ELIJAH FIGHTS FOR THE LORD

1 Kings 17:1-18:46

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.”

Thus far in our study of Kings we have learned that God raised David as the model king for his people. God wanted all of the kings to be like David, a man after God’s own heart, and a shepherd of his people Israel. However, beginning with Solomon’s compromise with idol worship, the kings became unfaithful to God and abandoned God’s purpose. The kings of Northern Israel were especially ungodly. So the spiritual and moral condition of the nation degenerated rapidly until it looked like there was no hope left. At that time, God raised Elijah as a prophet for Northern Israel.

Who was Elijah? Bishop Hall, who lived in the 17th century, said that Elijah appeared like a storm and disappeared like a whirlwind. He also said that Elijah was the most excellent prophet prepared for the most corrupted time. Elijah may be the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. In the time of Jesus’ transfiguration, Elijah appeared together with Moses in glory (Mk 9:4). In that scene, Moses is representative of the Law and Elijah is representative of the prophets. Elijah was a shadow of Christ in terms of his suffering (Mt 17:11-13). The Old Testament ends with a promise that Elijah would come as a forerunner before the day of the Lord. This was fulfilled by John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, who worked with the spirit of Elijah (Lk 1:17).

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 is like our generation. How can we overcome this kind of spiritual darkness? Elijah shows us in this passage. When we think about Elijah we may think he was a superman, totally different from us. But the Bible says that he was a man just like us (Ja 5:17). God trained him to become a great man of faith and man of prayer. Then God used him to deliver his people. Let’s learn of the God of Elijah and the spirit of Elijah.

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

As we studied in chapter 12, Northern Israel was badly influenced by King Jeroboam. The seven kings that followed him were wicked in the eyes of the Lord, especially Omri. He arranged a political marriage between his son Ahab and Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. Then by the influence of Jezebel, Baal worship spread all over Northern Israel. The Lord’s prophets were killed by Jezebel. There was no word of God. The people lived in spiritual darkness. At this time, God sent one man of faith to deliver his people; his name was Elijah. We don’t know about his birth, only that he was a Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead. He probably belonged to the tribe of Gad or Manasseh. His name Elijah means “The Lord is my God.” It seemed that all people in Northern Israel had become Baal worshipers. But Elijah did not join them. He lifted the banner of God’s truth, saying, “The Lord is my God.” Suddenly this man with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist appeared before the king and delivered God’s message of judgment against Israel for her wicked idolatry.

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. But it would not be an ordinary drought. Usually in a time of drought there is dew, even in the desert. Because of this the cactus can survive. If there is no dew, all the grass will wither away and nothing can survive. If this drought lasted even one year, it would have serious consequences. But Elijah said the drought would last a few years. Once the land was flowing with milk and honey, but it would be completely devastated by drought. The judgment of God was not only judgment against Ahab, but against Baal, the god of rain and thunder. Most people were so fearful that they could not challenge the wickedness of Ahab. They were especially fearful of Jezebel. Only one person, Elijah, challenged the wicked king and queen. He believed that the God of Israel was the living God. Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years (Ja 1:17). 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. Without training, no one can be used greatly by the Lord, even though he has faith. God always trains his servants before using them, as in the cases of Joseph, Moses and David. How did the Lord train Elijah?

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.’” Elijah was a man of great zeal for the Lord. He wanted to do something great for the Lord. Probably he was a man of action. He must have thought that he was able and he was not a coward and he could do something. But God sent him to the Kerith Ravine to be all alone for an extended period of time, without any companions. It must have been hard for Elijah to obey this instruction. But anyway, he obeyed without any complaining. This training was to curb his pride and to help him learn absolute obedience to God’s word. Another aspect of this training was to teach Elijah to trust in God and depend on God alone on a daily basis for his needs. It must have been hard for him 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 to feed him and care for him according to his word. Elijah learned practical faith on a daily basis. Feeding Elijah in this way was not only to train Elijah; it was God’s wisdom to keep Elijah hidden. If Elijah had been fed by people or by dogs, his adversary could track down his hiding place. But no one could follow the ravens. In this way God kept Elijah hidden.

