

Elijah: A Man Just Like Us— A God Just Like His

First of a Series

TONY BAKER

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1 Kings 16:29—17:1—standing in the presence of God

We go to a section of Scripture almost embarrassingly familiar—to the story of Israel in the days of Elijah the prophet. But familiarity with Scripture can breed, if not contempt, certainly content in the sense that we feel we know it and have 'got it taped': our grasp may be less sure than we think.

No theme could be more important than that which we find in these chapters. At a time when everything seemed to be in danger of collapsing spiritually and morally amongst God's people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (9 B.C.), the whole unfolding plan of God seemed to be in jeopardy. How, then, did 'the Lord, the God of Israel' (16:33) 'tackle' the crisis?

The answer is: by God's words through God's man—and by that man's words to his God in prayer. Such is always God's way in both biblical and post-biblical times, so that in times of crisis in God's church we cannot plead ignorance as to the priorities of our own praying.

We are assured in James 5:17 that 'Elijah was a man just like us'. Privately, we dispute this: we may prefer him on his column, like Nelson in Trafalgar Square, exalted 57 metres above us. To place Elijah on a pedestal means we can avoid facing the implications of his life for ourselves. But James 5:17 won't go away: it means that Elijah had a fallen, sinful nature just like us—tempted to pride, jealousy, lust, and everything else—just like us. He could be, as we know, brave as a lion and as timid as a deer.

But, as with Joseph (Genesis 39:2) so with Elijah: 'The Lord was with him'. In remembering and reckoning on the promised presence of God with his children, we have the assurance of everything else. Jeremiah remembered that presence (Jeremiah 20:11): so did Paul (2 Timothy 4:17): so (generally) did Elijah—apart from a severe attack of spiritual amnesia in 1 Kings 19. Elijah's ministry was marked overall by the conviction

that the Lord was present, powerful, righteous and gracious: and that the word of the Lord is, as Paul said many years later, 'the word of the Spirit'. The next time we feel weak or alone in our ministry for, or witness to, the Lord Jesus Christ, recollect: the Lord God of Elijah is with us by his Spirit. 'God plus one is a majority' may be a hackneyed phrase—but it remains true.

To see how true, we need to contrast Ahab and Elijah in this first installment of the saga.

1. Ahab—A king, but a king who committed evil 'in the eyes of the Lord'

Ahab had a lot going for him: the Northern Kingdom was firmly established as a separate kingdom from Judah in the south, against which of course it had rebelled after the death of Solomon. Although there had been much violence in Israel, it seems that Ahab inherited the crown peacefully from his father Omri.

He married a powerful woman, Jezebel (16:31), daughter of the King of Sidonians, which gave him a powerful local alliance. In Ahab and Jezebel there was therefore power on the throne and power behind the throne. Ahab's resources, however, were only human. Finally, he had feet of clay, as does any leader in church or state (however great he may be reckoned) who is not trusting in the living God, whom we know to be revealed as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In particular, Ahab sinned by marrying a fanatically pagan wife, which led to his openly apostasizing, even to his building a temple for Baal (16:31–32). But all this was 'in the eyes of the Lord' (16:30): the Lord saw it all. He is never short-sighted—unlike a bishop who once arrived in my vestry before a Confirmation service peering and stumbling, having forgotten his glasses. Having previously suffered at a Confirmation with a bishop so deaf he could hear the candidates' names only if bellowed fortissimo in his left ear, I was immensely relieved that someone had providentially

left a pair of gold-rimmed half-glasses in the church. Thus attired, the bishop got through the service without major calamity. Unlike the bishops, the Lord has faultless sight and hearing—though Ahab chose to forget this.

Always there will be (at least) problems when the people of God choose to marry into paganism. To marry a child of the devil brings trouble with father-in-law. Ahab did all he could to avoid trouble in that direction by his readiness to do what ultimately the forces of darkness wanted: 'You have sold yourself to do evil' said Elijah: but, unhappily for Ahab, all was always 'in the eyes of the Lord' (21:20).

So here is a man determined to lead a pagan life, a devilish life, a life that 'did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him' (16:33). But what the writer of 1 Kings is emphasizing above all, even before Elijah appears on the scene, is that Ahab and his cronies could not escape the power of the word of God, however much they closed their ears to it. 16:34 records the rebuilding of Jericho at the cost of Hiel's two sons—probably offered as human sacrifices. Unwittingly, he only succeeded in fulfilling Joshua 6:26, just as Acts 4:28 reminds us that when men killed the Son of God, they too fulfilled his preordained purposes.

