

“Elijah’s Contest” (part 1)

1 Kings 16:29-33; 1 Kings 17:1-24

☞ What would you like to praise God for today?

☞ Pray for God’s guidance as you study

1. Describe a time in your life when you had to “skimp” on food. What was your most creative meal?

To fully appreciate this story it is helpful to know some of the background history. Six kings had preceded King Ahab’s rule in the last 58 years. Two of these were idolaters. The third king was a murderer. The fourth king was an alcoholic. The fifth king was accused of “spiritual treason”. And Ahab’s father was described as more evil than all the others previously. Now Ahab follows in his father’s footsteps by being even worse. He ruled from 874—853 B.C.

To cement an alliance with Tyre Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the priest-king Eshbaal. Jezebel (her name means “where is Baal”) was a fanatical follower of Baal. In fact she had a staff of 450 Baal prophets and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah. She led the way in enforcing Baal worship at the new national religion. This included depraved sexual immorality and child sacrifice.

Baal was essentially a fertility god, thought to have power over drought and sterility. He was also associated with fire. His name meant “the Rider in the Clouds”. 1

2. What impresses you most about the meeting between Elijah and King Ahab:

a. Elijah’s courage to confront the King?

b. Elijah’s courage to challenge Jezebel’s god to a weather prediction?

c. That the prediction included not just weather but the lack of dew as well?

d. That Elijah’s prophecy was not random, but aligned with the mandate of God in Deuteronomy 11:13-17?

3. Why do you think God directed Elijah into the wilderness on a long campout? Why direct him to a brook named Cherith (meaning “drought”) and not a spring? Why feed him via ravens?

Moses spent time herding sheep and goats in the wilderness before leading the Exodus. Joseph spent time in prison before becoming the prime minister of Egypt. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness before beginning His public ministry. What reasoning might God have had for Elijah in this similar experience at Cherith?

4. If camping at the brook Cherith (meaning “*drought*”) wasn’t bad enough, God now directs Elijah to the town of Zarephath (meaning “*smelting furnace*”). To make matters worse, Elijah’s “refuge” is in the home of a starving widow. What’s more Zarephath is only eight miles from Tyre – Jezebel’s home town. Elijah is literally hiding in Jezebel’s backyard!

Try and put yourself in the widow’s place. What might your thoughts and feelings have been as you went about your tasks that morning?

How would you have responded to Elijah’s words in 1 Kings 17:13-14?

5. Was the woman a believer in the true God, or just in no position to argue? Why does Elijah tell her to provide for him first?

What is the result of her faith?

6. What “jars and jugs” are running dry for you? What encouragement can you take from Elijah’s wilderness experiences for yourself and the testing you are facing?

Prayer: For one another

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DID YOU KNOW?

After the contest on Mt. Carmel, the Bible refers to a servant Elijah sends repeatedly to look for rain. We don't know for certain who that servant was, but legend has it that he may have been the widow's son from Zarephath. It is thought that he dedicated his life to serving the man who saved him from death.

The story of Zarephath is referred to again by Jesus in Luke 4:25,26. Jesus uses the story to rebuke his home town's lack of faith. Jesus' statement also shows that God celebrates faith regardless of nationality, gender or social status – all things that were important barriers to those in the culture of Jesus' day.

In the following chapter, Elijah conducts an amazing contest on Mt. Carmel. However, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story of another mountain top experience involving the prophet. (See Matthew 17:1-3; Mark 9:1-12 and Luke 9:28-35.) In this story Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain. There Christ is transformed into his heavenly glory. Elijah and Moses appear with him. But of all the Old Testament Bible characters, why did God send Elijah?

Here are a couple thoughts. In 2 Kings 2 we learn how Elijah's ministry was suspended and Elisha became his successor. 2 Kings 2:11 says simply: *"As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind."* Elijah never died. In fact, Malachi mentions his future ministry in verse 4:5: *"I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."*

Jesus identified John the Baptist as having come in the spirit of Elijah (Matt. 11:14; Luke 11:1-17). Does this mean that we have seen the last of Elijah? Orthodox Jews still observe Malachi's promise of Elijah when they celebrate Passover even today:

"The cup of Elijah derives from a problem in Talmudic Law. The problem is not knowing exactly how many cups of wine to drink at the Seder, four or five. The number of cups is based on the four expressions of deliverance, but there is actually a fifth expression of deliverance.

So, the rabbis came up with the perfect Jewish compromise. We fill the fifth cup, but we don't drink from it. And since Elijah will proceed the Messiah, who will be able to tell us whether four or five cups are correct, we make the fifth cup of wine Elijah's cup.

In some Seder services, each person at the Seder contributes some wine to the fifth cup, symbolizing everyone sharing in the messianic hope. At other Seder services, wine from the cup of Elijah is mixed with the fourth cup."¹

Another thought takes us to the very end of Scripture. In Revelation 11: 3-12 the Bible mentions two witnesses that have supernatural empowering. It also refers to the witness' ability to prohibit rainfall during their ministry. (Sound familiar?) However when their testimony is complete, Satan's forces will kill them. It is thought that the identity of one of these prophets is none other than Elijah, and it is here that he will finally experience death. Three and a half days later, their dead bodies are restored and they are taken to Heaven.