Elijah obeyed the Lord and the ravens fed him very faithfully, at 7:30 every morning and at 5:30 every evening. Elijah drank from the brook in the Kerith Ravine which had the most pure water (5,6). From this training Elijah could learn much about God. God protected him and provided for him faithfully, even in the time of famine and danger. God rules of nature, and even commands ravens, and they obey him. God works according to his own plan, step by step. Elijah could realize that he must follow God’s plan, tempering his own zeal. Perhaps most of all, Elijah could have deep fellowship with God. There was no one around him, only ravens coming twice a day. He could spend all his time in Bible study and prayer and have intimate fellowship with God.

Second, Elijah fed by a poor widow (7-16). Look at verse 7. “Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.” The drought became worse and worse until the brook dried up. When Elijah saw this, he may have felt pain. We can survive for a while without bread and meat. But without water, no one can survive for long. Now, Elijah’s life was in danger. Nevertheless, he waited for the word of the Lord in faith. Look at verses 8-9. “The word of the Lord came to him: ‘Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.’” To move to Zarephath from the Kerith Ravine was not a small matter. It was about 75 miles through the desert. At that time it was very hard for Elijah to travel by foot, without even a donkey. Furthermore, Zarephath was in Sidon, which was Gentile territory and Jezebel’s home country. Why did God sent Elijah to Sidon? It was to demonstrate God’s power and to reveal that Jezebel’s evil intention to kill him was futile.

Elijah had to leave his home country and stay in Zarephath and be fed by a poor widow. Elijah obeyed God’s command without any complaint. God said that he had commanded a widow in that town to supply him with food. When Elijah came to Zarephath he may have expected a delicious hot meal prepared by a rich widow. But as he arrived in Zarephath he saw a poor widow gathering sticks and called to her, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” Elijah was not only thirsty, he was also hungry. So he said, “And bring me, please a piece of bread.” How did the woman 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 and just about to eat her last meal with her son before they died. Why did God send Elijah to a poor and destitute widow instead of a rich merchant or an officer or at least a rich widow? It was to teach him to depend on God alone. At this moment, Elijah could have doubted God’s love. What he found was different from what he expected based on God’s promise. It would have been easy for Elijah to complain, saying, “This is too much. I want to resign as a prophet.” But he did not do this. He believed God’s promise. So he challenged her by faith.

Look at verses 13-14. “Elijah said to her, ‘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.’” Elijah challenged the woman to have faith in God. Elijah promised that God would provide for her needs if she sought God’s kingdom and righteousness first. It was hard for Elijah to ask an extremely poor widow to make something for him first. It seems to be too selfish. But he wanted to plant faith in God in her heart.

When Elijah spoke the word of the Lord by faith, a miracle happened. Look at verses 15-16. “She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.”  The widow obeyed the word of the Lord spoken through Elijah. She had faith in God even though she lived in Sidon. What did Elijah learn through this experience? He learned that the God of Israel was ruling over Sidon as well. The Sovereign God controlled the climate of Sidon and sent rain according to his will. Baal, the god of rain and thunder, was nothing. Moreover, the widow accepted the word of God. There was a remnant of people who believed in God even in Sidon. Most of all, Elijah learned to depend on God by faith and to challenge the impossible situation in any circumstance. We learn here that we should never despair or complain, but hold on to God’s promise by faith and challenge any difficulty. Then we can experience God’s power. We must have a thankful mind in any circumstances and challenge by faith. Then God will give us great victory. God will change the desperate situation into one of favor and blessing. However, as we know, we human beings are weak and we easily despair and then complain and shrink back. But we must hold on to God’s word by faith and challenge. Then God will give us victory.

Third, Elijah raised a dead boy by faith (17-24). Look at verses 17-18. “Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. The widow said to Elijah, ‘What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?’” 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. 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 complained to God’s servant Elijah. Usually when people hit rock bottom they complain against God and God’s servants, becoming fatalistic about their sins, and forgetting all the grace of God they have received. The widow and her son could have died due to famine. But they survived by God’s grace through Elijah. So she should have been thankful to God and to Elijah even if her son died. We may understand her sorrow, but to accuse God’s servant was not a proper thing to do. She must have been greatly influenced by the pagan culture of the Sidonians. So even though she believed in God, she had some wrong concepts about God. In the time of great difficulty, her pagan idea of “cause and effect” came to the surface. She thought that her son’s death was a consequence of her sin. Many times, when people face some difficulty, they feel that God is punishing them because of some hidden sin. Sometimes this may be true. However, we should not assume so. Sometimes God uses all kinds of trials and difficulties to refine our faith so that our faith may be like pure gold (1 Pe 1:7).

