



# ELIJAH

## WEEK 1 STUDY GUIDE





## THE STORY BEHIND ELIJAH

The Story of Elijah takes place during the reign of King Ahab in the Kingdom of Israel sometime around 870 BC. God's people had been divided into two nations, 931BC when King Solomon Died. While both kingdoms struggled to keep God's law and avoid the temptation of idolatry, the Northern kingdom of Israel was considerably worse. They brought in false gods, participated nationally in pagan rituals, and put puppet prophets in place to mislead the people and support foreign agendas in the land. The book of Kings signals the faithfulness of each king in Israel and Judah's succession by introducing them as a king who "did good" or a king who "did evil" in God's eyes.

The northern kingdom of Israel saw a multitude of kings who did evil in God's eyes, but during the ministry of Elijah to God's people the circumstances were the worst they had ever been. In **1 Kings 16:29-30** we're told this about the nature of Ahab's reign in Israel,

*"In the thirty-eighth year of Asa King of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahan the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him."*

Ahab was not only a bad king, but he was the worst king Israel in Israel's history. He boldly and defiantly turned away from God's law in the land. His determination to walk away from God was so strong that in the verses that immediately follow we're told this about Ahab's actions in verses **31-34**.

*"And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal King of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid the foundations at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun."*

Ahab is described as doing a number of things that were not only against the word of God but were an insult to God. He married a woman named Jezebel from the Sidonians. It was not unpermitted for Israelites to marry women of other races or nationalities. Ruth is a great example of a Moabite woman who was accepted by God, became an Israelite, and married a Jewish man. However, in this instance Ahab was to marry a woman of another faith who had no intention of changing her views. In fact the opposite would take place.

The text names off a number of transgressions that Ahab committed in his time as King. First, he went and worshipped Baal. Baal was the god of the Sidonians along with Asherah. Ahab publicly began worshipping an idol instead of God. He made temples in Israel to these gods for others to worship there. We'll find out later that he also brought in prophets of Baal in an attempt to silence and end the worship of God. His disdain for God went so far that we are told a man named Hiel began to rebuild Jericho under the reign of Ahab. Joshua, the successor to Moses, had stated that the land of Jericho was cursed and no one should build on it because of the evils the Canaanite people did there. Yet in Ahab's reign the city structures were slowly rebuilt. The text even indicated that this construction came at the cost of two of Hiel's children. While it doesn't say outright, it is implied that Hiel sacrificed two of his children to false gods to have the cursed city of Jericho rebuilt.

This is the context of the ministry of Elijah. He was but a remnant of the people of God who were willing to stand up and speak out against all the evil being done in their midst. God called Elijah to speak hard truth to a hard-hearted people who desperately needed to hear it and change their ways.

It is in the calling of Elijah and its subsequent events that we will glean for our own lives what God might be calling us to, and how we can respond.



## DEVOTIONAL 1: WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU?

One of the first things we learn from the context and circumstances surrounding Elijah's life is in the mistakes of King Ahab. As 1 Kings 16:30 says, he did what was evil in the sight of God. His life, his decisions, and his choices were worse than "all who were before him."

Ahab was the far extreme of this, but countless other kings on both Judah and Israel were accused by the author of the text of doing "evil in the sight of the LORD." And yet still there were, further and fewer as time progressed, who continued to try and serve the Lord. In 623, one king would so far as to institute religious reform and use his entire reign to push God's people back towards God's law and commands. When talking about his story, we see the book of 2 Kings in 22:1 say this about his time,

*"He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in the ways of David his father, and did not turn aside to the right or the left."*

When God's word looks back on Ahab it says he did evil worse than anyone else. When it looks back at Josiah it says he did what was right and never turned away from that. One was focused on doing what God has called him to do as king. The other was distracted by political powers, women, idols, and a plethora of other things and not only did the results of these decisions change dramatically, the way they were viewed for generations was as well.

