

Genesis Project

Elijah: A Man Like Us

Seven weeks of daily Bible notes to accompany the preaching series
· October 12 – November 29, 2026

Week 1: October 12–18

Courageous obedience in a culture of compromise

Follows the sermon on Sunday, October 11 · 1 Kings 16:29–17:1; James 5:17

On Sunday we met Elijah – an ordinary man of conviction and courage, born into the dark days of Ahab and Jezebel. This week we explore his world, and discover that faith was a costly climb then, just as it is now. But God was – and He still is.

Monday, October 12

Holy and human

Readings: James 5:13–20, 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Focus: *Elijah was a man just like us. (James 5:17)*

His name immediately conjures up images of a swashbuckling superstar: Elijah, the brave confronter of cowardly kings and wicked queens. The fearless faith warrior who stood atop Mount Carmel, laughed out loud at an intimidating gang of demon-worshippers, and then demanded that flames leap out of nowhere. Elijah, the master of miracles, who raised a dead child to life. In short, not like us at all. I fear that faced with a Cruella de Vil type like Jezebel, I'd feel led to tell her that she was the fairest of them all. As for flames coming forth at my command, I was the worst Boy Scout in history. My attempts at fire making produced a feeble campfire that half-cooked some chicken and took half the troop out with food poisoning.

But before we go on what I hope will be an exciting journey with Elijah, let's stop and be encouraged by one vital truth that Scripture is loud and clear about – and that is that Elijah was *exactly* like us. He was just as capable of sin, doubt, compromise, and fear, because he was a real, flesh and blood human – and one with obvious flaws too. I love Elijah, because he could be brave and faith filled one moment and wondering where God had gone the next. Perhaps that sounds quite like most of us. His story is not so much about the extraordinary man, but the life of an ordinary man in the hands of an extraordinary God. There's hope for us all. Even a failed fire starter like me.

Prayer: *Father, thank you for the real-life portraits in your word. Help me to count myself in for your purposes today. Amen.*

Tuesday, October 13

Elijah and home

Readings: 1 Kings 17:1, Amos 7:10–15

Focus: *Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead... (1 Kings 17:1)*

Sometimes people ask me what my most terrifying preaching engagement was – a very easy question to answer. It was when I was privileged to address the National Prayer Breakfast that is held annually in the Great Hall of Westminster. Loaded with history, it was here that King Charles 1 received his death sentence from the gathered parliament. Helpfully, I fared rather better. The architecture of the Houses of Commons and Lords, with the lavish paintings and statues of the good and great, all conspire to create a sense of massive power. As a working class ('blue collar') lad raised in London's East End (with an accent that is definitely not "posh") I felt like I didn't belong. It was grand, and intimidating.

Elijah was a kid from the "wrong" part of town. Tishbe in Gilead was such an obscure place that archaeologists can't tell us its exact location. Gilead was separated by the Jordan River from the rest of Israel, politically and geographically. It was beautiful, the place where

healing spices were made (the “balm” of Gilead) but the locals were tough, serious shepherds, country folk. Dressed in camel hair cloaks with thick leather belts, they looked and sounded nothing like the sophisticated crowd in the royal court in Samaria. So pronounced was their accent that in times of war they would ask unidentified soldiers to pronounce one word: “Shibboleth” (Judges 12:5–6). The hapless enemy, unable to imitate the local dialect, was found out immediately.

Like Elijah and Amos, sometimes God puts us in places where we don’t feel we fit – but there, we might be in the very epicenter of his purposes.

Prayer: *Lord, keep my heart at peace when I feel out of place. Teach me to be secure, because of your calling and command. Amen*

Wednesday, October 14

Non-conformity and powerlessness

Readings: 1 Kings 18:4, Romans 12:1–2

Focus: *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2)*

I’m glad that Christendom – the time when the church largely controlled government and everyday life – is well and truly dead. The corrupting nature of power is easy to prove when we consider the terrible things that were done in the Name of Christ, when “Christian” people held the reins of nations and kingdoms. But it’s hard to live in a culture where those that do hold the reins seem so committedly anti-Christian. There are some nations, like North Korea, where to be a follower of Jesus is dangerous: many believers are held in concentration camp like prisons simply because of their faith - they live with consistent fear and intimidation.

Elijah must have felt something similar, living in Israel under the leadership, not only of King Ahab, but also his evil wife Jezebel. She was passionate in her love for Baal worship, erected a huge temple in

their honor, and had built up a full time team of 450 prophets and a further four hundred prophets of the goddess Asherah.

What must it have felt like to be a lover of God during this time, when the “new” Baal worship religion was sweeping the land – a religion, which, as we will see, was highly appealing to base human nature? Elijah and those like him were called to stand their ground, even though the ground beneath them felt like quicksand. There is a power at work in the world that will always demand that we conform and act like everyone else. But the majority can still be wrong. James Crook put it well: “The one who wants to lead the orchestra must turn his back on the crowd.” Is it time to break step and step out?

Prayer: *God, help me to be faithful, when faithfulness seems like lonely foolishness. Help me today. Amen.*

Thursday, October 15

Innocent blood and Baal worship

Readings: 2 Kings 17:7–17, Psalm 119:1–8

Focus: *They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshipped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. (2 Kings 17:16–17)*

What can fourteen people do in 90 minutes or less? Set plans in motion for the extermination of 11 million people, that’s what. In January of 1942, the top Nazi hierarchy met in a pleasant Berlin suburb, to plan the so-called “Final Solution.” I’ve read the minutes of their meeting, which took place over a buffet lunch. Committee minutes don’t usually stir me – but these make chilling reading. These monsters conducted their business, not with crazed blood lust, but as calm, calculated and intelligent technocrats, driven by an entirely logical ideology – at least in their eyes. One of the participants noted the atmosphere of the meeting was one of cooperation and agreement. Bad ideas wreak terrible carnage.

So it was in Elijah's days. Ahab and Jezebel's religion called for worshippers to frantically engage with their slow witted gods through sacrifice, and taught that human life was cheap. That was their theology – which led to horrifying practice. In that evil religion, it was deemed spiritual to take a new born child, still warm from the breast, and hurl it into the flames, as the monotonous drums vainly muffled its screams. Bad theology is indeed a terrible taskmaster.

That's why it's so important to take very seriously what we believe. Read, study, stretch your mind, watch the news, get informed, and engage in discussion. Don't nod your head in placid agreement with every notion that floats by. There's a battle going on to capture our minds. So, with the Psalmist, let's "learn his righteous laws" – and for God's sake - think.

Prayer: *Lord, save me from deception, from error disguised as truth, from falsehood that destroys and distorts. Keep me in your ways. Amen.*

Friday, October 16

Faithful, but different

Readings: 1 Kings 18:3–4, 1 Kings 19:18

Focus: *While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water. (1 Kings 18:4)*

Elijah stood boldly in the face of unspeakable evil – but he did not stand alone. There were others alive at the time that were willing to risk life and limb for God, but they did so in ways quite different from those chosen by Elijah. The prophet would become an open confronter, who would capture the hearts and imagination of a nation; others were called to quiet, even furtive faithfulness.

One of those men was Obadiah, a high ranking minister of state who was in charge of the royal household. He was the original double

agent. Risking certain death if discovered, he set up a rescue program, hiding a hundred of God's prophets away in caves, and supplying them with the essentials for their survival. He had loved God for many years (1 Kings 18:12), but was never called to take center stage in the way that Elijah was. He was another part of God's jigsaw – different, but vital nonetheless.

The great William Wilberforce, abolitionist of slavery, was condemned by some Christians in his day because they misunderstood his skill as political tactician and dismissed him as a compromiser. In reality, Wilberforce did what he believed God was asking him to do – with brilliant and world changing effect.

