

The Word of a Life-Giving God

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[0 : 0 0] . Okay, so new series this morning, Elijah and Elisha, and I've called it the big fight live.

Not that Elijah and Elisha are going to have a fight, but that as we look at the history of God's people at this time, there is a big fight going on, and the Lord is fighting to be recognized by his people who are turning to false gods.

So, Bible's open at 1 Kings 17, that would be great. You could find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as we look at this together. But above all, let's pray and let's ask for God to speak to us.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are a God who has acted in history to reveal your character, your greatness.

We thank you that you have spoken by your word that we can know you ourselves in the Lord Jesus. And we pray that this morning, you will open your word to our hearts, and you will open up our hearts to your word.

[1 : 3 2] For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Well, messages can be very powerful things, and it's Freshers' Week here in Glasgow for various universities around this time, and, of course, all around the world.

And you might have seen in the news this week that in Canada, at the University of Calgary, there was a young man, Carlos, who met a student, a Dutch girl. Her name was Nicole.

And so, boy meets girl, and they got on well. And he got her number at the end of the evening. But then, when he tried it, it was the wrong number. It wasn't a valid number. And so, he decided to track her down.

He said he didn't want to be known as a bad guy who didn't text back. So, that was his excuse. So, pulling together all the facts he knew about Nicole, he sent an email to every student at the University of Calgary called Nicole.

And there are 247 of them who received this email. Now, when that happened, the Nicoles at the University of Calgary started replying to everybody, saying, good luck, Carlos, and that sort of thing.

[2 : 3 6] And they started congratulating each other on having a great name and suggested they start getting together. So, a new community has been formed, the Nicoles Society.

And they started going out together. Every Friday, they reserved space in the bar for the Nicoles to get together. Now, after much tracking down as well, the happy news for Carlos is that the first Nicole had indeed made a genuine mistake with her number.

And they're planning to reconnect this week without the other 246 Nicoles. So, it was an effective message. It was a powerful message. The powerful word of Carlos in Canada.

And this morning, we're thinking about the powerful word of God. We're starting this series with Elijah and Elisha. And the theme that holds our chapter together is the word of God.

These events, they took place about 870 BC. So, we're after Adam. We're after Abraham. We're after Moses. We're after the great King David.

[3 : 36] After Solomon. And the king who rules over the northern kingdom of Israel, of God's people, is a man called Ahab. And we pick up this story with our first point, the frightening withdrawal of Yahweh's word.

Yahweh is God's name for himself. So, whenever we see Lord in capitals, in this chapter and in the Bible, it's Yahweh, the name that God gave his people to call him Yahweh.

I don't know how you describe the church today in Scotland, but at the time of King Ahab, God's people were going through the darkest of times.

Ahab the king is meant to lead God's people in worshipping Yahweh. But in chapter 16, we find that he is the worst king Israel ever had.

Chapter 16, verse 30. Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He built a temple for the false god Baal and made a worship shrine for the false god Asherah.

[4 : 43] So, this is the nation of God being led systematically into clear apostasy by its leaders. To worship other gods instead of Yahweh.

Just imagine that. I don't know if you remember, but in January last year, the cathedral, just around the corner from here on Great Western Road, they had, as part of one of their worship services, they had a reading from the Koran from a Muslim.

And there was an outcry from Christians all over the world about that, about having that as part of public worship in a Christian church. But with Ahab here, this is something far worse than that.

Far worse. This is like the leaders of churches, the archbishops and moderators and so on, publicly leading the people, saying, you should worship this god and not Yahweh, the god of the Bible.

And if you cannot imagine somebody worse than Ahab, you just had to meet his wife. Okay? Ahab was married to Jezebel from up north from Israel near Sidon.

[5 : 48] She is a woman whose family have worshipped Baal for generations. She is awful. This is the darkest of days among God's people. So what does God do about that?

Well, look at verse 1 of chapter 17. Now, Elijah, the Tishbite from Tishbe and Gilead, said to Ahab, 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.

God raises up a messenger, a prophet, to bring a judgment on the people for having rejected God for Baal. And Elijah's message is a devastating message.

We saw earlier this year, didn't we, in Australia, there was lots of news from Australia about how awful it was in parts of Australia, living in drought earlier this year. It's a devastating thing.

