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Lessons in Prayer – The Prayers of Elijah

In this series we are looking at some Biblical figures and the role of prayer in their relationship with God. So far we have looked at Moses and David; how their stories and their prayers can help us grow deeper in our relationship with God through prayer.

Today we are going to take a look at the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Elijah is a fascinating character with a fierce passion for God. God did some amazing things through Elijah and in time Elijah becomes the figurehead prophet. Elijah symbolizes the spirit of prophecy. We see this in the New Testament when John the Baptist is asked if he is Elijah in the first chapter of John's gospel. When Jesus reveals his divinity to Peter, James and John on a mountain and is transformed before their eyes in Mark 9, two significant figures from the Old Testament appear with Jesus; Moses – the person identified with the Laws of Israel, and Elijah – the person identified with the voice of prophecy in Israel.

So today we are going to take a look at Elijah. Who was this man and what can we learn from his prayers and experiences with God to help us utilize prayer to connect to God. As we get started, I want to remind you to take a few notes today and also to use the study guide for this week. We will do a quick cliff notes version of Elijah today, but the readings this week will give you a chance to interact with Elijah's life and prayers in more detail. So use it as a way to read the Bible daily...

In his letter in the New Testament, the disciple James lifts Elijah up as a person of prayer and uses him as an example.

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.” James 5:16-18 TNIV

Elijah's exploits are pretty amazing, so much so that it would be easy for us to place him in an almost super-human category and to believe that he is not like us. James is quick to remind us that Elijah was just a man. We need to remember that all of these people we have looked at, including Elijah, are people, are human like us, with frailties and shortcomings like us. They are not above our reach or beyond our ability to relate. Yet they had a powerful connection to God. Their prayer lives were part of a deep connection to God, so we are looking at them to gain insight about how we can deepen our relationship with God.

Last week we talked about David, who was the great King of Israel. Within two generations after David, the kingdom of Israel became divided. Ten of the twelve tribes felt oppressed by Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and split off to form the Northern Kingdom (also called Israel) while Rehoboam retained power in the two tribes whose regions were closest to Jerusalem to form the Southern Kingdom (also called Judah).

Roughly 60 years later, around 870 BC, Ahab becomes King of Israel. He is described in I Kings 16 as doing more evil in the eyes of the Lord than all the previous kings combined. Ahab married the daughter of a neighboring king. Her name was Jezebel. This may have been a good political move, but it was a horrible spiritual decision. Jezebel brought with her the worship of the foreign gods (Baal and other deities associated with him) and Ahab sets up altars to these gods and encourages sacrifices to them from the people. Baal was the most important among the gods of the Canaanites, and was a storm-god, or nature deity and so worship to Baal was centered around pleasing this god to ensure fertility and production of crops, and protection from natural disasters.

We no sooner read that Ahab has firmly established the practice of worshipping Baal among the northern kingdom when Elijah comes onto the scene. There is hardly any introduction to this prophet. His name, **“Elijah”**, means **“The Lord is my God”** and we are told where his hometown is and then the next thing you know he is talking to Ahab, the king. His prophecy to Ahab is that there will be no rain in Israel (remember that rain is power Baal claims to have) for several years. After his brief confrontation, Elijah leaves Israel at God's command. He eventually ends up in Jezebel's home country in a town along the coast of the Mediterranean called Zarephath. God leads Elijah there to take refuge in the heart of the very land where Baal is the supreme God, where Jezebel's father is still king. We learn from context of the story is that the drought is not just in Israel, but also in the larger region, including Jezebel's home country (Baal's stronghold).

A widow there was gathering sticks to build a fire to bake her last meal. Elijah asks her for something to eat and she says she doesn't have anything to share. He tells her not to worry, her flour and oil will last until the Lord provides the rain that will end the drought and the widow and her son will survive. So Elijah stays there for a long time. While he is there the son of the widow becomes ill and dies. The widow wonders what she has done to

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deserve that especially since she has been housing God's prophet. Elijah prays over the son and the Lord hears Elijah's prayer and the son's life returns to him.

After three years of drought and famine, the Lord tells Elijah to go meet with Ahab again. All this time Ahab has been searching for Elijah to kill him. Elijah finds Ahab and lays a throw down challenge; a cosmic duel – literally between God and Baal. He challenges Ahab to bring all 450 of his prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel and take on the God of Israel. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to build an altar on the mountain to their God, make a sacrifice and invite their storm god, who is often depicted as having lightning bolts in his hand, to bring down fire from heaven and burn up the sacrifice. So they take the challenge and they go at it from morning to noon, calling upon their god, Baal, and nothing happens. That's when Elijah begins the trash talking. "Yell louder! Maybe your god is asleep and cannot hear you." This went on until the evening and nothing happened.