If someone were to view your life and write a book about you, which one of those two titles would be more likely to fit? Would the biographer look at your past, your faith journey, and your efforts and say this was a man or woman who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord? They hit the mark. The focus was clearly on what God had called them to in their position, their circumstances, and life. Or would the author look at your struggles, distractions, and idols and say something more closely aligned with Ahab's story? They were distracted by lesser things. They gave their heart to things that didn't deserve it. They missed the calling I had for them.

We don't often think about our own lives and stories until it's too late. We wait until the moments have passed, the opportunities are memories, and wonder what would have been different. It was this very tendency to apathy that encouraged the author of Psalms to cry out in Psalm 90:12,

*"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."*

Do you think you have a heart of wisdom, truly focused on things that matter? Or have you found yourself consumed with things that in the grander scheme of things only serve to take our minds off what God has for us?

Take some time today, as we work through understanding our calling and what it looks like when God finally does call, to determine where your heart sits. Is it seeking after God and his calling or is the throne in your life cluttered by modern day Baals and Asherahs?



## DEVOTIONAL 2: ALL OUR IDOLS FALL

In the opening of the text for Chapter 17, Elijah is standing before king Ahab and proclaiming the coming drought of God's judgment on the nation of Israel. In it he says this,

“As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

Elijah tells Ahab the drought is coming for years on end and that all of this is because of God's judgment. Because of Ahab's life, his decisions, and his idolatry the nation is about to suffer through a great drought which will also result in a great famine. This will discourage the people, show God's strength and control, hopefully turn their hearts back to repentance as we've seen in the past, but it will also insult the false god's they've erected in the LORD's place.

Baal and the other God's that Jezebel brought with her to Israel were considered to be the dieties of fertility, growth, harvest, and the rain. If you wanted a god harvest you needed to pray to these gods and follow their rituals. If you wanted rain you needed to go see Baal because his power was over the weather. A major allure to an agricultural civilization would be the ability to please the divine and have them in return flood your barns and build your family. Baal worship cam with it a promise of prosperity and abundance.

The intentional of God's choice to bring famine was not one of vengeful anger on the people of Israel as many have claimed. While it is true, God does use things to bring about judgment, correction, and discipline in the world, the real reason for God choosing the famine is the same reason for the twelve different plagues in the book of Exodus.

In the book of Exodus, God sends Moses to rescue his people from a ruthless and evil tyrant in Egypt. “let my people go” is the chant heard over and over as Moses continues to approach the Pharaoh about leaving and the Pharaoh hardens his heart. After each encounter God brings a steeper judgment on Egypt for their refusal. Each of these twelve seemingly random plagues were actually an insult to the gods that Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshiped. The Nile River turning to blood, the frogs overturning the city, and the flies all represent a deity in the Egyptian religions. God was bringing his judgment but he was also showing the people that the lesser things they try to trust in are worthless compared to him. Baal and the fertility gods that came with him could not bring about rain or harvest or anything else. God is in control of the universe and he set our world in motion and order. Hebrews 1:3 tells us this,

*“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.”*

God worked in the story of Elijah not just to discipline Israel for their apostasy. He was also knocking down the false idols they had allowed to take their attention off Him. He did this by showing He, and He alone, is on control.

What things in your life do you put your trust in besides God? How can seeing his greatness, his faithfulness, and his power on display in this story encourage you to trust him more?



## DEVOTIONAL 3: EAST OF THE JORDAN

Elijah receives a message from God to go before the king of Israel and declare a famine. That's not an easy task. Studies have shown that most people are afraid to even speak in public about congenial topics, let alone to stand up and proclaim incoming judgement. The task that God had for Elijah was not an easy one, but his calling was more than just an action, it was a life. God didn't call him to show up and do a thing, God called him to live a certain way. His calling was going to, as we'll see in a moment, impact his life dramatically. His decision to speak would send him on an uncomfortable journey that would last for years. In **1 Kings 17: 3-4** it says that Elijah listened and confronted Ahab, but this was God's reward to Elijah for his faithfulness. God comes back and says,

*“Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.”*

Elijah gets done risking his life to speak truth and his reward is God telling him to go into hiding east of the Jordan where ravens will make him some dinner. Really, that's it. Go read it for yourself if you don't believe me. Following God's call to speak led Elijah into a wilderness retreat with no food, no water, and nothing to rely on for provision but God's divinely appointed ravens. .... yes, really.