We saw Cape Town on the world news for nearly running out of water. And in places like Namibia, now we've got friends who were missionaries in Namibia, and so often their prayer requests come in, can you pray for rain?

[6 : 52] First thing to pray for, can you pray for rain? There's no rain. Well, the message here for Ahab is that the land will not have rain for years. And this is the ancient world.

There were no desalination machines around. And it's not just arbitrary that the Lord chooses this judgment. It's because Baal was worshipped as the fertility god. So they thought, if you turn away from Yahweh, the god of the Bible, and you worship Baal, he'll make sure the harvest comes in.

And Yahweh does this to demonstrate to the people whom he loved and whom he rescued and who've rejected him, he is the one who is in charge of nature.

He reigns. And just notice what Elijah said about the Lord. He says, Baal is not real.

Baal is made up. He's not the god around here. Yahweh is the god of this nation. And then he adds, Yahweh whom I serve. He's remarkably brave, Elijah, to stand before the apostate king with his apostate wife who's killing the prophets and say, Yahweh is still the true god and I serve him.

[8 : 08] And then Elijah is led by the word of the Lord to the Kerith ravine away from what's, well it's in, it's in kind of what's modern day Jordan and he's out of reach of King Ahab.

So why is he led there? Well partly it's to protect him from Ahab, but God could do that anywhere. God could protect his people. The bigger reason why Elijah is taken away is because God is taking the word of God away from the people of God.

By the time we get to the next chapter, next week, three years will have gone by and Ahab will have sent people into every corner of his kingdom to try and find Elijah. But the king and his people have rejected God's word and God responds in judgment by taking his word away.

His word that rules, but also that's his word that brings blessing. And it's a terrible thing not to have it. And we must be concerned for China today with the news coming over from China that the government are closing down churches, they're burning Bibles, they've made it illegal to buy Bibles online now in China.

And we must pray that the Lord will defy the governing authorities in China and enable the people of China to have God's word. But here in 1 Kings we're also seeing that when God's people have the word but they stop paying attention to the word when they hear it but they don't trust it and build their lives on it and put it into practice, his response can be to take it away from his people.

[9 : 44] And conversely, when we see Israel going through that, it should make us appreciate what a wonderful gift it is for us to have God's word in Scotland today.

And we should ask ourselves, does my own pattern of life demonstrate that I see the Bible as a wonderful gift from God to me as one of his people? Let me ask you, what change could you perhaps make in your life?

What could you do differently so that in your life day by day and in your life Sunday by Sunday, you could demonstrate that your attitude towards the Bible is that you value it as a wonderful gift from God?

That's our first point, the frightening withdrawal of Yahweh's word. And our second is the searching challenge of Yahweh's word. While Israel is left without rain, Yahweh wonderfully provides for his faithful prophet.

In verse 6, we read that the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook. God provides daily for Elijah and it's significant, isn't it, that Elijah's being provided just what he needs, bread and meat, day by day, day by day in the wilderness because that's what God did for his people Israel when they were in the wilderness as he taught them to trust his provision day by day before they went into the land.

[11 : 13] And here they are worshipping an idol and idols like Baal, they make promises that they don't keep. It's true for us today. If you stop worshipping the God of the Bible and you worship something else, it will be because you've believed a promise about something else and it won't keep that promise and Yahweh is the great provider.

He can even use unclean animals to deliver food to somebody as he sustains them. But in verse 7, the brook dries up and it dries up because the Lord wants to move Elijah somewhere else so that he can provide for someone else.

Let's read from verse 7. Sometime later, the brook dried up because there'd been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him, go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there.

I have instructed a widow there to supply you with food. So Elijah gets up and he goes. But what's remarkable here is that he's sent to this little town, Zarephath.

I've got a map on here of where he goes from the Kerith brook up north, well out of reach of the people of God, just south of Sidon. That's where Zarephath is.

[12 : 29] And that's significant because as well as this widow being from there, we know that another woman from Sidon is Jezebel, married to Ahab. So this is out of Israel territory where Baal is now being worshipped and right into the epicenter of Baal land where Baal is wholeheartedly worshipped.

And here Elijah finds this destitute widow and she's at the town gate gathering sticks and he asks her if she'll give him a drink and she goes off to give him a drink. But then he also asks her for a piece of bread.

And look at verse 12. She makes a remarkable confession in verse 12. As surely as the Lord your God lives. Isn't that an amazing thing to say?

