

2. God's Word Challenges our Preconceptions

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 0 0] And now let's pray before we look at the passage together. You are the Word of God the Father. Father, we pray indeed that the living Word, Christ Jesus, may now speak to us through his written Word.

The ancient words spoken by the prophet Elijah, not just to the people of his own day, but to us who live in the last days. And we pray that we will hear your voice, that the Holy Spirit himself will take these words and apply them to our hearts and minds.

In Jesus' name. Amen. May you not live in interesting times, says the Chinese proverb.

Because interesting times tend to be times of danger, times of drama, times of great pressure, and times of great uncertainty.

Now the prophet Elijah most certainly did live in interesting times. And the prophet Elijah's ministry was accompanied by an unusual outpouring of God's miracles.

[1 : 1 9] And I want to begin this morning by talking about miracle. But a number of miracles happen in this chapter. A number of miracles are still to happen in the future chapters.

So let's consider what is happening in a miracle. Now, I think there are two wrong views of miracle. One is the way of rationalism, of explaining them away.

And you can find that in many of the commentators. Rationalism, for example. Look at verse 4. I have commanded the ravens to feed you.

Now, a slight change in the Hebrew word. We get a word which could be translated Bedouin. In other words, I have commanded the wandering desert tribes to feed you. And then again, what happened, apparently, in verses 14 and so on, the jar of flour shall not be spent, is that the widow's friends suddenly recognized the responsibility and rushed in to help her with bags and bags of flour and all sorts of wonderful things.

And then, of course, the boy wasn't actually dead. He was only in a trance. And Elijah gave him the kiss of life. And that is rationalism.

[2 : 3 6] And it is pretty pathetic. It gives us nothing to preach, nothing to believe in, leaves us with a trite, arid, moralizing story. We looked for bread and we're given stone.

Don't be rationalist. That will rob the story of all its power to speak to us. On the other hand, I think another wrong way is sensationalism.

Many people say if this kind of thing happened more often today, then people would be converted in droves. That's what's sometimes called power evangelism.

That if God sent signs and wonders and dramatic miracles, then hundreds of people would come to the Lord. The trouble about that view is that it makes a fundamental mistake.

The gospel word is not something that's accompanied by the power of God. The gospel word is itself the power of God to salvation.

[3 : 3 5] God, in his grace and in his mercy, sometimes does wonderful things. But even if he's not doing these things, it is the word of God itself which converts. It is the word of God used by the spirit of God which brings people from death to life, from darkness to light.

And there is no greater miracle than that. A sinner converted. So, don't be sensational. As it says in some modern hymns, these are the days of Elijah.

These are not the days of Elijah proclaiming the word of the Lord. Scripture tells us that those days happened when John the Baptist came preaching in the spirit and power of Elijah, proclaiming the coming of the Lord and the great and terrible day of the Lord.

And remember the wise words of C.S. Lewis that miracles tend to occur at times of great danger, times of great persecution, times around which, as he says, we have no particular desire to be.

So, that's the first thing then. Don't rationalize. Don't sensationalize. Well, why are these miracles happening here? I want to suggest they're happening here to authenticate Elijah's ministry.

[4 : 55] If you read scripture, you'll find that miracles, mighty acts of God, can happen at any time. But they do tend to cluster at particular times in salvation history.

We have them at the Exodus when God is bringing his people from Egypt, demonstrating his power over the gods of Egypt. We have it here again when Baal is a challenge, the Yahweh God of Israel, and Yahweh is showing his power against the Canaanite God Baal.

We have them again at the exile when God's cause seems to have been defeated. And we have wonderful stories of rescue from lion's dens and blazing furnaces and visions and so on.

We have it again in our Lord's earthly ministry when the Prince of Life is here challenging the kingdom of darkness. There are more cases there of casting out of demons than anywhere else in scripture because the kingdom of heaven is challenging the kingdom of darkness.

And then again as the infant church is established in the early chapters of Acts, the Lord authenticating his servants. Now it doesn't always happen this way.

[6 : 08] Many of God's servants have worked without any visible signs of support. Jeremiah, for example, preached for 40 years, an arid, difficult, desolate time.

Jeremiah had none of those miracles vouchsafed to him. But what Jeremiah did, as Elijah did, was to bring the life-changing word of God into the situation.

So don't interpret these chapters by saying, if we were more like Elijah and saw miracles happening, then things would be different. This is rather, we must be more like Elijah in obeying the word of God and praying to God.

This is a powerful picture of what the life of faith looks like. Now last week we saw how the word of God challenges the establishment. And today we are going to look at how it challenges our presuppositions.

But I think as the story develops, we are particularly looking at 8 to 24, I want to suggest there are three ways in which the word of God challenges our presuppositions.