Often we think following God is going to lead us to a better life, or a more preferable situation. We know there might be some struggle but ultimately we think (sometimes have been told) that God has your back and he's going to reward you. Elijah did the right thing and it made his life worse. It made his life considerably worse. The area east of the Jordan was desolate. It was not desolate because it was the hidden gem of the middle east. It was desolate because it was inhabitable. There was no real food to hunt. Ground not suitable for farming, and unstable political relations that might get you killed for wearing the wrong head covering. It was ugly. And the place no one else wanted to go was the place God sent Elijah after he was faithful in saying the thing no one else wanted to say. He listened, and life didn't get immediately better. It got worse.

There is a cost to following God's call in your life. There is persecution, rejection, and sacrifice that comes with doing the things God has asked us to do. We may not face such a great persecution as those who were buried and beaten for their faith, but there are real consequences. It can impact our careers. It can impact your dating life. It can impact the way other parents see you and your kids sports schedules. There are costs to following Jesus. It's not a one time thing, it's a life style. Jesus said it this way, in **Matthew 5:10-12**,

*“Blessed are those who persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

There is a cost to following God's plan. We must know that going in.



## DEVOTIONAL 4: LINGERING DOUBTS

As we continue to read through the first chapter of Elijah's life we see him taken from the desert and barren land east of the Jordan River and moved into the care of a widow and her child. When Elijah arrives to the place God has directed him, he finds the widow who is intended to care for him has no water and no food to share.

The widow doubts Elijah and his word from God but obliges him of his request. As they get to her home Elijah performs a miracle and they are provided for not only water through this entire drought, but also food to care for her and her son throughout this all.

After some time, the widow's son passes and her desperation turns into anger as she calls our Elijah as taking advantage of her and bringing evil to her and her son. She knows from the prophets claims, his miracles, and the work God has done in Elijah's ministry, and still here she doubts.

Often people claim if they just had a sign or a miracle they would have better and stronger faith to move forward. And yet here in this story the widow was given clear signs and miracles of God's provision and power in Elijah and she still doubts. She still, in the face of inconceivable trials and suffering, finds doubt and anger against God.

The widow did not need more signs. She needed faith in God. Often we want the signs to trust God but just like he had already given Israel plenty of signs that he was worthy of their trust he has given us the greatest sign. In Romans 5:8 we're told this about the lengths God was willing to go for us,

*"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

God has shown he is faithful to us. He came into our world, lived a sinless life, died a gruesome death, and rose victorious on our behalf. If that's not a sign that God cares and is willing to go to the greatest length on your behalf, then I don't know what anyone could consider to be enough. The apostle John, who walked with Jesus, spent years in ministry with him, witnessed his resurrection first hand, and then was exiled for his refusal to deny the gospel and the resurrection had this to say about God's incredible love for us,

*"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."*

When we doubt God's plan and the calling he has for us, we're not doubting because of a lack of evidence. We're not doubting because he has a history of broken promises. We're doubting because the struggle in following Jesus is unreal. John, the same apostle, followed the statement above by saying this in 1 John 3: 1

*"The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."*

In other words, the world around us crucified Jesus the message and example he left. If we are to follow in his path and practice, we should inevitably expect there will be trials and a cross to bear.



## VERSES TO STUDY THIS WEEK

Below is a list of verses that speak into the trial and struggle we often face in God's calling for our life. Take some time this week to read through these verses. While there are verses that talk about the joy, the peace, and the fulfillment that comes from following in God's calling, our focus in this week is understanding that when we follow God there will be a cost to pay. Read the verses below and ask yourself if your faith has cost you anything.

### Matthew 5:11-12

*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

### John 15:18-20

*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

### 2 Timothy 3:10-12

*You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra- which persecutions I endure; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

### Philippians 1:29

*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.*