Elijah would eventually march to the mountain top, while Obadiah quietly rushed down to the caves, clutching vital supplies for God's prophets in hiding. Both were needed in their day. You are vital – and so are those who are quite unlike you. We are all different - thank God for that!

Prayer: Lord, give me passion to serve you, and grace to appreciate and bless those who serve you in different spheres and methods from my own. Amen

Weekend, October 17–18

The good old days

Readings: Romans 1:18–32, Hebrews 13:7–8

“It's more difficult to be a Christian these days, because things are definitely getting worse” - or so it is often said. We can easily think that if we had just been born at another time, in another place, then it would have been easier somehow. But our nostalgia is misguided. I look at the black and white television pictures of 1950s America, and it all looks so innocent, so appealing. Surely it was simpler to be a follower of Jesus back then? Try telling that to a black person, who had to sit at the back of the bus and endure the fearsome sight of burning crosses lit by hooded Ku Klux Klan members, some of whom were

“pillars” of the local church. I’m not convinced that things are any better or worse than they’ve ever been – perhaps we’re just a lot more brazen and obvious about our sinning. Human nature is what it is, and has always been, as Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans.

This week we’ve taken a good look at Elijah’s world, and seen that in some ways his challenges were similar to our own. But God was big enough then – and He hasn’t changed. God is great enough for you, with your life - now.

Prayer: Father, it’s my turn, together with all Your people, to walk faithfully in 2026. Strengthen me today, enable me to stand firm in You. Amen.

Week 2: October 19–25

God’s provision and preparation of Elijah

Follows the sermon on Sunday, October 18 · 1 Kings 17:2–7

On Sunday we enrolled at Kerith Valley University. This week we stay by the brook with Elijah – a place of silence, strange provision and slow growth. The road to Carmel passes through Kerith.

Monday, October 19

Leaving it to God

Readings: 1 Kings 17:2–4, 2 Chronicles 20:1–12

Focus: *“Leave here, turn eastwards and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan.” (1 Kings 17:3)*

God knows, or so the saying goes. But I like it when I know too.

I don’t like those movies with ambiguous endings, where we are left in the dark as to the final outcome. Having invested a couple of hours in watching the thing, we’d quite like to know what happened at the

finish. And I'm not too thrilled about those cliff-hanger quiz shows where a huge prize hangs in the balance, the contestant has given their answer – but we have to endure a commercial break before we find out if they are to be millionaire or pauper.

Elijah dropped his prophetic stun grenade in the palace and then walked out – and off the stage of Israel's national life for a whole year as God shunted him away to the brook Kerith – a location we'll visit this week. He doesn't wait for Ahab's response to his message; instead, he's off on the trail to enforced obscurity, because there was something that was far more important than Elijah knowing the outcome of his palace trip – and that was the shaping of Elijah's character, preparing him for the next round of battle with the Baals.

It's okay for us, like Jehoshaphat, not to know. We just have to leave some things with God, who does know.

Prayer: *Lord, when I don't know how things will turn out, help me to leave them with you. Amen.*

Tuesday, October 20

Obedience

Readings: 1 Kings 17:4–5, John 14:15–24

Focus: *So he did what the Lord had told him (1 Kings 17:5)*

At first glance, it looks like Elijah did a proverbial “runner” – rushing into hiding from what was now probably a seething king – the English translation of the text includes the word “hide.” But we've already seen that others were in hiding; the senior civil servant Obadiah was running a secret refuge for prophets. So if Elijah wanted to hole up for a while, he could have joined them, where the benefits of community would have been his.

Consider as well that when Jezebel later issued a death threat to Elijah, he took matters in his own hands, ran away and hid, and God sent him straight back into that dangerous situation (1 Kings 19:3). Whatever the

ultimate motivation here, it seems that at this earlier stage of Elijah's ministry, fear wasn't the dominating force that drove him – *obedience* was.

Obedience is the heart of discipleship. Sometimes, we don't feel like doing what is right, have a host of better ideas and wonder about the logic of doing things God's way. But obedience must be our daily choice.

So why does God insist that we obey him? Has he got some ego problem, so despotic He needs always to have his own way? Does he delight in mocking our cherished ambitions? The opposite is true. God is the source of all wisdom, and really does know what is best for the children that he loves so urgently and completely. Let's gladly submit to him today: ultimately, it's for our own good.

Prayer: *Thank you for your rule and reign of love, not oppression. I gladly yield to you, Father. Amen.*

Wednesday, October 21

Silence is golden

Readings: 1 Kings 17:2–7, Psalm 131:1–3

Focus: *He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there (1 Kings 17:5b)*

Today I am beginning a season of intense writing. Deadlines are looming, my long suffering editor's legendary patience is wearing thin, so I have holed myself up, alone and away from it all. My wife is six thousand miles away, my menu possibilities are limited, and my phone is silent. I am a little scared, and occasionally find myself staring at the phone, almost willing it to ring. Two hundred and forty hours of virtual silence yawns before me like the Grand Canyon; I am feeling an insane urge to rush out, mug a total stranger and engage them in meaningless conversation.

I'd be the first to extol the virtues of community, reject as ridiculous the notion of individualized, privatized Christianity, and insist that, biblically, spirituality is not a solo exercise, but is always done together. And I've not been that good with "morning quiet times" of prayer. Some years ago, I threw my so-called quiet times overboard in a reckless attack on anything that I considered to be remotely religious or potentially legalistic. I was foolish, and felt a sense of spiritual leanness as a result.

Quietness leaves me alone with, and sometimes at the mercy of, my own thoughts. It insists that I process rather than react, and affords me the luxury of uninterrupted reflection. Prayer is easier, because I have a sense that God, with whom all things are possible, can possibly get a word in edgeways.

Elijah was destined to be parked by a brook in solitary confinement for around a year. Perhaps most of us can't take the luxury of a year, or even a day – but ten minutes of sheer quiet could change the landscape of our day.

Prayer: *God, give me moments of pause today. Save me from turning this day into a frantic sprint: walk with me through these coming hours. Amen.*

Thursday, October 22

Microwavable maturity

Readings: 1 Kings 17:1–7, 2 Peter 3:18

Focus: *He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there (1 Kings 17:5b)*

Because I'm no culinary genius, my discovery of instant porridge has been a delight. Now, in just 120 seconds, I can whip myself up a delicious concoction of oats with a hint of apples and blackberries. There is but one problem. Just lately, the two minute wait has seemed so very long. I find myself cheering the microwave on, urging it to

cook ever faster, desperate to hear that little chime that announces that my fine cuisine is ready for consumption. I like things fast.

And I'd like to be a good Christian by this time tomorrow, praying with razor sharp sensitivity and faith-packed authority. But most of all, I'd like to weigh in as a heavyweight when it comes to godly character, and be a significantly holy super- saint. Okay, it's not going to happen overnight. How about by Thursday afternoon?

But character is created in a slow cooker. Look at those verses again. Elijah didn't spend his days in a paradise location; Kerith was an ugly place, a gash in the desert. The weather was hot – often 120 degrees in the afternoon – and the water would have been coated in thick, green algae. This was no crystal clear mountain stream. But he didn't just go there – he stayed there.

“God's man or woman,” says Soren Kierkegaard, “is early selected and slowly educated for a job.” Kosuke Koyama writes in *The Three Mile an Hour God* that God works at the speed a person walks. Perhaps, like me, you find yourself parked where you don't want to be, painfully learning a long term lesson in God's lifelong academy.

Be patient. God is.