[7 : 15] First of all, about how God provides. How does God provide? And the word of God here challenges our presuppositions.

Verses 8 to 16. Now the Lord has already provided very strangely for Elijah by the ravens, unclean scavengers, as we saw last week.

And then in verse 7 comes the ominous phrase, the brook dried up. Many of God's people find themselves in that situation often.

Perhaps some of you find yourself in that situation now. Not necessarily physically, but perhaps spiritually. The brook dried up. What is Yahweh going to do?

What is the Lord going to do? Well I'll tell you what I would expect the Lord to do here. If I were writing the story, I would expect him to send rain. After all. Surely that was the point.

[8 : 14] The ravens had provided for him. After the brook dries up, then of course he'll do the predictable thing. Now look at the crazy thing he says. I have commanded a widow there to feed you.

Now widows usually are those who need provided for. Particularly in those days when there was no state help. And not only a widow, but one whom death was staring in the face.

Verse 12. I'll prepare it for myself and my son, and we will eat, and then we'll die. This seems a crazy way to provide.

I don't know if you're at all like me. But when I meet a difficulty, my prayers are too often instructions to God what to do.

You know, I think of the situation. I think, well, the Lord might do this, and he might do that, and he might do this. And I mention in my prayers and in my thinking all the logical things. Then, of course, the Lord doesn't do any of those things.

[9 : 16] And I panic. The brook dries up. It's so true to life. But let's look a little bit more closely at how God strangely provides. The first thing to notice about this is that he provides in enemy territory.

Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon. Who was king of Sidon? Ephbaal, Jezebel's dad. Go right into the heart of enemy territory.

Elijah. And I'll protect you there. Indeed, I'll do more than protect you. I'll provide for you. But it also shows God's overflowing grace, doesn't it?

A Baal worshipper is going to be welcomed into the Lord's kingdom. Notice, he's not a worshipper of the Lord at this moment. Verse 12, as the Lord, your God, lives. Like in the ministry of Elijah sometime later, Naaman the Syrian is going to be welcomed into God's kingdom.

Rather like Peter with Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, where Peter has that great vision of the sheep full of animals, which shows him that the nations are being welcomed into God's kingdom.

[10 : 24] So it's grace to the enemy, but there's also judgment to God's people. You may remember that Jesus speaks about this in his first synagogue sermon in Luke 4.

It's what he says in Luke 4, 28. There were many widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent to a widow at Zarephath. The people of that time recognized very clearly what he was saying, that because they were rejecting him, the message would go to others.

And Paul in Romans 11 makes it very plain that the rejection by Israel of the word of God is opening the gate to the world to believe.

So it's in enemy territory. That's the first odd thing about God's providing. Go into the lines, Dorn Elijah, and I'll provide you with food. Go to a widow, a widow who is on the verge of destitution and indeed death, and I'm going to provide for you.

And that's the other point, surely, that God's provision needs faith. Verse 13, Elijah said to her, Do not fear, go and do as you have said.

[11 : 32] First, make me a little cake and bring it to me. Elijah seems to make her trouble worse, doesn't he? She says, I've nothing left. I've only a tiny handful for myself and my son.

After we've eaten that, we'll die. What does Elijah say? Well, go and use it up and give it to me. But notice the first verse, don't be afraid. You notice how often that's said in Scripture.

Because so much of our lives are dominated by fear, aren't they? Sometimes they're genuine fears. Other times they're fantasy fears. But nevertheless, so often the Lord and his messengers say, Don't be afraid.

Because we obviously are afraid. And so often, and so often, we find it difficult to trust because we are afraid. Now notice what faith is here.

Faith is trusting in the word of the Lord. Verse 15, she did as Elijah said. Just as Elijah had done what Yahweh said, so she goes and does it. But notice further about the faith.

[12 : 35] Notice verse 16. The jar of flour was not spent. Neither did the jug of oil become empty. Now wouldn't it have been great if the house had suddenly been flooded with flour and other provisions?

But it wasn't. There was just enough for every day. Every morning, as they woke up, they would wonder, is it going to come today? Is God able to provide today?

I know he did yesterday. But can he do it today? And this is the way God usually works, isn't it? God seldom gives us everything in advance. God basically says, look, I'm giving you this.

I want you to trust me. And it worked according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah. So the first way this church, and the first way the word of God challenges our preconceptions about the way he provides.

And indeed, the people of God in an earlier generation were condemned for saying, can God provide a table in the desert? Secondly, it overturns our preconceptions about the way he works, or about his providence, if you like, in verses 17 to 18.

[13 : 51] After this, the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill, and his illness was so severe there was no breath left in him. Just imagine the distress and perplexity.