That's when Elijah steps up to take his turn. He takes 12 stones and builds an altar and lays the sacrificial bull upon it and digs a trench around it. He orders for water to be poured over it all, so much that it fills the trench around the altar. And then he prays:

"LORD, the 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, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." I Kings 18:36-37 TNIV

And with that simple, short prayer, fire came down out of heaven and burned up the altar and the sacrifice and dried up all the water that was around the altar. And the people fell down and worshiped God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Israel. Then the people got up and pursued and killed all the prophets of Baal.

Elijah then tells King Ahab to go refresh himself with food and wine because soon the earth will also be refreshed by rain. And Elijah goes further up Mount Carmel to pray:

So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. I Kings 18:42-45 TNIV

The fire on the mountain was not the complete defeat of Baal; Baal, the god of weather and fertility and rain and good crops was ultimately defeated through this episode of prayer, when the rains return to renew the land. There's a good metaphor happening here, so don't miss it, that as the earth is renewed by the rain, the faith of the people of Israel in the God of their ancestors is also renewed. This miracle happens through the prayer of Elijah. This time we don't even know what he said. We just know that he humbled himself and he was persistent – he kept praying.

Remembering that Elijah was human, just like us, I like to imagine that somewhere in that prayer there was a bit of panic. You know what I mean? After the servant comes back like the 4th or 5th time, can't you hear Elijah... "OK Lord, where's the rain? Don't leave me hangin here please? I only had to ask once for fire from the sky." So I think the short lesson is from this prayer is to be persistent. Let the prayer continue even through your doubt; even through not knowing if or how it will be answered. Whatever it is, pray it through until you hear or see God's response.

Ahab makes it back to Jezebel and tells her about his interesting day at the office. Jezebel is irate and pledges to do to Elijah what was done to her prophets and sets an alarm on her to do list to make sure the task is completed in 24 hours. Elijah hears of her threat and does what? Well, he doesn't pray! He RUNS!

God takes care of him along the journey. He runs a long way. The scripture says he travelled 40 days and 40 nights. That may or may not mean 40 literal days. It definitely has figurative meaning because he heads south and leaves Israel, passes through the southern kingdom, Judah, and goes into desert where the Hebrews wondered with Moses for 40 years. Elijah takes refuge in a cave or cleft in the rock at Mount Horeb, which is also called "the mountain of God", and it just happens to be where Moses encountered the burning bush.

Here's how the rest of the story goes: ***So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.***

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And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. I Kings 19:8-15 TNIV

So Elijah is exhausted, he finds a cave on the mountain of God and he climbs in for refuge and shelter and rest. He's been on the run, looking for a place to escape. While he is in this place of escape, he encounters God and we are privy to their conversation. God asks, "What are you doing here?"

When we listen to Elijah's response it seems clear that Elijah interprets God's question as "what are you doing HERE in this cave, hiding out?" In pretty dramatic fashion Elijah frames his reasons for coming to Horeb. A) "I am on the right team here, I am doing the right things" B) "They have all rejected you and killed anyone associated with you" C) "Only I remain and they are all after me now". This is where I think Elijah's prayer sounds pretty human! He's fretting, focusing on his fears, it's all about him and this terrible predicament God has put him in. It's very close to "it's your fault, God". His words are filled with self-pity. His perspective is limited to what immediately affects him. He can only see his troubles and he just wants God to make it all disappear and make everything all right! He's whining and he just wants God to fix it!

I understand this kind of prayer. Maybe you do to. There's a problem. There is a crisis. There is something outside of our ability to control. We are focused on it, whether "it" is something pretty serious in our life or someone else's life; cancer, natural disasters, losing a job, divorce. We feel threatened in some way or it affects our way of life. It dominates our vision and we can't see around it. It is overwhelming and we just want God to fix it. Change the circumstances; alter the reality around us.

Elijah's previous prayers had altered the external reality. Dead son became alive again; rain stopped; fire came down from heaven; rain returned. All those prayers connected to a change outside of Elijah. And I think we should pray those kinds of prayers. We should be praying that God would intervene in our world, in our lives and the lives around us; that God would heal, God would protect, God would be at work in sometimes miraculous ways. We should pray for reality around us to change; for cancer to disappear, for depression to cease, for God's comfort to overwhelm the grieving and for peace to conquer violence. Elijah is clearly an example that we should pray for things around us to change, even if they do not get answered as we wish they would.