Prayer: *Lord, I long for the fruit of the Spirit in my life – but forget that fruit takes time to grow. Give me patience with myself – and with those around me. Amen.*

Friday, October 23

Weird waiters

Readings: 1 Kings 17:5–6, Numbers 22:21–41

Focus: *The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. (1 Kings 17:6)*

Alfred Hitchcock's chilling movie *The Birds* is a disturbing work of cinema. The almost silent gathering of those dark eyed creatures with

their razor sharp beaks is a menacing sight – and one not dissimilar to what Elijah experienced twice daily when his stomach growled.

We saw yesterday that the prophet in semi-retirement was parked on the backside of the desert, not ensconced in a luxurious resort. There was a twice-daily food drop helpfully provided by a squadron of divinely navigated ravens. We might picture them showing up in perfect formation, like Navy jets, each one dropping tiny pieces of perfectly charbroiled tenderloin steak onto a silver platter marked “X”; Elijah tucks a starched white napkin into his collar and picks up a silver knife and fork.....

The birds were rats with wings. Ravens fed on offal, carrion and general rotting matter – they loved to patter around rubbish tips. They were listed in the law of Moses under “d” for detestable. Technically, no law was being broken because Elijah was fed by the birds, and he didn’t choose to eat his waiters. But it was an unusual tactic, these visitations from very unclean food servers.

Perhaps, as Elijah watched yet another flock of ravens spitting their offerings at his feet, he was learning that God is ever full of surprises, and is beyond our figuring out. Sometimes what he does comes through those that we would least expect, using methods that we would not anticipate – or even emulate with His waiting birds and, in Balaam’s experience, talking donkeys. He is totally consistent – but rather unpredictable.

Prayer: *Surprise me, today, God. Stretch my thinking; overturn my hidden prejudices, teach me something new. Amen.*

Weekend, October 24–25

A door closes, another opens

Readings: 1 Kings 17:7, 2 Corinthians 2:12–17

It's been a year, the ravens have become your friends, and you've learned to not fear silence or solitude. And then you begin to notice that the level of that water hole is going down – it really is drying up.

Let me tell you what my reaction would have been. My first conclusion would be that the waters were running out because I'd sinned: for some reason, whenever something goes wrong, I rush to conclude that I am under some act of judgment and that the natural calamity is my fault. Hard on the heels of this fear comes the thought that God has now abandoned me; that he has become weary of my small-mindedness, my tendency toward the same sinful pathways.

The brook dried up. This was simply the ending of one chapter in Elijah's life, and the beginning of a new, exciting episode; but notice that the brook failed before the word came.

Perhaps you're at that junction now. A door that you thought was going to stay open has suddenly slammed in your face, and you're at a loss to know what to do next. Don't panic, but ask God: what next? If Elijah had lingered at Kerith, he would have missed the greatest adventure of his life, and ultimately, he would have died of thirst. Sometimes it's only in looking back that we can be grateful for the ending of a season. Hold steady – you might be on the brink of the biggest adventure of your life.

Prayer: When my circumstances suddenly change, or I feel at the edge of change, steady my heart and mind, Lord. Amen.

Week 3: October 26 – November 1

God sustains the obedient and raises the dead

Follows the sermon on Sunday, October 25 · 1 Kings 17:8–24

This week we move to a widow's home in Zarephath, where Elijah's faith is tested at the kitchen table. Monday, October 26

Methods and miracles

Readings: 1 Kings 17:8–9, Psalm 145:1–21

Focus: *“Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” (1 Kings 17:9)*

Seven hundred times the divine delivery service, the ravens, had swooped low over the brook Kerith. To see a miracle once is a wonder – to see it repeated must have left an indelible imprint on Elijah's heart and mind. Every time they came, he realized that all of nature is ultimately subject to the commanding word of the creator. Each visit spoke loudly to the lonely prophet that God could be trusted. But sometimes those who have seen great things develop the belief that God can only work in a specific way, and they begin to hallow the method that God uses rather than the miracle itself. Now God was calling Elijah to the grueling journey of eighty miles – in the wrong direction, deep in the heart of enemy country, to be the guest of an impoverished widow, as we'll see as we go to Zarephath this week. The raven delivery service would have been a lot easier.

Our God of “unfathomable greatness” (Psalm 145:3) remains the same – but his tactics and strategies vary. Don't sneer at that other church because they don't sing your songs or emulate your style. Don't just keep doing the same things simply because they've worked up until now. Why not pray the risky but vital prayer that invites God to shake things up a little, and bring change of his making?

Prayer: *Lord, you never change, but your ways often surprise me. Keep me open to what you are doing now. Amen.*

Tuesday, October 27

Living with contradictions

Readings: 1 Kings 17:10–12, Romans 4:18–21

Focus: *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.” (1 Kings 17:12)*

I like it when life makes sense, God gives me guidance that is entirely logical, and my questions are answered. When I can understand, faith is an easier walk. Unfortunately, life often doesn’t unfold that way, even if you are right in the center of God’s purposes for your life, as Elijah was at this moment.

Put yourself in his sandals. You’re tired, hungry, and somewhat bewildered at the thought of showing up at a stranger’s house for your first “normal” meal in a year. You’re looking forward to some conversation after months of isolation. But your host is a very confused, undernourished soul on the brink of death. When you ask her for something to eat, she declares that the cupboard is empty of food – and her heart void of hope: this is her last meal for her and her son, and then they would die. But God had promised provision from this poor woman’s hands, and so another miracle unfolds.

Have you ever been in a situation when you sensed that God was asking something of you, and then circumstances seemed to pile up, one after the other, to totally contradict what you thought God had said? When that happens, do check, with trusted friends and prayerful counsel that you have heard rightly. Terrible and sometimes tragic things have been done by Christians who insisted that they had heard from God – but it was wishful thinking that turned sour. But if God has spoken, even though it seems impossible, then stand your ground, and don’t be afraid.

Prayer: *Father, help me trust that your hand is at work, when circumstances suggest that you are nowhere to be found. Amen.*

Wednesday, October 28

Home matters

Readings: 1 Kings 17:13–16, Ephesians 5:22–6:4

Focus: *So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family (1 Kings 17:15b)*

I am currently feeling really quite spiritual. These last few days, prayer has been easier than usual, I've been able to think things through with an abnormal clarity, I sense I am hearing from God, and as far as I know, I've not irritated anyone for a while. You've guessed it. As I mentioned earlier, I've been alone, on a writing retreat. After an initial period of adjustment, where I had to get used to my own company, I quite liked the solitude – at least for a while.

It's been said that, "religion is what a person does with solitude," but I'm not so sure. For me at least, it's easier to be godly when alone – walking and praying on the lush green South Downs in England, as I've been able to do today, isn't demanding. Trying to love God and other humans when you are awakened by your children's violin practice at 7am (and you fear that a number of animals are being strangled) is not quite so easy.

In public, I can fake kindness. But around those nearest and dearest to me, I am the real me. American politician Mark Hatfield confesses: "The home is the toughest environment of all for leaders. Why is it that the ones we love the most are the ones we are most impatient with? My wife has often said to me, "I wish you were as patient with your children as you are with your constituents.""

Elijah takes his place in a family home – where fresh challenges will come. Zarephath means "smelting furnace" – and home and relationships will be the refining fire that shows what we really are.

Prayer: *Give me faith for the silent times, faith when it is peaceful, faith in the midst of busyness, and faith when I'm surrounded by noise. Amen.*

Thursday, October 29

Rejection comes

Readings: 1 Kings 17:17–18, Proverbs 15:1

Focus: *She 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?” (1 Kings 17:18)*

We saw yesterday that it's in our own relationships that much of the refining work of God comes. One of the most difficult trials to walk through is when we are hurt by the very people that we are closest to. If someone distant takes a swipe at me, it smarts, but I'm not mortally wounded. But if a close friend or family member disappoints then the pain can be excruciating.