When Elijah heard the widow’s complaint he must have felt sorry. He did not rebuke her. He had a compassionate heart for the poor widow. Usually people think that death is the end of everything. But Elijah did not. He challenged the power of death out of his compassionate heart toward the widow. He believed that the Lord is the living God who can even raise the dead. He believed that the Lord is sovereign over man’s life and death. So he took the boy from her arms, making this problem his very own. Then he went to the place where he was staying 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 cried out to the Lord with a shepherd’s mind. 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!’” The Lord heard Elijah’s compassionate cry. Then the boy’s life returned to him and he lived. This is the first time that the Bible records the raising of someone from the dead. God granted to the non-Israelite widow the supreme blessing of raising her son to life again, a son who was everything to her. Elijah’s compassionate heart for the widow produced a miracle. It is amazing that Elijah had a shepherd heart for a Sidonian widow. Elijah experienced God Almighty who raises the dead. He could have resurrection faith. Now he became a man of faith who could challenge even the power of death. Then 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). When he was recognized by the widow he was ready for the battle on Mount Carmel. It is important for God’s servants to be recognized by one person. When we have a challenging spirit to do the impossible, out of a great compassionate heart, we can grow as people of God and be recognized by our sheep. Now Elijah was full of challenging spirit.

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.’” To Elijah it was a very dangerous thing to show himself to Ahab, because Ahab had searched for Elijah everywhere to kill him. But Elijah was ready to obey the word of the Lord. So he went to present himself to Ahab. At that time the famine was so severe in the land that Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of his palace, and they went to find springs and valleys and some grass to feed their animals. Who was Obadiah? He is not the same person who wrote the book of Obadiah. He had served the Lord faithfully from his youth. He was working as a high official under the wicked king Ahab. As a member of King Ahab’s court, it would be natural for him to engage in Baal worship. However, he kept his faith; he did not compromise. He was not just an ordinary believer, but 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. Not only Obadiah, but Joseph and Daniel and Nehemiah show us a good example how to serve the Lord wholeheartedly even under wicked and ungodly bosses. May the Lord raise many devout people of God like Obadiah who can protect and serve his people.

As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, “Is it really you, my lord Elijah?” (7) Then Elijah asked Obadiah to go and tell Ahab, “Elijah is here” (8). However, Obadiah was afraid that Ahab would kill him if Elijah did not appear. Obadiah was worried that the Spirit of the Lord might suddenly take Elijah away. So he asked Elijah to remember what he had done for the Lord and to have mercy upon him. Elijah promised that he would surely present himself to Ahab that day. Strengthened by this promise, Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him that Elijah had come.

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). To any ordinary man this could have been an intimidating threat. But 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.” Then he challenged him. Look at verse 19. “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.” On one side was Elijah the prophet of the Lord. On the other side were 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. Elijah summoned them to meet him on Mount Carmel. What great faith! What great challenging spirit! We need this kind of faith and challenging spirit in order to save people from the deception of idolatry. Without a challenge, nothing happens. But in order to challenge we need faith in God. When we challenge by faith, then God will surely bless us. So we should not just sit down powerlessly and complain about the adverse situation. We must rise up and challenge by faith. We are called as the soldiers of Jesus Christ. If a soldier does not want to fight and becomes lazy, he is useless and he will die very soon. So we have to fight a spiritual battle for our Commander Jesus.