Elijah hasn't heard anybody have faith like that in Israel for a long time, especially not the king of Israel. But this pagan widow in a pagan town seems to know that Yahweh is alive.

But then her desperation emerges in verse 12. I don't have any bread, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug.

[13 : 41] I'm gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it and die. She's on the verge of death.

And then we get this searching challenge for her. She's called to put her trust in Yahweh's promise. If you have a look at verse 13. Elijah said to her, don't be afraid, go home and do as you have said.

But first make a small loaf of bread for me and from what you have. Make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me and then make something for yourself and your son.

That's the challenge for her. And then the promise. 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 sends rain on the land.

So this woman, she might never have met one of God's people before but she knows two things, doesn't she? She knows she's about to die and she knows that Yahweh has made her a promise.

[14 : 51] And the question is, will she trust him? And in that dilemma, this woman is like every one of us living in Scotland today. We all know that we're going to die.

Whatever you choose to build your life on, death will spoil it. Death is the greatest enemy of humanity. And I find it remarkable with young children how difficult it is for children to get used to the idea of death.

It's not a natural thing for children. And death is coming to all of us and the people we love. We all know, like this woman, that we're going to die. And secondly, we know that the God of the Bible has made promises to us.

It's true of every one of us here. It's true of everybody in Scotland. We cannot deny it. You might not believe they're real. People of Scotland might not believe they're real but they're undeniably there. Jesus says to you and me, in the Bible, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. It's a promise. And the searching challenge for you and me is, will we trust that promise?

[16 : 00] Well, the woman does and she is kept wonderfully alive. Verse 15, she went away and did as Elijah had told her. That's the trust. And then the promise fulfilled.

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.

Elijah. God acting supernaturally at this point in history as his people reject him. That's the searching challenge of Yahweh's word.

Day by day for her and for us. Will we trust him? The God of the Bible. But then, devastation. Our third point, the mysterious pain of Yahweh's word.

If you look with me at verse 17, sometime later, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing.

[17:02] It's devastating, isn't it? And through the tears, she swipes out at Elijah. Verse 18, what do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?

You can see the anger. Why did you ever come into my life? I was in despair. You've given me hope only for this to happen. And the guilt, you can see the guilt there, can't you?

Is it my fault? Am I being punished here? What sort of a God is this? And for Elijah, it must have been completely perplexing. What on earth is my God up to here?

But for us today, what a comfort to know that the Bible deals with real life like this. All of us in this world today can find that life hits us with disappointment, with tragedy, with confusion.

And it's good to reflect on that moment in these events. One of the dangers when you read an Old Testament account like this one of Elijah is we're too quick to put ourselves in the shoes of the lead character.

[18:11] So we see Elijah and we think, oh yeah, I'm like Elijah and we see him by the brook getting provided for and we sort of normalize the promise and think, yeah, God's showing me that if I just trust God, he'll always provide for me all the food and drink that I need.

We're actually, we're not like Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who God is keeping alive and sustaining because he's got business to do with Elijah. presumably while Elijah was at the brook, there were still faithful people worshipping Yahweh in the minority in Israel who were in that devastating famine.

We're not Elijah. And sometimes our lives will look much more like this woman's does at that moment. And we're left completely perplexed by how life is going just as she was and Elijah was.

that God would invite this woman to trust him, provide for her and for her son every day and then he allows the son to get sick and die. And here in Zarephath we have some Bible realism about the world today as one of God's people to forewarn us.

Let me read you what the writer Dale Ralph Davis says about this event. He says, we may think we would have been kinder than God. Here is a widow having just escaped from bar worship who had only begun to taste and see that Yahweh is good and he crushed her.

[19:37] Why didn't he wait until she was more mature in her faith? Why shatter a new convert with the dark mysteries of his way? We cannot answer such queries. We can only say that this woman discovered early on that Yahweh both sustains and bewilders, both delights and devastates.

And as you watch and hear her in the text you know that you have been there. Just as perplexed, as much in amaze, in just as much darkness before God, in knots about what sin God was punishing.

Why, you've lamented, did he light my way with tokens of his favor and then crush me with such a grievous distress? And yet there is a sort of backhanded comfort in the rugged honesty of the Bible.

It hides nothing but warns clearly that Yahweh both blesses and baffles his servants. That's the mysterious pain of Yahweh's word.