Elijah had walked through an ongoing daily miracle with the woman and her son, but when her boy dies, she turns on Elijah and strikes like a rattlesnake. Suddenly, it's Elijah's fault that the boy died (he would have died of starvation months earlier had it not been for the prophet), he has something against the woman (yes, that's why he prayerfully laid on a miracle for her) and he only came to remind her of her sin (now what sin would that be exactly, since no-one has mentioned it until now?)

So what turned a happy home into a boxing ring? Notice how quickly the distraught woman links her son's death, Elijah's being in the home, and her past sin together. There's a skeleton in the closet, and it's making her angry and spiteful.

And so she hits out. Unresolved issues in our relationship with God will affect our relationships with others. When someone is unkind, stop and wonder what might be going on beneath the surface. Who knows what pain lingers behind those acidic words? Perhaps the problem is not really with us at all. And how should we react? We'll consider that tomorrow.

Prayer: *Help me to see past the surface when others hurt me: give me sensitivity to their pain, and the grace to respond well. Amen.*

Friday, October 30

Kindness expressed through prayer

Readings: 1 Kings 17:19–23, Luke 6:27–36

Focus: *She 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?” (1 Kings 17:18)*

It’s hard to meet contempt with kindness. It surely takes real grace to keep serving someone even as they attack you. Who knows, they might interpret your willingness to be gracious as an admission of guilt for the very things that they accuse you of. Now, they insist, you are trying to work off your shame! But Elijah is broken hearted at the tragedy that has befallen this little family: there’s no time for defensive words, or for theological discussion about guilt and past sin – it was time to pray. We are clearly taught to pray for our enemies and for those who mistreat us. While the woman was not Elijah’s enemy, she was acting like it. Surely our eyes and hearts are changed as we pray for those who are unkind to us: we see them differently, and feel differently about them.

Elijah opens the floodgates of his heart with his praying – we get a glimpse of intense prayer as he rages at God. In the unusual act of “stretching” himself upon the boy three times, pressing his body against the cold body of that lad, some commentators suggest that he was taking a radical stance: “my life for his life, let my breath be given for him.” Of course, in praying like this, Elijah touched a corpse – and that would make him ceremonially unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11).

As I contemplate Elijah praying like this, I confess to you my poverty in this area – I know very little about this kind of intensity and passion in

intercession. Perhaps you'd like to join me as I ask God: Lord, teach me how to pray.

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to pray with passion, persistence, and genuine love, even for those who bruise us with their words and deeds. Amen.*

Weekend, October 31 – November 1

Influence is ours

Readings: 1 Kings 17:24, Matthew 5:13–16

Imagine the atmosphere in that room as Elijah carried the once dead, now living son downstairs to a tearful reunion with his mother. But something more than physical resurrection has taken place here. When Elijah first showed up at this house, the woman spoke to him about the Lord his God (1 Kings 17:12) But now both she and her son have seen and experienced enough of the power and love of God, and she exclaims, “the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.” She has come to see the reality about God for herself – and all because God choreographed things so that she would provide a lonely prophet with a home for a while.

It must have been impossible to live with a man like Elijah without bumping into God. I’m reminded of the story of missionary Gordon Maxwell:

“He went to India as a missionary, and his Christian conduct and commitment were evident to all. On one occasion, he asked a Hindu man to teach him the local language. The Hindu replied, “No, sahib, for you will convert me to Christianity.” Maxwell tried to qualify: You don’t understand, all I want you to do is teach me the language.” But the Hindu replied, “I will not, for no one can live with you and not become a Christian.”

That’s something to aspire to, especially as many of us quietly feel that living with us might have the opposite effect. Elijah lived the message

in the home, before he took the next mighty step to the hill: onto the platform of confrontation at Mount Carmel.

Prayer: *With those nearest to me, family, friends, work colleagues - may I live in a way that clearly and convincingly points to you, Jesus. Amen.*

Week 4: November 2–8

Decisive confrontation with false gods

Follows the sermon on Sunday, November 1 · 1 Kings 18:1–40

On Sunday we stood on Mount Carmel for the great showdown. This week we linger there: no more limping between two opinions – the real God needs no help.

Monday, November 2

You can't have it both ways

Readings: 1 Kings 18:20–21, Joshua 24:1–15

Focus: *How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'* (1 Kings 18:21)

The Christian life is often compared with running in a race; images of sleek athletes striding down the track come to mind, unless you're me. I used to run every day, but the word stagger was more appropriate to describe my style of running. At times, an oxygen tent from above would be helpful as I limped my way through the last torturous yards.

In challenging the gathered people of Israel, Elijah uses a term (translated “waver” here) that means “to limp.” They have wavered backwards and forwards between Yahweh and Baal, perhaps trying to get the best of both religions. Baal was primarily a weather-god and handy at harvest time. Yahweh, on the other hand, may have been popularly thought of as a god from the desert regions of Sinai (see

Habakkuk 3:3–7). Some thought of Yahweh as “a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys” (1 Kings 20:28). Baalism certainly came in useful if you wanted some sexual indulgence: you could sin away and still feel spiritual.

Now the people have to make a choice – it’s one or the other. You and I face that choice daily: the tempter doesn’t usually throw down the gauntlet and demand that we totally abandon our love for God – but subtly invites us to mix up a cocktail, a little compromise here, a dash of self indulgence there. Perhaps, at the beginning of another day, it would be good to set our sights on decisive living, where we follow God – wholeheartedly. Limping isn’t fun; it’s painful, looks terrible, and ultimately, will slow your jogging down to a complete stop. Let’s choose well.

Prayer: *Father, give me grace to say a firm “yes” to you, and a clear “no” to that which draws me away from you. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 3

I’d prefer not to

Readings: 1 Kings 18:20–21, Jeremiah 13:1–11

Focus: *But the people said nothing (1 Kings 18:21)*

We saw yesterday that “limping” Christianity will characterize our experience if we fail to be decisive about our choices. But sometimes, like Israel on Mount Carmel, we don’t openly refuse God – we just stay in silent rebellion, lips sealed, arms folded.

In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Bartleby is a scribe who copies legal documents. The meek and mild Bartleby is liked and appreciated by his employer; but then the boring and previously predictable clerk begins to rebel. Asked to proof read a document, Bartleby refuses, and uses a phrase that becomes theme of the rest of the book: “I’d prefer not to.” Soon every request from the employer, no matter how reasonable, is met with the same wooden response: “I’d

prefer not to." The employer, who could have simply fired Bartleby, desperately and yet patiently tries to win him over and coax him with kindness; but eventually, Bartleby refuses to do any work, and incredibly, makes the office his permanent home, establishing squatter's rights. Once again the employer embodies longsuffering and kindness, and invites Bartleby to vacate the office building and live in his home; amazing grace that is met by the same reply: "I'd prefer not to."

Ultimately, selfish Bartleby is hauled off to jail, where he goes on hunger strike. His former employer visits him, pleading with him to take some food. I'd prefer not to. As the book ends, the narrator, pondering the polite but unyielding Bartleby, exclaims, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

Silence sometimes isn't golden – just solid rebellion. Are there areas where we're smiling at heaven – but saying, "I'd prefer not to"?

