

ELIJAH AND THE DROUGHT

What Elijah can teach us about prayer?

In your newsletter you have a picture of a shell, a conch shell, used around the Pacific as a call to worship, a call to prayer. This shell and book mark we hope will remind you to pray.

On the back you will notice that it quotes Ps 116:2

'because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath'.

The question I want to ask today is; **Because God bends down to listen, how then should we pray?**

To answer this we are going to look at the story of Elijah and the drought found in 1 Kings 17 and 18

For three and a half years there had been a drought in Israel, and the people were in the midst of a famine. The streams and brooks had dried up and King Ahab, the king of Israel, had ordered an extensive search of the land in the hope of finding water. There was no grass left to feed the animals, and the people were facing starvation.

When the famine is at its worst, God prompts his prophet Elijah to present himself to King Ahab and then rain will be sent. There's this incredible God-moment on Mount Carmel, where God sends fire from heaven, revealing Himself to be the one true God. Elijah then climbs to the very top of Mount Carmel and waits for God to send the rain He promised. God keeps his promise. Rain comes, the drought ends, and the famine is over!

Jesus also speaks about Elijah and the drought in Luke chapter 4, and the authors of James refers to this event in James chapter 5.

So, what can this account teach us about prayer? Specifically, about prayer and mission?

PRAY—BECAUSE THERE IS SUFFERING IN THE WORLD

Famines are truly awful. The first famine I remember hearing about was the Beafrian's in the 70's and then Ethiopia in the 80's. To my shame I remember jokes about starving people been told around the playground. But I also remember images of starving, dying children in desperate need of help.

It's easy to read the account of the drought in 1 Kings just as a matter of fact, this is what happened back then, but imagine what it was like for those for those who were struggling to survive. Jesus spoke about this drought and said "people everywhere were starving" (Luke 4:25). This was a painful time—a dreadful time.

In the midst of all this suffering, Elijah—God's faithful follower—is sent to one person. All of this suffering and God identifies one.

Elijah's life becomes entwined with the lives of the widow and her son. He is invited into their home and he stays with them during the famine. The widow had believed that she and her son would starve to death, but instead, she experiences God's incredible provision.

Here is a question to ponder.

- With all the suffering in the world, is God asking you to narrow your focus? Is there one person, one family, one situation He is asking you to engage with?

Elijah shares in the widow's suffering.

This is what Elijah does and there is a terrible moment in this story when the widow's son falls sick and dies.

17Some time later the woman's son became sick. He grew worse and worse, and finally he died. 18Then she said to Elijah, "O man of God, what have you done to me? Have you come here to point out my sins and kill my son?"

19But Elijah replied, "Give me your son." And he took the child's body from her arms, carried him up the stairs to the room where he was staying, and laid the body on his bed. 20Then Elijah cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, why have you brought tragedy to this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die?"

Imagine the pain and confusion of this poor woman, who has been experiencing God's incredible goodness, but who now cradles her dead son in her arms. Imagine also what is going on in Elijah's heart and mind as the widow confronts him in her grief and as he shares in her suffering. These are people

he has grown to care for, and Elijah is distressed by this “affliction added to the afflicted.”

Elijah’s response is to challenge God in prayer.

Elijah barely says anything to the widow—perhaps he could find no words with which to comfort her. Instead, he goes to his room and confronts God in prayer.

“O LORD my God, why have you brought tragedy to this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die?”

Throughout the Old Testament we discover accounts of praying-people accosting God about the injustice and suffering they see in the world around them.

- The Prophet Habakkuk confronts God about the suffering he sees around him. (Habakkuk 1:3)
- Moses confronts God in prayer after the King of Egypt cruelly increases the workload of the enslaved Israelites: (Exodus 5:22-23)
- The author of Psalm 44 is bold in confronting God about the suffering he sees: “Wake up! Do something, Lord! Why are you sleeping? (Psalm 44:23)

These are raw, honest, unguarded prayers to God. They are full of passion and pain. These are not grumbles or whinings. They are not complaints about inconveniences, or petty annoyances. Scripture is VERY clear that God HATES grumbling and whinging.

Rather, these are heartfelt, honest outpourings to God. They have been brought out of concern for the suffering of others. These are prayers which are full of emotion, born out of grief for those that are grieving.

These are prayers that are acceptable to God.

Elijah prayed, passionately and boldly, because his life was entwined with that of the widow’s, and because he shared in her suffering.

And, incredibly, God answers Elijah’s prayer. God restores life to the widow’s son.

We're not told if he prayed for the many who were suffering because of the famine in Israel. What is clear is that Elijah confronted God for the sake of one person—one grieving widow—who he was connected with and concerned for.

Questions

- What are you passionate about? What grieves you? Will you be bold and pour your heart out to God?
- As a family and church family, how are we engaging in the pain and suffering of this world? Is there a particular situation, or are there particular people who we, as a community, are stirred to pray for?

PRAY—BECAUSE OF OUR HOPE IN A COMPASSIONATE GOD.

Famines are awful. Yet God had specific reasons for allowing drought and famine to afflict the people of Israel.

In 1 Kings 16:30 we read about King Ahab— the King of Israel—that he “did more things to disobey the LORD than any king before him.” One of the things he did was to popularise the worship of Baal in Israel.

God was disgusted by the worship of Baal. It was not only a rejection of Him; Baal worship was cruel and savage, and utterly offensive to God’s heart and character. It included human sacrifice, with young, innocent children being offered as burnt offerings. It was an evil religion, that forced people to worship in terrible ways, and it was entirely offensive to God.

The followers of Baal believed that their god was in charge of the weather and the rain. It was Baal who made the harvest fruitful. The prophets of Baal would have encouraged the Israelites to worship Baal so he would provide them with rain and good harvests.

