bringing Israel into a new era of wealth and political influence.

B. The Rise of Idol Worship

None of this is mentioned in the Bible narrative for a very specific reason. The way Omri sealed his covenant with the king of Sidon was to have his son, Ahab, marry the Sidonian princess Jezebel. The Sidonians were worshipers of the false Canaanite god Baal. For the writer of Kings, this spelled disaster for the nation, for it meant the reintroduction of a loathsome false god into Israel's national life.

That is why the writer of Kings included the following note in the narrative of Ahab's ascension to power (I Kings 16:34): “In his days did Hiel the Beth-elite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn, and set up the gates thereof in his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Joshua the son of Nun.” Not only does this text demonstrate the prophetic stature of Joshua, but it also symbolizes “the striking reversal between Israel's triumph under Joshua and their tragedy under Ahab” (Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*). Under Ahab, Baal worship was not simply tolerated—it was promoted as the official “state religion” of Israel. (See I Kings 16:31–33.)

God's explicit purpose for giving the Israelites the Promised Land was to punish the Canaanites for their false worship. (See Genesis 15:13–16; Joshua 3:10.) The marriage of Ahab and Jezebel represented the very “undoing” of Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua, even to the rebuilding of the evil city of Jericho.

C. The Demands of Obedience Never Change

There are two important lessons to draw from the story of Ahab's rise to power. First, God is not impressed or moved by worldly standards of success. Most historians agree that Omri and Ahab were two of the most powerful kings Israel had ever known. In fact, at the Battle of Qarqar, King Ahab was able to field an army of ten thousand infantry soldiers and two thousand chariots and was essentially the military leader of the coalition that confronted the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*). However, despite the military and economic might of Omri and Ahab, they failed the one test of "good success" (Joshua 1:8)—they were not faithful to God or His covenant.

The second important lesson to draw from these stories is that God's demands for obedience never changed. Though centuries separate the time of Joshua from the time of Ahab, God still abhorred the gods of the Canaanites and all that their worship entailed. Not the "cultural shift," nor the "need for economic stability," nor the desire for "international recognition" were sufficient reasons for sacrificing Israel's strict loyalty to God. The actions of Omri and Ahab were sinful because they were rooted in a lack of trust in God to provide those things in His own way and time.

» *Why are worldly definitions of success both so attractive and so dangerous?*

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF ELIJAH

A. A Man of Purpose

Into this charged religious and political arena stepped the mysterious man Elijah. Perhaps what is most noticeable is how little we know about him. No one is quite sure of the whereabouts of Tishbi, Elijah's hometown. The writer of Kings does not provide us with the name of Elijah's father or even the tribe to which he belonged. The only thing we know about Elijah is the meaning of his name: "Yahweh is my God." And perhaps, in the end, that is all we need to know about him. Elijah's name was his mission: he was a prophet raised up by God to combat the state-sanctioned rise of false worship.

B. A Man of Prayer

The only other thing we know about Elijah is he was a man of prayer. A grand total of fourteen separate prayer sessions are recorded in I Kings 17–19. Three things are noteworthy about Elijah's prayers. First, his prayers are striking in their simplicity. The Bible is no stranger to lengthy prayers. (See, for example, I Kings 8:22–53.) However, Elijah's prayer in chapter 17 was almost breathtakingly brief. "O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again" (I Kings 17:21). Later, in Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus extolled this kind of prayer: "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (Matthew 6:7–8).

Second, Elijah's prayers are notable for their honesty. Especially in his encounter with God on Mount Horeb in I Kings 19, Elijah was very open with his own feelings of isolation and perhaps even despair. Like David and the other psalmists, Elijah demonstrated honesty to be the hallmark of fervent prayer. In his honesty Elijah became for the apostle James a "model" man of prayer (James 5:17).

Finally, Elijah's prayers were notable in their persistence. He prayed three times for the widow's son to be resurrected (I Kings 17:21); he prayed seven times for the rains to fall and end the three-year-long drought (I Kings 18:43). In Luke 18:1 we find Jesus' Parable of the Unjust Judge was intended to teach this very lesson, "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."

» *Besides honesty and persistence, what are two or three other keys to effective prayer you have discovered in your own life?*

C. The Importance of Spiritual Authority

In the Old Testament, Elijah was an iconic example of spiritual authority. It is often forgotten that Baal's role in the Canaanite pantheon was as the god of storms (lightning and rain). When Elijah announced: "As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (I Kings 17:1), he was directly challenging Baal's claims. According to the Canaanite Baal myth, drought signaled the "death" of the god; in effect, when Elijah stormed into Ahab's presence that day, Elijah, through Yahweh's power, "killed" Baal.

Elijah's spiritual authority may have been demonstrated in miraculous signs and wonders, but it was clearly rooted in Elijah's prayers. Charles H. Kraft was correct in saying, "Spiritual authority is in direct proportion to spiritual intimacy" (*The Evangelical's Guide to Spiritual Warfare*). As with all other forms of authority, spiritual authority comes with associated responsibilities. A pastor who has been granted spiritual oversight of a congregation has a spiritual obligation to uphold his congregants in intercessory prayer. At the end of his life, Samuel, the prophet and judge, said to the children of Israel: "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you" (I Samuel 12:23).