Prayer: *When you speak Lord, I will listen – and answer. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 4

Desperate dancing

Readings: 1 Kings 18:22–29, Ephesians 2:1–10

Focus: *At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27)*

The prophets of Baal moved into a frenzied, six-hour religious workout, desperate to provoke a fiery response from the heavens. The word that is used to describe their dancing is the same word that we considered a couple of days ago – the one that means "staggering."

With his wicked sense of humor, Elijah hovers in the background, making snide comments about the need to wake Baal up – an inside joke, as Baal Melqart was believed to be a vegetation deity who had to

be awakened each spring from his winter hibernation. Most modern translators have cleaned up Elijah's other little joke, about Baal "going traveling" – a term that probably means "gone aside to relieve oneself."

But freeze the frame for a moment, and consider these desperate dancers: everything is based on them making their god do something. If they can just leap high enough, scream loud enough, or even spill enough of their own blood (as they resort to cutting themselves) then perhaps their deity will do something and torch their sacrifice. This same notion of the "pay as you pray" god was behind the unspeakable evil of child sacrifice: blessing, if it was coming, would have to be purchased. Human nature rushes to adopt that false spiritual equation. *There's no such thing as a free lunch, or for that matter, a free pardon. Whatever I get, I'll settle the bill.*

Today, there's nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us less. Salvation really is the ultimate free gift, the greatest gift in history.

Prayer: *Thank you, Father, for giving me what I could never earn. Help me to pass on news of that gift today. Amen.*

Thursday, November 5

Tempting God

Readings: 1 Kings 18:30–38, Luke 4:1–13

Focus: *"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." (1 Kings 18:36)*

As Elijah repairs the old altar of the Lord, lays out the sacrifice, and then splashes buckets of water all over the place, he wants everyone to be in no doubt – this was going to be a bona-fide miracle, no sleight of hand or trickery here. So wasn't this testing God? Jesus was invited by Satan to do some stunts in the wilderness to prove himself, but refused

the offer. Sometimes I've seen Christians pray prayers that are similar to that testing: "God, if you want me to continue to follow you, then you'd better answer this one.....or else." So was Elijah's action legitimate?

The answer is found in his prayer for fire, as he insists, "I am your servant and have done these things at your command" (1 Kings 18:36). Just as fire had fallen on David's sacrifice two hundred years earlier (1 Chronicles 21:26) so now, in a terrifying instant, the sacrifice is consumed from flames that leapt out of the sky. No wonder the people fell on their faces and a new shout echoed around the hillside: the Lord, he is God. The fire test was God's idea, and so God obliged. Let's ask that we fulfill his dreams today – not ours.

Prayer: *Lord, may I seek your plans, rather than trying to bend you to mine. Amen.*

Friday, November 6

Faithful – or fanatical?

Readings: 1 Kings 18:39–40, 2 Corinthians 2:1–11

Focus: *Then Elijah 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 them there. (1 Kings 18:40)*

It's one of those terrible scenes that occur in Old Testament history, as the prophets of Baal are executed without delay – or trial.

Commentators are divided: some insist that Elijah was just fulfilling the law (Deuteronomy 13:1–5) in ordering the executions. And remember the countless babies that had suffered an agonizing death at the hands of these evil occultists.

But others wonder if Elijah took a step too far – as we've noted, there was no trial (perhaps the evidence was plain) but the day does end with what seems like a lynching, the mob ruling, even though the mob

was under the command of Elijah. One commentator suggests that Elijah had a tendency toward fanaticism, and as we'll see in the next few days, the man of miracles certainly didn't always get it right, and occasionally his perception was completely wrong.

Perhaps we should simply heed the warning never to allow passionate faith to become damaging fanaticism. Someone once said "A fanatic is just someone who is more committed to God than you are" – but though that sounds challenging and noble, it's not helpful. A fanatic is not just someone who pilots an airplane into a building in the name of their god; they go to extremes to demonstrate their commitment, insisting that everyone does faith their way. They go beyond the demands of God, placing extra rules upon themselves or others. The Corinthians went too far in their discipline of one of their number. Fanaticism can be difficult to judge in others, though, so let's be careful to look for it in ourselves and reluctant to judge it in others.

Prayer: *Lord, show me how to walk in the balance and rhythm of grace. Amen.*

Weekend, November 7–8

God is bigger

Readings: 1 Kings 18:36–39, Psalm 47:1–9

David, a dear friend of mine had to walk through a battle with cancer. It was a journey into the shadowy land of uncertainty. There were days of waiting for test results, months of wondering if the treatment would prove a total success, and huge disruption of everyday life - those who struggle with life threatening diseases still have to negotiate their way through the ordinary, Monday morning stuff.

David loves music, and his favorite song was *My Glorious* by Delirious. I can remember watching him raise his hands in worship as he sang the line, "God is bigger than the air I breathe, this world we'll leave." He needed to affirm the greatness and power of God, bigger than cancer, bigger than even life and death. The greatness of God

runs right through Elijah's story, and we need to pause over it. Not only did that vision nudge Elijah into bravery, but it also would sustain him during the more difficult days. The great God would protect him, provide for him, and direct his paths.

J.I. Packer once remarked that a vision of a "pygmy God" produces pygmy Christians. Too often my vision of the Lord shrinks down to someone who might help me find a parking space, but who doesn't seem to have too much to do with creating the outer reaches of the universe. Little life looms larger than the expanse of eternity. I need to remind myself of his majesty and might. I'm praying that God will increase my sense of his greatness, and I'm including you in on the prayer.

Prayer: *Lord, show me a greater vision of your glory, your power, your matchless love. Amen.*

Week 5: November 9–15

Persevering prayer that expects God's Word to be fulfilled

Follows the sermon on Sunday, November 8 • 1 Kings 18:41–46; James 5:17–18

On Sunday we watched Elijah pray until the rain came. This week we learn from his praying: rooted in God's promises, persistent when answers are slow, and quick to act when the first small cloud appears.

Monday, November 9

Praying in prayer

Readings: James 5:17, Luke 11:5–10

Focus: *"Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain..." (James 5:17)*

As I mentioned earlier, I'm not terribly good at prayer. I've written a book on the subject, have preached about it endlessly, and in recent years have discovered a level of freedom as I realized that much of my thinking and reflection is actually prayer, and that good prayers don't have to be long prayers – some of my best prayers are of the “arrow” type – swift and to the point. But there are times when we do really need to learn that waiting in prayer is hard work – just as Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane. There we see agony, wrestling and struggle. Recently I was in a meeting where we were discussing a prayer “vigil” – that lasted half an hour. We all wondered whether this was more of a “McVigil” – intercession of the fast food type.

“Elijah prayed” - the phrase in James “he prayed earnestly” means “prayed in prayer.” Perhaps this was an extended prayer symphony of angry tears, whispers and shouts, strident walking up and down, and a body pressed hard into the earth, shoulders shaking, a fist hammering the ground. James, who wrote those words, apparently believed in prayer. Tradition tells us that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became hard and calloused. Sometimes my feet ache from too much rushing around: perhaps my knees could do with taking a bit more strain.

Prayer: *Lord, teach me to pray – not in a hurry, but with my whole heart. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 10

The word coming alive

Readings: James 5:17–18 Deuteronomy 11:13–17

Focus: *He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years (James 5:17)*

Prayer is not just a religious duty, something Christians do to prove that they are Christian. Prayer puts us before a God who is alive and still speaks. It's a heart-racing, awesome experience to catch a sense that

the God who created the universe is talking to you. Christians often speak of those times when a particular Scripture seems to come alive with meaning, when God makes his eternal word a “now” word for this very moment.

Many people abuse the concept of God speaking, justifying everything they do – especially their bizarre and sometimes thoughtless actions – by announcing that “God told them.” I heard that phrase enough times to put me off the possibility that God might whisper something in my ear for the rest of my life.

