

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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ELIJAH -- THE LORD IS GOD

During the years following the division of the kingdom the history of the 10 tribes was one of decline, bloodshed and misery. Successive monarchs exceeded each other in wickedness, yet in spite of their waywardness and disobedience God was to extend mercy in abundance if they would seek him in truth. Our lesson today shows God's mercy to his people in sending a prophet to warn those who would listen.

God's prophet Elijah suddenly appears like a flash of lightning and clap of thunder. We do not know who his parents were and he left no children. He appears unexpectedly without warning giving his harsh and uncompromising message. A hairy man clothed in a leather girdle tied around his waist and was a forbidding figure to confront.

He appears in the reign of King Ahab who had married a Phoenician princess Jezebel and through her introduced Baal worship into the land of Israel. Baal worship was evil and degrading and made God very angry with his people. Elijah had a message from God to this evil King. He was not afraid to deliver the messages.

We are told that Elijah the Tishbite came with the message. Tishbite shows the place from where he came, it was in Gilead the rough wild country east of Jordan. The word Tishbite means "sojourner or stranger" and Elijah was certainly a stranger to wicked Israel. What was the message? Open your Bible to 1 Kings 17:1 and read it.

There was to be no rain... a drought... God used this method many times to punish his people. Deuteronomy 11 v 16 tells us it was a punishment for apostasy and Deuteronomy 28 v 22 for disobedience. In 1 Kings 17 we are not told that Elijah asked God to withhold rain from his people but in the new Testament we are in James 5 v 17 where we are told that Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and it did not for 3 1/2 years. Have a look at this quotation and tell me why you think Elijah prayed to God in this manner.

Now you must all have seen pictures of lands affected by drought. Rain is a wonderful blessing even today and man cannot do without it. Israel as a land would suffer greatly in drought conditions yet God ever in control cares for his servants and provides food and water all through this terrible time for his servant Elijah.

ELIJAH AT CHERITH

Elijah was now in danger from the evil Jezebel who was to blame him for the lack of rain. God directed him to cross Jordan and hide in the brook Cherith, Ahab searched in vain to find the prophet who had predicted the drought. However, Elijah was safe, he had water from the brook to drink and bread and flesh were brought to him every morning and every evening by ravens. Stop and think. God had told Elijah "I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there". Of the many spectacular ways God could have provided food it was to be through the humiliating experience of depending upon ravens -- unclean birds to Elijah (see Leviticus 11:15). It was almost as though God was demonstrating his overruling power over even wild birds, naturally speaking the scavenger birds in famine conditions would consume all they found, but they were turned from scavengers

to providers in God's employment. Why did God use an unclean bird and not a clean bird or animal? Simply because a lesson is being taught. Elijah is shown that the things which were thought of as unclean Israel could be purified by God.

To add to this lesson, as the brook dries up Elijah is told to go to Zarephath in Sidon, where God said he had commanded a widow woman to feed Elijah. Put your thinking caps on again and examine the command of God. Elijah was to find a widow woman, a Gentile widow woman living in the same district as Jezebel (she was searching to kill the prophet) who was to help him in time of famine. This woman belongs to a group so low and insecure, so poor and oppressed it could be thought that she could help no one. Yet God knowing the hearts and minds of all sought fit to use her to help his servant. Open your Bible's again and read 1 Kings 17:10-16. Notice how this woman revealed an amazing faith in the God of Israel. She was prepared to deny herself and her son the last bit of food they had because she had been promised an unending supply of oil. Like Abraham before she believed, then acted. This is true faith. She a Gentile survived the famine while many in Israel died. She had the faith that Israel lacked at this time and we are told that "without faith it is impossible to please God" *Hebrews 11:6*

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES

This incident is so important to prove a point that Jesus uses it in Luke 4:22-32. It was at a time when the Jews were unbelieving of Jesus and challenge his power and authority to do miracles, they were descendants of Abraham yet they lacked faith which is so necessary. To illustrate the point that God receives those who believe independent of race he uses the illustration of the widow woman and Elijah. A Gentile from Sidon had more faith than those in Israel.

In the second half of chapter 17 we have another interesting little point when the son of the woman falls sick and dies. The woman says in verse 18...

"Have you come to call my sin into remembrance?" What you think is meant by this verse? Well obviously the woman had not always been a believer and in the past she would have done many things wrong according to God's law. She now thought that she was being punished for her past sins. The meaning behind the word sin is "mortal faults or failings". However we know that God rewards her faith and her kindness to Elijah by raising the boy to life again.