But Elijah is not in a good place. Just listen to what he says. What he says to God are distortions. Elijah is not the only one faithful to God. They are not ALL after him. Elijah makes his situation look more drastic and devastating. There is quite a bit of justifying going on here. Elijah wants God to change the external reality around him. And God asks Elijah a question and I think that God is trying to help Elijah see that before the reality around him can change, the reality IN HIM has to change.

When God asks Elijah "what are you doing here?", maybe "here" isn't Mount Horeb. Maybe "here" is his self-absorption. Maybe "here" is self-pity; a pity that makes it all about Elijah. Maybe "here" is twisting the truth to make himself look good before God. Maybe "here" is the place of panic or fear. Maybe "here" is thinking only about himself when he is in the meeting place with God.

Maybe God is trying to say, "Elijah, this cave is a meeting place, not a hiding place. You're here, but your not here."

And that sounds very familiar to me. How many times have I been in prayer and been there, but not been there. It could be over something very significant or very trivial. It could be a bad diagnosis (yours or someone you love) and it shakes your world – fills your head with fear or it could be major stuff like depression or paranoia like it was for Elijah, or It could just be that you are wrapped up in your own little world of "to do's". I know that there are

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times when I get pretty pre-occupied with me and my world. There are all kinds of ways that our minds and souls get wrapped up and make it all about us, and in that way we become like Elijah – here but not here.

So God answers Elijah's three reasons for being in the cave with three responses. Great wind comes; Earthquake comes; destroying fire comes. Three powerful things, but the Bible says that God was not in any of them.

Interpreters vary in their translation of the Hebrew for how God did show up; "still small voice", "gentle whisper", "gentle breeze" or "hardly a sound". The point is clear...it is not just in the spectacular that God can show up. God also arrives in simple, quiet moments too. Moments like prayer. God is in the calm after the storm.

After Elijah encounters God in the stillness, he follows God's instructions. He wraps his head (a sign of awe or respect) and gets up (out of his self-absorption) and goes out to the mouth of the cave (leaves his hiding place).

And as Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave he can look out to the world he wants to get away from and see it all from a different perspective. At the mouth of the cave, he can look back into the cave and see how he is hiding. He can see himself as he truly is. He can see how he was living in a world that was all about him. He can see how small his view of reality had become.

And as Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave, he can look out at that world and see beyond the paralyzing fears. He can see beyond his hardships and troubles and he can see the world as a place of mission and opportunity again. All because he met God in the calm after the storm.

The reality of the world out there hasn't changed for Elijah. Jezebel still wants him dead. Ahab still has an army after him. They are still to be reckoned with. While he is in the cave, that seems overwhelming, but at the mouth of the cave, Elijah no longer sees that world through fear.

Prayer can be a place of encounter that calls us out of a self-centered sense of the world around us and give us new perspective. It calls us out of the hiding places, out of the darkness of the cave to encounter the light of God's presence. Prayer is like standing at the mouth of the cave, where we can look back in to see ourselves from a new perspective and look out at the world without fear – seeing opportunities to be with God on God's mission. Everything looks different after we've met God in the stillness.

So God asks Elijah the same question a second time. "What are you doing here". Here is no longer in the cave. Here is at the mouth of the cave. And even though Elijah says the same words, I don't think he says them in the same way.

In the cave his words would have been pouty, whiny, "I'm here because of my zeal for you, and I am the only one left, there isn't anyone else, and they are all after me, now what are you going to do?"

At the mouth of the cave I think he's at a place of surrender, humility. "I came here because of my passion for you; and it felt like I was all alone out there and like everyone else was against me. I wasn't even sure if you were there. But I'm better now and I'm ready to go."

And God says, well here's your assignment. "Go". And Elijah leaves the cave behind and goes.

I'd like to lead you in a prayer time that I have been using this week. It is based on Elijah's experience with God at the cave on Mt Horeb.

Lord, we are going to take this time just to be still. Lead us out of our hiding, out of the safe places, and out of the darkness of the cave where the world is all about us. Help me, Lord, to get to the place where I can look back into the cave and see how I am making the world revolve around me.

And about the fears or worries or whatever it is that dominate my world right now, give me the faith to trust you with those and free me from their power to hold me captive.

And Lord, help me to look out at your world, to see beyond myself and my world, and recognize the opportunities you present to join you on your mission. Thank you for meeting me here today, Lord, and please walk with me today so that I may be encouraged by your power and presence to help you do your work wherever I go.