But I’m quite wrong to react like that. The essence of Christianity is relationship; God still speaks.

Surely that was the key to Elijah’s praying. His request for a divinely commanded drought was not some idea that had randomly popped into his head. As a man who knew the law, he knew that God decreed that idolatry would usher in a drought of judgment. His was biblically inspired logic: Scripture had come alive in his heart, and now he felt confident to ask for what God had promised. He also knew that this would be a slap in the face for Baal, who was supposed to be “The rider in the clouds,” and the sender of rain. When the rains stopped, Baal worshippers believed that their god was dead. This drought would send a clear message about who was really in charge.

Feed on God’s word today. He still speaks.

Prayer: *Bring your word to life in my heart, Lord. Speak: I am listening. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 11

The honor of God

Readings: 1 Kings 17:1, Matthew 5:14–16

Focus: *“As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives....” (1 Kings 17:1b)*

Today, there is a fabulous opportunity for people to discover what Jesus looks like. All they need to do is take a look at us, the people of God.

Sounds like an intimidating or presumptuous comment? Certainly I would never have made that statement in the early years as a Christian. I used to apologize for my own foibles and the inconsistencies of the church by encouraging people to just “look up at Jesus.” But how could they do that, what with him currently being invisible? God has always intended that His people be a lighthouse that shines in the darkness – this was true of the people of Israel (Isaiah 42:6) and the church (Matthew 5:14). That means that the way we live really matters – God’s honor and integrity are at stake.

Looking back at the beginning of the story, let’s remember that Elijah took more than his life into his hands when he marched resolutely into Ahab’s court – the very existence and power of God were laid on the line by his invocation, “As the Lord lives...” This is the language of an oath (see Jeremiah 38:16); people frequently swore by their gods – Jezebel swore by Baal when she later threatened Elijah’s life (1 Kings 19:1). This was not some vague threat or possibility – Elijah was announcing what he knew was an absolute certainty, and staking the reputation of God on his prediction coming to pass – an action that could have only been taken after some serious prayer and listening to God.

Let’s do whatever we do today with excellence, not so that we will look good, but so that He will.

Prayer: *Help me to live well, not so that I may be noticed, Jesus, but so that you will. Amen.*

Thursday, November 12

Instant rain?

Readings: 1 Kings 18:41–45, Exodus 14:1–14

Focus: *“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.” (1 Kings 18:43)*

I’ve discovered that I quite like cookery books. Yesterday I spent a happy few minutes flipping through a couple. They make it sound so very easy: just follow the recipe. Helpfully, I decided to refrain from attempting to actually cook anything.

I’ve noticed that some Christians like recipe-based Christianity. In fact, just like those cookery books, faith that can be reduced to a series of clear steps with a quantifiable outcome sells well – there’s no shortage of books, tapes, videos and conferences that offer *Seven Laws for Spiritual Breakthrough* or *67 Powerful Principles for Prosperity*. I discovered, however, that the recipes don’t turn out so well when I break out the proverbial mixing bowl.

Elijah prayed for fire, and in an instant it came. Now, as he ends the day by interceding for rain (having prophesied its coming to King Ahab), the instant cloudburst is not forthcoming, and his servant has to scan the sky for clouds not once or twice, but seven times. Finally a tiny cloud is spotted on the horizon. The floodgates were opened, but slowly.

Faith doesn’t work like clockwork: prayer is not a vending machine that automatically dispenses the candy bar once the credit card or dollar bills have been deposited. Christianity is an intimate relationship, not the application of a series of impersonal cosmic principles which always generate the same result. Israel’s exodus is an example: in their first battle, they were told not to fight (Exodus 14:1–14). In their second skirmish, fighting was required (Exodus 17:9). God was the same: his strategy had changed. Elijah’s story demonstrates an important principle: what God did this afternoon he might not do this evening.

Prayer: *Lord, I want to know more than truths about you. Help me to know you, the unchanging God, in the ever-changing circumstances of life. Amen.*

Friday, November 13

First past the post?

Readings: 1 Kings 18:46, 1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Focus: *“The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.” (1 Kings 18:46)*

We humans are quite good at putting each other in categories. People are either winners or losers, famous or nobodies, fat or thin, successful or failures. But these generalities obscure the real truth: today’s strong person can be tomorrow’s miserable failure: our past history may be a helpful indicator of our future performance, but nothing is guaranteed. As we wonder at Elijah, surging past King Ahab’s chariot, he looks like a winner all the way. He caps a day of triumph, where fire and rain fell at his word, with an impressive dash back to Jezreel. He looks so very invincible – when you’ve won a battle where the odds were stacked against you (450 to one didn’t look hopeful at the start of the day), you could easily believe that nothing could ever bring you down again, that you are unbeatable. And Elijah was more than a strong character: the text records that “the power of the Lord came upon Elijah,” so fuelling his incredible run.

But Elijah’s story shows us that everyone – even those who seem to have more than their fair share of God’s power – can fall. Within a very short time, Elijah would be running again – but this time it would be in sheer terror. The triumphant national hero is about to come crashing down; the victor of Mount Carmel is about to become the fugitive of Mount Sinai. “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Let’s know where we could be tripped up. Let’s ask for grace for our weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

And let's know that, even when we're winning today, that tomorrow is another day.

Prayer: *Show me my weaknesses, and prevent me from being deluded by my strengths, Lord. Amen.*

Weekend, November 14–15

Small clouds

Readings: 1 Kings 18:44–45, Zechariah 4:8–10

On the seventh trip, the servant came back with a report that hardly sounded like breaking news: "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." Most of us would have shrugged. A cloud that size wouldn't fill a teacup. But Elijah jumped up and told Ahab to get his chariot moving before the storm stopped him.

Faith has a way of seeing the small beginnings that others dismiss. The servant saw a cloud. Elijah saw the rain. Faith is not pretending the cloud is bigger than it is. It is trusting the God who sent it, because Elijah had already heard "the sound of a heavy rain" (18:41) before any cloud appeared.

The prophet Zechariah asked, "Who dares despise the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). God often starts with a hand-sized cloud – a conversation that goes a little deeper, a prayer that gets a partial answer, a friend who asks one honest question about Jesus.

And then persistence is needed. "Go back seven times" is a call to keep praying when the report keeps coming back "nothing." The answer came on the seventh look, not the first, and Elijah did not quit at six.

Don't wait for the downpour before you give thanks. Look for the small clouds this weekend, and when you spot one, get ready for rain.

Prayer: Lord, help me to walk gratefully for the 'small' things of life - that I will never take your blessings for granted. And help me to persist in prayer. Amen.

Week 6: November 16–22

God's gentle presence in exhaustion and fear

Follows the sermon on Sunday, November 15 · 1 Kings 19:1–18

On Sunday we followed Elijah from Carmel's triumph to a broom tree and a cave. This week we see how fear and isolation brought him low – and how gently God met him with food, rest, a question and a whisper.

Monday, November 16

The power of fear

Readings: 1 Kings 19:1–3, Psalm 27:1–14

Focus: *So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” (1 Kings 19:2)*

I can remember spending a whole summer under the cudgel of fear. I'd heard through the grapevine that a rather large, muscle bound lad in our neighborhood was out to get me. He had a terrifying reputation, having put a few other people in hospital, and I awoke every day with the same suffocating sense of dread. Perhaps today would be the day for me to experience hospital food. After six weeks of fretting and agonizing, I decided to go to his workplace to see if the rumors were true. We met, and he treated me like an old friend: I had thrown a summer away, sacrificed to fear.

