

## Elijah—A Courageous Prophet, Healed by God



Have you ever felt depressed? Have you ever believed that you had done something right, only to receive the anger of some others—an anger that left you first worried, then feeling a failure, and finally miserable? Have you ever felt you were the only one left that really cared? I know that I have. And there is a prophet in the Old Testament that had just that happen to him. His name is Elijah, and it was God who knew just what to do.

His story is recorded in the First Book of Kings, chapter 8 and 9. It is a favourite of mine.

[Note: Elijah was a prophet who spanned the time between when God was called El (the desert name for God and the reason why Islam used the name Allah for God) and the time when God was normally called Yahweh ( was often shortened to Yah) and his name illustrates that—El + Yah, or Elijah as we say in English.]

Elijah lived at a time when Israel had strayed from the worship of God, with many adopting other gods, primarily Baal and Asherah. The popularity of these pagan deities was strengthened by Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, who personally employed many of the Baal priests, and built many pagan shrines in Israel. King Ahab was quite happy to go along with this, including the elimination of many of the shrines sacred to Yahweh the God of Israel. The people, knowing on which side their bread was buttered, connived in this apostasy, some wavering between God and Baal, while many simply moving their loyalty and worship to Baal. His worship was colourful and sexy, while making no moral demands. The society of Elijah's day was not so far removed from our own today, much to Elijah's unhappiness.

Finally, Elijah had had enough. He courageously appeared before King Ahab and declared that because of the national apostasy, God would prevent rain in Israel for 3 years. And then Elijah fled and headed out of Israel to live first in Jordan, and then in Lebanon. And as Elijah had prophesied, it didn't rain. Crops died, and people had to buy imported food. Things went from bad, worse. Because Baal was the pagan god of rain and lightning—the people appealed to him, but nothing worked. As Elijah had said, God would withhold rain for 3 years.

After 3 years of drought, King Ahab and Elijah confronted each other—it was a tense moment—but Elijah proposed a contest—a contest that would pitch Baal against God—a contest to see Who could bring rain. It was to be a contest on Mount Carmel, one in which the people could all see the winner. It was to be big thing. It would be Elijah's last stand.

Elijah proposed that the priests of Baal could build an altar to Baal, place on it some wood, and lay on it the body of a bull as a sacrifice. But they were NOT to light it—only to pray

that Baal, the god of rain and lightening, would send fire from heaven to light the sacrifice. And the priests of Baal did just that—they danced and pranced around it all day, begging Baal to light the sacrifice—but nothing happened. Exhausted, they finally gave up.

As the time for the evening sacrifice was approaching, Elijah repaired the altar of God which had been broken down, rebuilding it with 12 large stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, placing on it the wood and then a bull cut in pieces in readiness for the sacrifice. And then he asked that his servant pour a jug of water over the sacrifice—and a second—and a third, until the water was running down the wood, the rocks and into the ground. When all was complete, Elijah stood and prayed: “Yahweh ... let the people know that you are the only God in Israel, and that I am your servant ... and that you are winning back their hearts.”

Immediately fire fell from Heaven and burned up the sacrifice. It was a dramatic moment. Elijah had proved that Yahweh was God, and that Baal was a useless pagan deity with no power. And the people shouted: “Yahweh is the God.”

Elijah commanded that the priests of Baal be bound and then executed, which the people eagerly did. And in confusion King Ahab swiftly returned to his palace, as the rains poured down, and the dry ground was refreshed.

And all was well, right?

Not so fast, Elijah, said Queen Jezebel—what you have done to my priests of Baal I promise I will do to you by tomorrow. And Elijah was afraid and turned and ran. He ran south from Samaria, through Judea, into Arabia, and lay down under a “broom tree” (not much shelter there) and prayed to die. Despite his success with the sacrifice on Mt Carmel, he felt he was a failure. Sure, God had proved that He was God—but most of the people were still happy to go along with the power of the government, and worship Baal. Can't we have both? Couldn't we be tolerant and support both God and Baal? Being tolerant and accepting of other ideas is good for business, right? Absolutely not, said Elijah. You are either for God, or not. There is no middle ground. Elijah knew he had done his best; he had failed; now he wished to die.

When he woke in the morning, there was a loaf of bread and a jug of water beside him, delivered there by a messenger. (The usual translation says the messenger was an angel, but it could have been a human one.) Elijah accepted it and lay down and slept again. Next morning there was more bread and water, and a message to eat and drink—you'll need it for your journey. Still depressed and feeling a failure, Elijah ran south again, heading for Mt Horeb. Now Mt Horeb was where God had appeared to Moses and given him the 10 Commandments. It was a key place in Jewish theology. It had all started from here—and so to there Elijah went back—it was like going home to die. Arriving at Mt Horeb, Elijah climbed until he found a cave, crawled into the back, and hid there. For him it was all over.

But God had another idea in mind. The voice of God sounded in Elijah's head: "What are you doing here Elijah?"

And Elijah explained to God that he had done all that he could for Him, everyone was against him, he had failed, he was the only one left faithful to God, and they even wanted to kill him.

And God said: "Watch and learn, Elijah." There was a great earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. There was a great wind, but God was not in the wind. There was a great fire, but God was not in the fire. Then in the silence there was a still quiet voice.

Hearing it, Elijah came to the mouth of the cave. "What are doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah said it all again; he had done everything he could, and he had failed; he was the only faithful one left, and they wanted to kill him

And God said: I've got a new job for you Elijah. I want you to go to Syria, and anoint someone to be king there, I want you to go to Israel and anoint someone else to be king there; and I want you to find Elisha and make him your successor. And oh yes, you're not the only one, Elijah, there are still 7000 people in Israel who are completely faithful to Me. Now get to it.

What had happened? If you've ever been depressed, you can guess what. Elijah was really depressed, felt a failure, and wanted to die. God did not comfort him, did not dissuade him, did not argue with him—instead, God gave him a new job and in doing so, gave him Hope. Another job, upsetting other royal governments, another job sharing his prophetic tasks with a new prophet. In other words, God believed in Elijah, and gave him a new job to do, a job that stopped him feeling sorry for himself, stopped him feeling a failure, stopped him hiding. God had a job for him to do, and filled with new Hope, Elijah set off to do it.

The story of Elijah is a story of a man severely depressed. He was suffering, as have others who have been depressed. But God knew just what to do. God healed Elijah's depression and restored him to usefulness in building the Kingdom of God. And, because of Elijah and his crusade against Baal, Israel returned to its faith in the One God, Yahweh. He was just one man, but it was his faith and his courage that made the difference. If you can be just as faithful, God can use you to create miracles.

Have you ever felt that depressed? Have you ever wanted to crawl into the back of a cave and die in the darkness? Well listen to how God treated Elijah. See what God did—God restored his HOPE—He can do the same for you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.