CONTEST ON MOUNT CARMEL

We move on now to the main point of the lesson. God was determined to end the famine and suffering of the people but there must be acknowledgement and repentance on their part. The famine was so great that even the King and his chief advisers were out trying to find food for the horses and mules which had not already died. Obadiah was Ahab's chief steward and he was a God-fearing man, in fact he had hid 100 of God's prophets in a cave and fed them so keeping them from being killed by wicked Jezebel. God instructed Elijah to go and find Obadiah and to tell him he wanted to meet Ahab. Elijah had to show great faith and courage here to present himself in front of the King when he knew that he was being sought everywhere in the land with the instructions to put him to death. Although Obadiah was fearful of telling the King that Elijah wanted to see him he did so and at last Elijah came face-to-face with Ahab.

Ahab was quick to accuse Elijah of causing the trouble which they were in, blaming him for the drought. However Elijah was quick to point out that it was the King himself who was to blame for the trouble and told him exactly why...

- V 18 --
1. They had forsaken the Commandments of the Lord.
 2. They were worshipping Baal.

This was the real reason for the drought. God was prepared to prove once and for all who was the true God. Elijah directed Ahab to assemble all Israel together and the 450 prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel. When the company was all assembled the challenge went out to the people.

"How long halt ye between two opinions, if Yahweh be God serve him, if Baal serve him" v 21

The people were speechless, Elijah pointed out that he was the only representative for God there yet Baal had 450 prophets so a simple test must be taken to settle the matter. I am sure from your earlier Sunday school days you can remember the contest which was enacted, a sacrifice was to be prepared on an altar and the God who answered by fire was to be the true God. The prophets of Baal went first calling from morning to evening, so pathetic was the display that Elijah began to taunt them and by so doing he highlighted how stupid idol worship was. Elijah asked if their God was talking, sleeping, or on personal business -- most ungodlike qualities indeed, the prophets vain cries of Baal "hear us" were useless. Psalm 115:3-9 we are told why, because lumps of wood and stone can not and could never answer.

Now came Elijah's turn in verses 29-37. Elijah made his preparations and his prayer and God heard his prayer and answered his requests. How?

With such dramatic action that the people were forced to acknowledge that the Lord was God. There is no doubt, for the present at least the people realised they had been foolish in idol worship. Elijah wasted no time in the zeal of the moment, he told the people to kill all the false prophets at the brook Kishom.

THE DROUGHT BREAKS

With the people's acknowledgement that there was only one true God, Elijah announced an end to the drought. He told Ahab he could hear the sound of abundant rain. Now Elijah went himself to the summit of Carmel and prayed earnestly for rain (James 5:18). His servant was told to look out to sea for signs of rain, yet he had to go six times and there was still no sign until the seventh occasion when a servant reported a small cloud which soon increased until everywhere was so black and there was great rain. Ahab drove his chariot towards Jezreel knowing that unless he arrived before the rains came he would be caught in the valley of Esdraelon. The work of Elijah for now was complete, yet the reforms were short lived and Israel went back to the idols.

However Elijah has a great work in the future, he has to bring God's people back to the land to live in peace when Jesus sets up that glorious kingdom.

Well what of us today? Remember how powerful the word of God whom we serve is to even be able to open or close heaven to give or withhold rain. God used a Gentile to show to us that it is the heart of a person which matters and not the nation they belong to, God needs to see faith at work in a person's life. Finally are we halting between two opinions? Do we want one foot in the

world and one in the truth...? This can never be. We cannot serve God and please ourselves giving more time for hobbies, sports, school, computers than to God, if we are then we are in effect serving Baal. Think about it. The lesson is clear and powerful. That is determined to be more like Elijah, fearlessly serving with all our hearts and minds, in giving to God all our time and energy, for surely the Lord Jesus will soon come and set up that glorious kingdom. How wonderful if we are committed in God's mercy to help Elijah in the great work of gathering and educating the Jewish people in God's ways. This time never to fall into vain worship again.

Extra work

1. Why did Elijah pray in the first place that it would not rain?
2. Detail his actions on Mount Carmel and tell me the significance of what he did as he step-by-step built the altar.
3. When God answered Elijah's prayer what was so unusual about the answer?