- God prophets were being killed left, right and centre.
- King Ahab corrupting His chosen people by encouraging them to worship a false deity.
- God sees a cruel religion spreading through Israel.
- He sees His people wavering between two opinions. Should we follow the LORD God, or should we follow Baal? (1 Kings 18:21)
- He sees His people begin to turn to this false weather god to provide the rain for their land.

So God stops the rain. If the people of Israel are going to look to Baal to provide for them, then God is going to make it absolutely clear that they are putting their trust in the wrong deity. God allows the land to fall into drought for three and a half years.

I don't know about you but my initial reaction to that is – that's mean!!

But we need to remember that this is just one small story within God's big story. **This big story is not about punishment but about redemption.**

- We place our hope in a God who tells us that He is compassionate.
- We place our hope in a God who is grieved by human suffering and who is powerful enough to do something about it.
- We place our hope in a God who desires to redeem and restore us—to bring people back to Him— rather than to condemn or punish us.

If this is not true, then our Christian faith is a terrible deception.

Consider these scriptures which are good news for all of us.

“God doesn't take our lives. Instead, he figures out ways of bringing us back when we run away.” (2 Samuel 14:14)

“The Lord said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart... I am merciful, kind, and caring. I don't easily lose my temper, and I don't like to punish.” (Joel 2: 12-13)

“Turn to the Lord! He can still be found. Call out to God! He is near. Give up your crooked ways and your evil thoughts. Return to the Lord our God. He will be merciful and forgive your sins.” (Isaiah 55: 6-7)

So trusting that God would be true to His word, Elijah prays for the people of Israel.

At this point, Elijah is not asking God to send rain. He is not asking that God will end the drought. His primary concern is that the people of Israel will know that the Lord is God, and that their hearts will be turned back to Him.

“Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” 1 Kings 17:20

Praying for others—appealing to God's compassion—these are prayers that are acceptable to God.

Questions

- Do you trust that He wants to restore people to himself? That He “figures out ways” to bring us back to Him?
- Who are the people in your life who you will pray for, asking that God will turn their hearts to Him?

PRAY—SO WE ARE ALIGNED WITH THE HEART AND MIND OF GOD.

On top of Mt Carmel, in front of Elijah, King Ahab, and people of Israel, God sends fire from heaven. I encourage you to go home and read it. It’s an awe-inspiring God moment; a definitive response to the people’s question “who is the real God”. The Israelites fall on the ground. Renouncing Baal they cry out “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (1 Kings 18:39). God has made a powerful statement, which turns His people’s hearts back to Him.

Elijah then climbs to the very top of Mt Carmel, and Elijah tells his servant to “go and look toward the sea...” (1 Kings 18: 43). Six times the servant comes back and tells Elijah that he can’t see anything. Then, at last, the servant spots a small cloud rising from the ocean. We read that soon “the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, and a heavy rain started falling...” (1 Kings 18: 45).

It’s important to note how Elijah prayed, as he waited for the rains to come.

On top of Mt Carmel, as his servant searched the sky for evidence of the coming rain, we read that Elijah “bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.” (1 Kings 18:42)

Perhaps Elijah, with his head bowed, quietly spoke to God. Perhaps he remained silent. This account does not tell us one way or another. What we see however is a man waiting humbly and patiently. So confident that rain is coming that he instructs his servant, seven times, to keep looking, even though the sky is empty. And then, when one small cloud appears above the ocean, he takes it as confirmation that his prayers have been answered.

Here’s a thought to consider: Who instigated the rain?

Was it Elijah? By praying for rain did he move God to act? Or had God already decided to send rain and Elijah’s prayer was needless? If God had already made up His mind to send rain then did it really matter if Elijah prayed or not?

In James 5: 17 & 18 we read:

“. . . for three and a half years [Elijah’s] prayers kept the rain from falling. But when he did pray for rain, it fell from the skies and made the crops grow.”

At the beginning of the drought, Elijah himself said *“there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”* (1 Kings 17:1)

These verses imply that Elijah yielded an incredible power; that it was his prayers which held back the rains, and that it was at his word that God broke the drought.

However, consider what it says in 1 Kings 18:1:

“After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah; ‘Go and present yourself to Ahab and I will send rain on the land.’”

It’s clear in this passage that Elijah is following God’s instruction. It is God who calls Elijah to action, and it is God who has decided when the time is right to send rain. It has been God’s intention all along to break the drought.

So, who instigated the rain? God or Elijah?

This story reveals the wonderful paradox of prayer.

God has a plan in motion—but He does not act unless His people pray.

God is in control—but He does nothing except in response to prayer.

Does this mean that God is powerless unless we pray? No! But it does reveal that God’s intention is for His people—His Church—to be in partnership with Him in what He is doing in our world.

Question

- Do we believe that God acts because we pray? Do we accept this incredible responsibility of praying so that His will is done, and His Kingdom will come?

CONCLUSION: BECAUSE HE BENDS DOWN TO LISTEN, I WILL PRAY AS LONG AS I HAVE BREATH! PSALM 116:2

Isn’t this a great picture; God bending down, coming near to us, so that He can hear us clearly when we pray. Isn’t it incredible that we can have this friendship—this privileged access—to our Creator!

And because He offers His ear to us, will we pray? We will speak to Him—will we speak with Him—as long as we have breath?

Prayer is the mighty engine that drives the work of mission.

So what has Elijah taught us about praying for mission?

We should pray—because there is suffering in the world.

We should pray—because of our hope in a compassionate God.

We should pray—so that our hearts and minds are attuned to purposes of God.