In fact, notice, first of all, the obstacle to the fulfillment of God's purposes. After this, very often in a kind of narrative device to show us that this is not just chronological.

It's not just after this in time. It's after this logically as well. Here is a widow who has just experienced God's goodness, just experienced his mercy, and now it seems to be cruelly snatched away.

Remember, she's what we'd call a young convert. She's a new believer. How on earth is she going to stand up to this? I think we've got to remember, this is an important principle.

Very often when people are converted, particularly young people, perhaps from non-Christian homes or from non-Christian environments, maybe they're converted and we pray, Oh Lord, give them an easy time.

[15 : 04] Make sure that their friends don't laugh at them. Make sure that their families, their parents are friendly. And exactly the opposite happens. Their friends are horrible to them.

Their parents are totally, totally, totally failed to understand what has happened. A week later, they're still Christian, aren't they?

Because it's not them. It's the work of God. So God is doing a work here. And notice what she says. You've come to bring my sin to remembrance, to cause the death of my son.

Inevitably, in these circumstances, she begins to think, Oh, I'm suffering because of something I've done. Because of something I've done wrong. So that's the first thing.

The obstacles to the fulfillment of God's purpose are part of the whole story of the way that God works. But more importantly, the nature of God himself, the nature of Yahweh, God of Israel, is he like the God Baal?

[16 : 08] Now, the essential thing about the pagan gods is that they were capricious, is that they were fickle, is that they kept on changing their minds, is that people had to continually make sure they kept in with them.

Is Yahweh like that? Is it like what Gloucester says in King Lear, As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport. Now, that's paganism.

Pagans live in a cruel, hostile world which reflect the cruelty and hostility of the world. And Christians live in that same world.

So too often we forget this. Ecclesiastes speaks about everything being futile, everything being under a curse. That's a useful book to use in pre-evangelism.

I've seen it used in universities often. A useful book to show people how, to show people the world is meaningless without God. What we must never forget is that Christians, we are also subject to futility, to the curse of the world.

[17 : 12] What's the one difference? The one difference is that we have a faithful God. The one difference is we have a God who has committed himself to us with promises that he cannot and will not break.

But the point is, we are often going to feel this. And if we pretend we're not, and worse still, if we try to counsel others, telling them they should not feel this way, quoting texts like Romans 8, all things work together for good and so on, and being insensitive, then we're misrepresenting the Lord himself.

The Lord is gracious, merciful, full of compassion. But we must also remember the mystery of providence, the mystery of the ways of God. And Elijah refuses to duck this, because you'll notice that Elijah, in verse 20, echoes the widow's words, O Lord my God, have you brought calamity, even upon the widow, with whom I sojourn, by killing her son.

You see, Elijah recognizes the mystery, because Elijah himself feels the mystery. We must remember that as Christians.

We don't have all the answers. There are some questions, which we'll never know the answer to, until we reach the Father's house. And we must remember that. We must remember that in our own lives.

[18 : 30] We must remember that in the lives of others, as we try to speak to them, and be with them. So, the Word of God, overturns presuppositions, about how he provides.

He can provide anywhere, in any way, and use anything, however apparently, empty, and barren. It challenges our presuppositions, about his providence, about the way he works.

But finally, in verses 19 to 24, it challenges our presuppositions, about the issues of life, and death itself. Notice Elijah doesn't try to give slick answers.

So what does it, and there are really two things here, which are two parts, two sides of the same coin. And the first is, that Elijah cries to the Lord. Verse 20.

He cries to the Lord. Then again in verse 21, he stretched himself upon the child, three times, and cried to the Lord. Elijah, we are told in the letter of James, as I mentioned already, was a man of prayer.

[19 : 37] But we're also told, that Elijah was just like us. Elijah had the same feelings as us. Elijah asked the same questions, as we do. Being, having faith, and believing in prayer, does not mean, we don't ask hard questions.

What it does mean, is that prayer, is the means of grace. Because, it is an admission of helplessness. It's an admission of perplexity.

And to come back to something I said earlier, Elijah doesn't act here, like a miracle worker. He doesn't act here, like some kind of great superstar.

What does he do? He does all that any of us can do, in these circumstances. He cries to the Lord. He's in perplexity. He's at the end of human resources.

The old hymn says, when we reach the end, of our hoarded resources, our father's full giving, is only begun.

[20 : 38] Elijah is at the end, of his resources. And notice, he's a man of faith. He's been supplied, in all these interesting, and unusual ways.

But now he's faced, with the ultimate challenge, the challenge of death itself. Though verse 17 is very clear, his illness was so severe, there was no breath left in him.