There is one final truth about the nature of spiritual authority revealed in the Elijah stories: spiritual authority must grow and develop. The stories recorded in I Kings 17 show a definite progression in terms of the prophet's own authority. As Richard D. Nelson puts it: "Elijah moves from passive to active readiness. In the first story he simply obeys and is fed. In the second, he reports what God will do. In the third, he takes an active role and the Lord listens to him" (*First and Second Kings*). If Elijah had not undergone these three tests of faith—each increasing the level of required trust exponentially—it is more than likely he would not have been adequately prepared for the showdown with the false prophets of Baal in I Kings 18. The raising of the widow's son convinced Elijah once and for all that God does hear and answer prayer, and He can do miracles that have never been seen before.

III. THE POWER OF A PRAYING PREACHER

A. The Widow First Trusted Elijah

The stories recorded in I Kings 17 form a kind of interlocked narrative, united by their focus on the problem of imminent death and the divine gift of life via miraculous means (Nelson). One cannot tell the story of the resurrection of the widow’s son without including, in some way, the prior story of the miraculous provision of food for the prophet, the widow, and her son (for over two years). It must be noted that Zarephath was in Sidonian territory, the “heart” of Baal’s country. Elijah had taken his fight against the false god to the god’s own “homeland.”

The text makes it clear this widow prepared the meal Elijah requested with the last bit of food she had been saving for her and her son. She had so much faith in the prophet’s words that she was willing to risk starvation in her obedience. The text is also clear that the widow acted “according to the saying of Elijah” (I Kings 17:15). Prior to her encounter with the prophet Elijah, this woman had been a worshiper of Baal; she did not know nor worship Yahweh, the God of Elijah. She acted, at least at first, on her faith in the prophet. There was something about Elijah himself that inspired trust, hope, and courage in this woman.

» *Do you think you would be able to trust in and act upon a word from a man or woman of God like this widow did? Why or why not?*

B. The Widow Was Led to Trust in God

Because of her courageous act of obedience to God’s word through the prophet Elijah, miraculous provision occurred. However, an even greater miracle is that this poor Sidonian widow came to be a believer in the God of Elijah. This can be seen in her grieved petition after the death of her son: “What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God?” (I Kings 17:18). The widow then recognized that Elijah’s spiritual authority came from the one true God, not from himself or from any of the gods of the Sidonians who had proven unable to provide sustenance during the drought and famine.

What followed was the first recorded resurrection story in the Bible. Because of this Sidonian widow’s faith and the prophet Elijah’s persistent prayers, God performed a miracle He had never performed before—raising a person from the dead. It was this final miraculous sign that elicited the widow’s full confession of faith: “Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth” (I Kings 17:24).

C. The Importance of Spiritual Integrity

It is important to notice that the woman believed in the prophet before she believed in the prophet’s God. The trustworthy character of the prophet led the woman to trust in the character of the God whom the prophet proclaimed. If the widow had not trusted Elijah, she would have continued with her original plan, and that meager

meal would have been her last. But because she chose to trust the prophet, her life and her son's life were saved.

In addition, the widow's decision to trust required that Elijah present himself (and his God) as trustworthy. In other words, Elijah's character and demeanor in these stories are crucial to the widow's discovery of the true character of God. Elijah was not simply called to represent God by performing mighty signs and wonders in His name; more fundamentally, Elijah was called to represent God by exhibiting His characteristic faithfulness to His covenant promises.

A life of spiritual authority is rooted in a life of spiritual integrity. And a life of spiritual integrity can only be rooted in a quest to consistently model the character of God revealed fully in Jesus Christ. Without the integrity of Christ-like character, spiritual authority becomes a weapon that is wielded for one's own benefit rather than for the cause of Christ and His kingdom. Sadly, many have been driven away from God because those who claim to represent Him do not display spiritual integrity. We should thank God every day for the blessing of spiritual leaders who lead with integrity.

» *Name two or three ways spiritual integrity might be differentiated from integrity of character. Can one exist without the other? Why or why not?*

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A baker in a little country town bought the butter he used from a nearby farmer. One day he suspected that the bricks of butter were not full pounds, and for several days he weighed them.

He was right. They were short of the advertised weight, and he had the farmer arrested. At the trial the judge said to the farmer, "I presume you have scales?"

"No, your honor."

"Then how do you manage to weigh the butter you sell?" inquired the judge.

The farmer replied, "That's easily explained, your honor. I have balances and for a weight I use a one-pound loaf I buy from the baker."

Warren Buffet, chairman and CEO of the investment company Berkshire Hathaway, once said: "In looking for people to hire, look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first one, the other two will kill you." We live in a world that is hungry for leadership with integrity, especially spiritual leadership. We also live in a world where that kind of leadership is in increasingly short supply. Today the world of Christendom is being rocked by abuse scandals that make the televangelist scandals of the 1980s appear tame and almost trifling.

At its root this cultural "search for integrity" is the cry of a heart that longs for something to believe in that will not disappoint or fail. We know the only fulfilling end for such a quest is a relationship with God, the only one who is ultimately trustworthy and unchanging.