A declaration of independence from the living God does not nullify the authority and power of the word of God over men and women. Everything takes place 'in the eyes of the Lord'; and human resources backed by the demonic can never finally overthrow the word of God. 'All men are like grass ... but the word of the Lord stands forever' (1 Peter 1:24–25). Those who give themselves to trusting, obeying, proclaiming and teaching the word of God are locked into impregnable resources. How true this is, as we turn to:

2. *Elijah—here is a nobody, but a nobody who is a somebody in his standing before God*

Elijah was neither a king, nor the son of a king: his parents were so ordinary that they are not even named. He came from the outback—from the wild country of Gilead, the 'wrong' side of Jordan. But it seems his parents were godly in a godless age. 'Elijah' signifies 'The Lord is God', and in God's goodness godly parents produced a godly son. Here is a focus for prayer and action: that in times of spiritual weakness, God will bring new determination to church and nations through those who have been taught and reared in godly homes, who by grace themselves believe. In terms of knowledge of God's word and ways, they should be able to bring some depth and stability to churches consisting otherwise mainly of small numbers of less

discerning first generation believers who are more likely to be 'blown here and there by every wind of teaching' (Ephesians 4:14). But this depends in turn on children from believing homes being confronted much more from earliest days with the word of God both taught and demonstrated in life.

It was Elijah's conviction that 'the Lord, the God of Israel' lives (17:1). That is our conviction as Christians today: we are not called to hide ourselves away in a cave in a spirit of despairing escapism (see 19:9). We have rather looked into a cave which was also a grave, but which is empty because God the Son was raised and is 'alive for ever and ever' (Revelation 1:18).

Elijah was deeply aware of the shameful paradox that the people of God were becoming the godless people of God, but he must also have known the Scriptures which were available to him, for a prophet's first work is to forthtell and apply God's revealed truth. In particular, he knew Deuteronomy 11:13–21:

If you faithfully obey the commands ... to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and ... soul, then I will send rain on your land ... Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods ... Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain ...

So Elijah prayed that the Lord would honour his word. James 5:17 tells us he prayed 'earnestly'—literally, 'he prayed with prayer'.

And he prayed, not at a distance from the Lord, but to the one (literally) 'before whom I stand' (17:1, NKJV; NIV paraphrases: 'whom I serve') Now, 'before whom I stand' is reckoned to be a technical term for being in God's service. In Elijah's case, it meant a clear awareness that he was being called to be a prophet; but it must also have involved for him the conviction that in God's grace he had a standing before God in the sense of a gracious status before him. And in experience day by day he stood there until he was deeply convinced that the Lord would fulfil his word before Elijah's very eyes. Elijah was sure that his own word would be God's word, and having stood in the presence of the King of Kings, he was ready to go and declare it to a petty pagan monarch with feet of clay (17:1).

Lance Pierson pictures Elijah breaking in on the King and Queen as they open a fresh assignment of 'goodies' from Ethbaal, Jezebel's father: suddenly a rough figure in homespun clothing with a rural accent breaks in and gives them a weather forecast! The UK is, of course, totally preoccupied with weather forecasts which, with their complexity and ability to cover every permutation, can sometimes leave us more bewildered than enlightened—especially the statutory reference to 'the odd rumble of thunder'. Elijah, however, brought a

forecast which was simple and direct, and which was a powerful rumble of divine thunder:

There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word (17:1).

God's methods remain essentially the same. When churches and nations are godless and astray, he raises up those who know what it is to have a standing of grace before God through our Lord Jesus Christ: —

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1–2)

He raises up those for whom this is not just a theological truth, but their personal experience—those who wait on God in prayer, and who go out knowing that the word they proclaim is God's word, now given to us in written form in Scripture. Of course, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness ... (2 Timothy 3:16); yet there are occasions when individuals and congregations are acutely aware that the proclaimed word is working particularly directly and powerfully within and amongst them—both for their comfort and (as for Ahab) their discomfort.

We need to look to God to raise up Elijah-like leaders who now, of course, like John the Baptist, will always point to Jesus. (John 1:29, Matthew 17:12). We also need to recognize that all Christians have an equal standing before God: all of us are called to stand in God's presence in prayer; and all of us are called in some way to 'hold out the word of life' (Philippians 2:16).

This, then, is still God's way: 'You have exalted above all things your name and your word' (Psalm 138:2), and his name and word are exalted in and through his chosen servants. This was God's way supremely two thousand years ago:

One day when heaven was filled with his praises,
 One day when sin was as black as could be,
 Jesus came forth to be born of a virgin,
 Dwelt amongst men, my example is he.
 (J. Wilbur Chapman).

God sent a man, the God-man Christ Jesus, who spent his life standing in his Father's presence, in constant prayer and communion with him. He made his priority teaching the word of God, which is why Jesus' focus in John 17:8 is on his having given his disciples 'the words you gave me', rather than the miraculous signs which John has so faithfully recorded. Nor can we overlook the deliberate interweaving of prayer to his Father and speaking the word which raises the dead in John 11:41–44.

Finally, his enemies executed the Lord of Glory—only in fact to fulfil the word and will of God (Acts 4:27–28). No wonder the disciples then prayed: 'Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness' (Acts 4:29)

The early church knew, as we need to know again, that the God-breathed word is irreplaceable, irreversible and inescapable; and God still calls his servants to proclaim it.

Tony Baker, Vicar of Bishop Hannington Memorial Church, Hove.