And rationalists can make nothing of that, because the text can mean nothing else, than what it says, this boy was dead. This boy had not gone into a trance, from which he was resuscitated.

This boy was dead. So that's the first thing. Elijah cries to the Lord, in the face of death. All he can do is cry to the Lord. All we can do, is cry to the Lord.

But the second thing, is that Yahweh, is that the Lord gives life. Elijah carries a dead child, up to the room, but brings a living one down.

[21 : 41] Now here is the supreme challenge. All through the stories of Elijah, Baal, the Canaanite god, is being shown, to be totally ineffective.

He's a pretty useless type of god. After all, he's in charge of the rain. And he can't bring rain, on the land. I wonder if they imported him, to Glasgow.

But anyway, the rain fails to come, and the rain god, fails to send it. So, over, all through this story, Yahweh has been shown, to be more powerful, than Baal.

He can send rain, and he can withhold it. Also, he's gone into Baal's territory, into Sidon, the very heartland, of Jezebel, and her dad, Ethbaal.

The very place, where Baal worship, is reigning. But is there one realm, that Yahweh, cannot cross into? Is there one frontier, that's too much, for him?

[22 : 45] See, in the old, Canaanite myths, which, probably, the readers of this, would know about, we read about, Baal, the rain god. We also read, that at one point, Baal, faced, an enemy, more ferocious, than himself.

The terrible god of death, whom the Canaanites, called, Mot. A dreadful god, whose jaws, stretched from heaven, to earth, and swallowed up, everything.

When Baal, faces that god, he is defeated, and sent down, to the underworld. But here, Yahweh, invades, not just the realm, of Baal, the realm of Sidon, he invades, the realm of death, and releases, one of its victims.

That's surely the point, of this story. Yahweh, not only, can defeat Baal, he can defeat, death, itself. Now, all through scripture, there are hints, of this.

Enoch, walked with God, and God took him. Later on, at the end of Elijah's story, which we'll look at, in a few weeks time, Elijah himself, is to be taken to heaven, without, without going through death.

[24 : 00] But here, what happens, is rather like, those three stories, we have in the gospels. Jairus's daughter, is raised, from the dead. Lazarus, is raised, from the dead. And the story, which is most like, this story, is in Luke chapter 7, where Jesus, where Jesus, raises a young man, from death.

A young man, who is the son of a widow. And clearly, and clearly, if you read that story, later on, Luke chapter 7, see how it echoes, this story. Not echoing it, because the, because Luke, thought it would be, a good idea, to echo this whole story.

But showing the truth, that Yahweh, is conqueror, of death. Conqueror, on him, that has the power, of death. Now, this comes, astonishingly, in the middle, of this story.

We know, that death, is still, is still an enemy. Even when Jesus, was here, in his earthly life, the cemeteries, didn't empty. So what we've got here, is a token miracle.

Now, I don't mean by that, tokenism. It's a miracle, of what C.S. Lewis, calls a miracle, of the new creation. Where what happens, once here, locally, is going to happen, on a universal scale, on the last day.

[25 : 15] As John says, in his gospel, the day is coming, when all who are in the graves, will hear the voice, of the Son of God, and will come out. So ultimately, this old story, is not just a piece, of ancient history.

It's pointing ultimately, to the glorious prince of life, and the conqueror, of death. The one who can conquer, not just Baal worship, but conquer death, himself.

Even as Christians, we find that difficult, to grasp, don't we? We believe it, theoretically, and we believe it, we believe it firmly. But death, is still an enemy.

Death, is still dreadful. And, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tells us, that one day, that enemy, will be destroyed. The last enemy, to be destroyed, is death.

So, in this story, here is a picture, not just of an ancient prophet. Here is a picture, of the life of faith, and how to live, the life of faith, by obeying, the word of the Lord, by, looking at, his strange providences, and realizing, that he is working.

[26 : 26] And above all, looking at, the terrible reality, of death itself. And realizing, as the woman says, Elijah says, you are a man of God, the word of the Lord, in your mouth, is truth.

Because it is truth, that will prevail, when all the lies, have gone. It is the truth of God. And so here, in this old, and rather remote, corner of the Old Testament, we see the wonderful, end of the story.

Let me end, by saying this. I said to you, this God of death, in the ancient world, was called, the swallower. Isaiah, in chapter 25, says, he will swallow up death, forever.

The swallower, will be swallowed. In that chapter, refer to 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, death is swallowed up, in victory. That is the end, of the story.

And that is, that is the destiny, for all who believe, in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. I see, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb.

[27 : 36] Lovingly, he greets us, scatters fear and gloom. Yours be the glory, risen, conquering son. Endless, is the victory. Your death, have won.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.