To forewarn us so that we're forearmed and ready. So that you don't lose your stability if something happens in your life that leaves you perplexed and confused.

[20 : 45] But our fourth point is the life-giving power of Yahweh's word. Elijah doesn't turn away from God in his distress. He turns towards God. He takes the dead son from the woman and he carries him up the stone stairs and into the upper room where he was staying and he lays the son down on the bed and he pleads with God.

Verse 20 Then he cried out to the Lord Lord my God have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with by causing her son to die? And then he lies down on the boy as though he's saying to God let my life pass into this dead body's life.

He does it three times and then he prays again. Elijah doesn't have any magic words here. He's got no special access to God's goodness to prize life out of God's hands.

At this point he's just an ordinary man on his knees perplexed and pleading before a great God. Yahweh my God he says let this boy's life return to him.

He's got no promise. Folks at this point in Bible history nobody has ever risen from the dead. It's never happened. But look at verse 22. The Lord heard Elijah's cry and the boy's life returned to him and he lived.

[22 : 08] Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said look your son is alive. It's a wonderful moment and you realize that Yahweh had let the son die so that he could show this woman that he is not just trustworthy for the present day by day.

You can trust him for your future even through death. It's just a sign of that great truth as God demonstrates here that he can help you not just when you're in distress but even when the jaws of death have sunk into you and closed on you over your life.

life. And for centuries after this event generations went by of people who lost their loved ones, parents who lost their children, grandparents burying their grandchildren and you can imagine every time among God's people them thinking I wish we lived at the time of Elijah like that widow who got her son back.

I wish I could have been there then. until Jesus comes and he sees a widow's son being carried out in a funeral procession outside Nain and he says to the widow don't cry and he raises the son to life and he raises Jairus' daughter to life and he raises Lazarus to life and they see him do it and they kill him on a cross and he says in Revelation chapter 1 to John on the island of Patmos he says don't be afraid I am the first and the last I am the living one I was dead and now look I'm alive forever and ever and I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Just recently out on Park Road just here I was walking past and there was a sports car outside and there was a couple of boys oogling at this sports car and so I walked towards the car with my keys in my hands and there was this moment when these boys thought it's his car and one of them said with this look of awe and excitement is it your car they couldn't see that my car key is actually for a Nissan and not a Lamborghini and they were so excited you see they realized if this guy has got the keys for this car we want to be with him because it means he is in control of the car and there are endless possibilities before us and friends when Jesus says that he holds the keys to death he means that he has defeated death and he is in complete control of it now so that one day he will unlock it and he will set his people free from it and we can trust him with our deaths because he's got those keys so that the tears of joy and relief in that widow's home at Zarephath that day they're just a picture of the joy we will feel on the last day when Jesus now alive forever restores all things and says there'll be no more grief anymore it's finished so the woman responds in verse 24 have a look the woman said to Elijah now I know that you are a man of

[25 : 25] God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth King Ahab worships Baal and he and his people are starving to death this widow has seen that the God of the Bible is a marvellous provider and she resolves to build her life on his word from now on so the challenge for us is how are you responding to God's word today in Luke chapter 4 Jesus uses this story in his hometown to warn the Bible people he was in the synagogue and he warned them he said there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time but Elijah wasn't sent to any of them but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon what was Jesus saying he's saying God's mercy on that widow that day was also a judgment on Israel outwardly religious in many ways but friends it's not enough to be in church it's not enough to be a hearer of God's word Jesus challenged to us is do we trust his word and do we obey his word because we trust it I wonder could we like that woman trust that God is a marvelous provider and resolve that we'll build our lives on his word and remember

Elijah that courage before Ahab his confidence before the woman to pass on God's promises in the heart of a pagan land could we like Elijah wherever we've been placed by God this week be willing to say to somebody the Lord Jesus is the God whom I serve he is a marvelous provider and you know he can save you from death let's pray together Lord Jesus we praise you that you are the living one the first and last who once was dead and now you are alive forever we praise you Yahweh that you are the great provider we trust you with our present and with our future may we like this widow receive your word as a wonderful gift and take heed of your word as the governing authority for our lives and may we like Elijah empowered by your spirit be brave to share the news that you are the living God who can save us from death we pray this for the good of our city and the glory of your name Amen Amen Amen Amen