Ahab obeyed Elijah and assembled all the prophets on Mount Carmel. Many people came to watch this great contest. Elijah began by challenging his own people. Look at verse 21. “Elijah went before the people and said, ‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.’ But the people said nothing.” In their minds, the people wanted to follow the Lord as their God. But in reality, they feared what Ahab might do to them if they followed the Lord. So they could not but follow Baal. They remind us of the situation today in Turkey. When Muslims convert to Christianity they face severe pressure from their bosses and their families and their society. They cannot marry or get a proper job. So among those who convert, 80 percent later return to Islam. They also remind us of young Americans who face peer pressure. In their souls they want to worship the Lord as their God. But in their body they want to enjoy the pleasures of sin in this world. So they hesitate to commit themselves to the Lord. So they are just standing in the middle ground, occupying the “gray area” of life. They are very sensitive to others’ opinions. But there is no middle ground in the spiritual world. We have to decide either to live as God’s people with a clear identity as a man or woman of God or to live as an idol worshiper. We have to decide whether we will serve God or money. We must determine to live for the glory of God or for our own glory, because we cannot serve two masters. God wants us to be hot or cold, not lukewarm. If we are lukewarm he will spit us out of his mouth (Rev 3:16). God is a jealous God. He does not want us to live with half-hearted devotion. Therefore we must decide either one way or the other. Those who make no decision will become idol worshipers by default. When we make a decision to serve God wholeheartedly, we can enjoy heavenly joy and peace and also God will surely bless us. And at the same time we will receive some persecution. But that persecution stimulates us to grow.

Elijah pointed out that there were four hundred fifty prophets of Baal versus one prophet of the Lord. In the Lord, the number does not matter. When the Lord is on our side, we can advance against innumerable enemies. 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 and Elijah would offer up a bull for sacrifice. 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. Then all the people said, “What you say is good.” Now the curtain was up for the play and the audience was watching and the main actors were in place ready to perform one of the most meaningful acts in history. It was a public confrontation 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 to Baal from morning until noon: “O Baal answer us.” But there was no response; no one answered. So they began to dance around the altar. Each priest of Baal did his best to dance to the utmost of his ability in order to disguise the fact that they knew Baal was not listening. Look at verse 27. “At noon Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’” Then the prophets of Baal began to shout louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. This went on for hours. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying. Here “prophesying” means shouting incantations in an ecstatic mood. This went on until the time of the evening sacrifice. 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. So 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. In this way Elijah helped the people to build their altar of faith. Then Elijah dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold a significant amount of water. Then he had four large jars filled with water and drenched the sacrifice with water. He had this done three times until the trench was filled with water. In this way he wanted to demonstrate that the fire from heaven was sent by God’s almighty power; he wanted to make it clear to them that God was living.

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 as God’s chosen people. He also revealed 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. He wanted the people to know that the Lord is God in Israel and that Elijah was God’s servant who had done all these things at God’s command. God was calling them back to a relationship with him. Elijah’s prayer topic was very clear: to let the people know that the Lord is God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel was the only true God and he was turning their hearts to him. There are many gods in the world, such as hedonism or materialism or technology, and many manmade religions. But they are nothing but idols. They cannot save us from the power of sin and death or deliver us from our practical problems. So we should not trust them. We must realize that only the 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.

Then how did the Lord reveal himself as God? Look at verses 38-39. “Then 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!’” Only the true God can hear and answer our prayers. In this way the Lord reveals his glory.

The people who had seen God’s glory revealed came out of their spiritual stupor and began to recognize the true God who was working among them. They were ready to cowork with Elijah. He commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. 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.

It is worthwhile to visualize the closing scene of this passage. Elijah the prophet, full of the power of God is running ahead. Behind him King Ahab is coming in his chariot. In the background, there is thunder and heavy rain, sent by the Lord, in answer to Elijah’s prayer. Symbolically, it appears that spiritual order has been restored in Israel. The king is following God’s word through the prophet and God is blessing the nation with rain. In one day the Lord had turned the hearts of his people back to him. In one day Elijah had killed all the idol worshiping prophets. It seems to be the beginning of a new chapter in Israel’s history in which God’s presence and blessing would once again characterize the spiritual life of the nation.

When Israel was overrun by Baal worship, Elijah did not sit down in despair, thinking the situation was hopeless. He did not complain and become fatalistic, doubting God’s love and power. Rather, he stood up by faith and challenged the situation by faith. Also, he humbly received God’s training. So he could grow as a great man of God, a man of prayer who was full of the Spirit. He was not overpowered by worldly influence, but he challenged the power of Baal worship. In this way, God gave him great victory. We need this kind of challenging spirit like Elijah. Let’s pray that we may all grow and become men and women of challenging spirit like Elijah.