It was fear that toppled Elijah. Jezebel was a devilishly clever strategist – she could have had Elijah killed, just as other prophets of God had died at her command. But in the wake of the Carmel contest, that wouldn't have been politically expedient. It could provoke a national uprising if the new hero from Gilead was suddenly executed. She realized that she didn't have to kill him – just tell him that she was

planning to do so, and let fear do its devastating, gnawing work in his mind and soul.

Her message is loaded with intimidation: one translation of her words is “I am Jezebel. You are Elijah.” She reminds him of her royal power, and of his humble background.

Perhaps we’re more vulnerable after an emotional and spiritual high. Now the man who had looked Ahab in the eye, who hadn’t flinched at a fight with a herd of prophets of Baal, buckles as the messenger departs. The smart weapon of fear had scored a hit, right on target.

Prayer: *Father, my imagination can summon all kinds of threats and diseases. Quiet my heart, and help me trust you when I am afraid. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 17

Call a friend

Readings: 1 Kings 19:3, Matthew 26:36–46

Focus: *When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there...(1 Kings 19:3)*

Recently I got together with a group of friends to be with one of our number who is currently battling with cancer, and for whom the future, humanly speaking, looks bleak. Our time shared together was memorable – there were tears, words of comfort, encouragement, empathy and prayer. It was simply quite beautiful. Friendship, especially during an autumnal season in our lives, gives us the hopeful scent of springtime.

We’ve already seen, through our visit with Elijah to the Brook Kerith, that there’s a time to be alone, to make space for clear thought, reflection, and to learn the lessons that only the classroom of solitude can teach us.

But being on the receiving end of a death threat is not one of those moments. When we're in a panic, it's useful to gain the support and care of trusted friends: this is what we were made for (Galatians 6:2).

I'm not at all sure that a problem shared is a problem halved, but friendship enables us to take our fears out from the labyrinth that is our mind, with all of its shadows and dark corners, and place them under the floodlight of relationship. There, enriched by the insights of fellow travellers, we are able to see our challenges more clearly. But Elijah turned his back on all of this, and allowed fear to do what fear so often does: shunt him into isolation. At his darkest hour, Jesus urgently needed the support and prayers of his very best friends – do we actually think that we are better, or stronger? Come out of isolation. Call a friend, or someone who looks like they could become one.

Prayer: *Help me to not to hide from others when fear comes stalking. And remove the self-obsession that blinds me to the burdens of others. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 18

Breakfast and angels

Readings: 1 Kings 19:5–8, John 21:1–14

Focus: *The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” (1 Kings 19:7)*

Sometimes I'm tempted to think that God abandons me on my bluer days; that when the fog rolls in, He is displeased and retreats. But notice when the angel shows up. No angels were visible when Elijah stood in the palace, or soaked the sacrifice on Carmel. Now, at his lowest, an angelic cook arrives – just as an angel strengthened Jesus in Gethsemane. Not that Elijah notices much. When we are low, we often miss what God is doing, however dramatic it is.

And what does the angel bring? Not a blinding revelation, or a thousand friends tap-dancing on the clouds, but breakfast – and permission to sleep. “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” It’s just like Jesus, who, having beaten death and hell, showed up on a beach to cook fish for his worn-out friends.

I’ve met too many Christians who decide they are under serious spiritual attack when what they really need is a hot meal and a good night’s sleep. God is interested in our work, rest and play. Whether you sense Him or not, He is watching over you – and He knows when the journey is too much.

Prayer: *Give me wisdom to establish a healthy rhythm in my life, Lord. And thank you that sometimes you bless – through breakfast. Amen.*

Thursday, November 19

Nobody does it better

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9–10, Matthew 6:6–13

Focus: *“I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.” (1 Kings 19:10)*

If we tell ourselves a lie often enough, then we’ll start to believe it. Elijah had been nursing a total misconception for a while – it was the notion that he was the only faithful prophet of the Lord left – an idea that was totally untrue. He knew about Obadiah, the double agent. He was well aware of the hundred prophets holed up in the cave. And then there were the seven thousand faithful in Israel who had not bowed to Baal. So why does he blurt out, “I am the only one left?”

Perhaps Elijah genuinely thought that when it came to true faithfulness, that he was the only genuine article. Had his exhaustion and disappointment caused him to resent Obadiah, who was still living in that fabulous palace? Had his epic performance on Carmel nudged

him into a belief that no one could deliver quite like he could? If that was so, he was carrying a crushing weight on his shoulders. We'll see later that Elijah became hesitant about passing on the baton to others: did he have an inflated view of his own significance? Ironically, his running means that he is now holed in a cave – just like those other one hundred prophets.

You are vital – but not irreplaceable. Perhaps to hand on that responsibility that is killing you will mean that it will not be done as well as you would do it. Jesus was willing to send his disciples out, knowing that there would be mistakes and misunderstandings – but he insisted on passing the baton on to them.

Prayer: *Lord, save me from the deception that insists that what I do can only be done well by me. Amen.*

Friday, November 20

The still, small voice

Readings: 1 Kings 19:13, John 10:1–16

Focus: *“And after the fire came a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:13).*

It was the gentle voice of God that Elijah heard – some have translated the words here as “the sound of gentle silence,” or “the silent sound.” God is not talking to him in booming tones, which one perhaps might have anticipated. When faith is low, a firm, unmistakable voice from above would be quite helpful.

But instead, God speaks in a barely perceptible hush, which would have been easy to miss. As this followed the hullabaloo of wind, earthquake and fire – without God - commentators have suggested that perhaps God whispered like this to show that he was now going to use Elijah in a more subtle, less dramatic way. Elijah thought that his ministry was over. In reality, one season was ending and another was beginning. The God of the tumultuous miracles was leading Elijah forward into the next phase: would he obey?

It's always exciting to begin an activity or ministry – but there's an art to sensing that the season is coming to a close, and now fresh challenges beckon. Huge amounts of money and effort are often poured into projects and initiatives that God was in, but now He has moved on. It takes grace to start something up – and grace to close it down.

To Elijah's credit, now at last he stands to his feet and edges closer to the mouth of the cave – which God had commanded him to do earlier. But, as we'll see, he still had some way to go yet before he could be useful again. Let's be open to the whisper of God today – he might ask us to start something, or perhaps nudge us to end something.

Prayer: *Give me ears that hear you, and a heart quick to respond to you Lord. Amen.*

Weekend, November 21–22

God asks a question

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9–10, Acts 9:1–6

Look at the conversation between God and Elijah once more. It begins, not with a heavenly command, but with a piercing question to the hunched over, exhausted man in the cave: “What are you doing there, Elijah?”

It's surely the simplest question that could have been asked of the fugitive prophet, and one that was designed to bring him right back on track. God knew the answer to his own question, but wanted Elijah to speak out his pain, so that he would begin to face it and move forward.

And it's a blunt question that we'd do well to face ourselves too. Are there places in our lives where we know we should not go? We should stop wriggling, bring the self justification to an end, and just face the fact, unpalatable though it may be. Sometimes the Lord can cut through all the fog of our deception with a razor sharp sentence. Saul

became the Apostle Paul as a result of a similar question. So let's not hide behind a wall of words, or try to bluff our way out of the challenge. Where, in our lives, would God say: "What are you doing there?"

Prayer: Do you have a question for *me*, Lord? In the coming days, help me to be open to your nudge. Amen.

Week 7: November 23–29

Mentoring and succession in ministry

Follows the sermon on Sunday, November 22 · 1 Kings 19:19–21; 2 Kings 2:1–15

On Sunday we watched the mantle pass from Elijah to Elisha. In this final week we see the loner become a team player, and a legacy that outlives him.

Monday, November 23

A radical plan

Readings: 1 Kings 19:15–18, Isaiah 55:8–13

Focus: *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." (1 Kings 19:15)*

Forget the idea that God only leads his children into safe places. Elijah was called to operate in a strategy that appeared to be suicidal. The Aramites were the enemies of Israel – so why would Elijah anoint a foreign king? The Aramites were being called to bring judgment upon Israel – and remove Ahab and Jezebel.

But it got worse. Now Elijah was being told to anoint another king over Israel itself, in readiness to take over – Jehu, a man who would have a heart for revival, and who would ultimately deal with Jezebel. But to

anoint another king would send the already incensed Jezebel into a fit of rage.

And then the issue of succession for Elijah was dealt with here, too, in the command to anoint Elisha.

So did Elijah obey? Yes and no. He did anoint Elisha. He didn't anoint Hazael - Elisha had to do that later. And he didn't anoint Jehu. So when Ahab's reign ended, Jehu wasn't waiting in the wings. Ahaziah, Ahab's son reigned two years, and he was just like his father. Then there was Jehoram, another son of Ahab, who was just a little better, but not much, and his reign was inconsequential. Thirteen years were wasted – and then Elisha, now at the helm, anointed another king – Jehu – the man picked out years earlier!

Jehu wasn't perfect, and drifted back into apostasy himself, but he stamped out the worship of Baal by tricking the god's followers into meeting together and then slaughtering them, also destroying their temple (2 Kings 10:18–28).

Even if God's command is costly, and indeed risky, let's do what he says. To disobey is to waste precious time.

Prayer: *Lord, help me to obey you when I don't understand you, and when what you call me to looks precarious. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 24

After Sinai: Elisha

Readings: 1 Kings 19:19–21, Psalm 145:1–21

Focus: *So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. (1 Kings 19:21)*

Today I heard of the death of a dear man who, years ago, spent hours with me when I was a brand new Christian. He was a minister who had been struck down by multiple sclerosis. Housebound, and unable

to function in church leadership, he refused to waste his life, but instead poured his failing energy into young Christians like me. He never mocked my questions, or rejected me when I failed. I will be forever grateful for him.

Elijah's influence faded after Sinai – perhaps because he didn't follow through on the instructions that he had received there. In a period of between ten and fifteen years, he only ministered twice publicly, as well as sending a prophetic word through the postal system. These were turbulent years, but years when Elijah was mostly silent. But he did raise up and invest in a worthy successor.

At a recent conference I heard Jim Partridge, a young man who has a passion to see the young people of Britain reached for Jesus. Jim called for a church that is “filled with youth workers,” where we don't just rely upon the youth leader or full time youth worker for the discipleship of their young people, but where everybody takes responsibility to be one generation telling the story of God to another.

Investing in others takes time and patience. We will be disappointed by some drifting away – especially some of those that showed great promise. We will need to answer endless questions that seem obvious, allow our busy schedules to be interrupted. But the call to disciple is a command, not an option.

Prayer: *Lord, grant me wisdom and grace to not only look for blessing, but to become a blessing, and leave a legacy. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 25

I will never leave you

Readings: 2 Kings 2:1–6, Ruth 1:15–18

Focus: *“But Elisha said, ‘As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.’” (2 Kings 2:2)*

Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind. And three times the younger man refuses: “I will not leave you.” Some commentators think

Elijah was testing Elisha's commitment. Others wonder if the old prophet, true to form, simply wanted to face the big moment alone. Either way, Elisha wasn't having it.

Remember the last time Elijah was under pressure? At Beersheba he dismissed his servant and headed into the desert on his own – and the result was a cave, a death wish and six lost weeks. Now, years later, the loner has a companion who simply won't go away. It's one of the most beautiful developments in the whole story. Elijah the solo artist has become part of a team.

Elisha's words echo Ruth's pledge to Naomi: "Where you go I will go." Loyalty like that is rare. It's easy to be a fair-weather friend, around for the celebrations and suddenly busy when the hard days come. But the friends who change our lives are usually the ones who stay – who sit in the hospital corridor, who keep turning up, who refuse to be sent away when we're at our most difficult.

Who has refused to leave you? Thank God for them today. And is there someone who needs you to say, in word or in deed, "I'm not going anywhere"?

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for those who have stayed with me. Make me that kind of friend to someone today. Amen.*

Thursday, November 26

A double portion

Readings: 2 Kings 2:9–12, 2 Timothy 2:1–2

Focus: *"Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?' 'Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,' Elisha replied." (2 Kings 2:9)*

It sounds like a greedy request. "I want what you've got – twice over." But Elisha isn't being grabby. In Israel, the firstborn son inherited a double share of his father's estate. Elisha is asking to be recognized as

Elijah's spiritual son and heir – the one who carries on the family business.

And notice what Elijah doesn't say. There's no pious rebuke: "Don't try to be like me, son – just follow God." Elijah knew that, for all his failures, God had been at work in him, shaping and using him. He had become someone worth imitating. Paul would later say something similar: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Over the ten years they spent together, Elijah had poured himself into this younger man. And the investment paid off. Some count roughly twice as many miracles recorded through Elisha as through Elijah. The student outran the teacher – and I suspect the teacher would have been delighted.

Paul told Timothy to entrust what he had learned "to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." That's four generations in a single sentence. Who are we investing in? And are we secure enough to celebrate when they overtake us?

Prayer: *Lord, help me to invest in others, and to be glad when they go further than I have. Amen.*

Friday, November 27

Where is the God of Elijah?

Readings: 2 Kings 2:13–15, Hebrews 13:7–8

Focus: *"He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. 'Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' he asked." (2 Kings 2:14)*

The chariot of fire has gone, the whirlwind has settled, and Elisha is left standing by the Jordan holding an old camel-hair cloak. The great man is gone. It's a moment many of us know – when a parent, a mentor, a pastor or a friend who carried us in faith is taken from us, and we wonder how we'll manage without them.

Elisha's question is honest: "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" Was God tied to the prophet? Would the power disappear with the man? Elisha strikes the water, just as he had seen Elijah do – and the river parts. The God of Elijah was the God of Elisha too.

Our faith heroes matter, and we rightly honor them. The writer to the Hebrews urges us to remember our leaders and imitate their faith – and then immediately adds, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). People come and go. He doesn't.

And notice how Elijah spent his last day: simply doing what he had been doing for years, visiting the schools of the prophets and encouraging the next generation. John Wesley was once asked what he would do if he knew he had three days to live. His answer was that he would carry on with what he had already planned. That's the way to live – ready, faithful and pointing others to the God who remains.

Prayer: *Lord, you are the God of every generation. Help me to trust you when the people I lean on are gone. Amen.*

Weekend, November 28–29

The encore

Readings: Matthew 17:1–8, Luke 9:28–36

Elijah's story has one more scene – and it happens around nine hundred years after the whirlwind. On a high mountain, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John, and two figures appear beside Him: Moses and Elijah. Luke tells us they spoke with Jesus about His "departure" – literally His "exodus" – which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Think about that. The man who once sat in a cave begging to die now stands in glory, talking with the Son of God about the cross. The ordinary man from Tishbe, kissed by the eternal. We began this series by remembering that Elijah was "a man just like us" (James 5:17). He

was brave and frightened, faithful and flawed, obedient and – sometimes – only half obedient. And God never gave up on him.

That's good news for us. Whatever season we're in – Kerith's silence, Carmel's fire or the broom tree's despair – the God of Elijah is with us. It's a faith for all seasons.

And as Advent begins, remember that another prophet would come “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17): John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus. Elijah's story was always pointing to Him.

Thanks for joining me!