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Introduction

Living a life of faith isn’t without its challenges. Every day, this world presents us with obstacles to living a life of faithfulness, but we can overcome these challenges by relying on God’s Word and the examples set by those who came before us.

In this study, we’ll examine events from the lives of Elijah, Josiah, Jehoshaphat, Jonah, and Thomas. In their struggles, we’ll learn that the solution to facing the obstacles of the 21st century is still found in turning to God as our primary source of refuge and strength.
Lesson One

The Challenge to See

Elijah in the Presence of God

Romans 4:20
“He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.”

Lesson Text
1 Kings 19:1-18

INTRODUCTION
Do you remember Magic Eye Pictures? They were popular in the ’90s. Pictures looked like layers of wavy lines. If you stared at it long enough and relaxed your eyes, you could see another image, like an elephant or a tree, hidden in the design. There is a lesson in that for us. Life often looks like a confusing mess of wavy lines. but if we look beyond the confusion, we can see our ever-present God, revealing His character and purpose. Behind every event within this word, God is at work to accomplish His purposes.
KEY BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The prophet, Elijah, burst into the story of Israel with little introduction (1 Kings 17:1). The significance of the prophet lies not within his genealogy or his socioeconomic status, but in his service to God as His prophet. It’s a service that led him to experience not only the joy and wonder of God’s power and Fatherly care, but fear and depression in the context of persecution because of his faith.

Elijah’s calling came within a time in Israel’s history when unfaithfulness was the norm. His first mission was to confront the political and religious powers of his day. King Ahab (874-853 BC), the seventh king of the northern state of Israel, was a powerful military king and had great international influence, yet Scripture sees him as who he really was. He failed to live up to God’s standards thus his rule was presented as a catastrophe. He married Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31-34), a princess and daughter of the priest-king Ethbaal (“Baal is alive’) of Tyre, worshiper of the god Melqart (also called Baal) who ascended to the throne through murder. This marriage was a political move by his father, Omri, to secure good relations with the Phoenicians. Jezebel’s zealous beliefs in the god Baal elevated this religion within the state to equal status with the religion of the Lord; Baalism became a state-sponsored religion. Little is known of the god, Baal, but it seems evident his followers believed he controlled fertility. This meant his worshipers believed Baal provided the rain. Elijah was called to undermine the integrity of the religion and expose the impotence of Baal. In doing so, he exposed the foolishness and failures of the political and religious powers of the state. Elijah’s first act was to proclaim drought and famine were coming (1 Kings 17:1), an act that directly assaulted the state religion of Baal worship, the god of storms and rain. During the drought, God miraculously provided Elijah food by the brook, Cherith, by the Jordan River. Then God sent him on his second mission into the heart of Jezebel’s homeland, Phoenicia, to the town of Zarephath. He was told to go directly into the enemy’s territory. God’s power and grace was not and is not limited to the people of Israel. Even Jezebel’s
homeland was not outside the sphere of His rule. Elijah was to learn that God’s power had and still has no limitations.

The drought and subsequent famine forced King Ahab and his servant, Obadiah, to search for water and food for their animals (1 Kings 18:1-16). Obadiah, a faithful worshiper of God, encountered Elijah during his search and set up a meeting with Ahab. Jezebel had been busy with her religious reforms that included killing the prophets of the Lord (18:4, 13). Elijah challenged the false prophets and arranged a confrontation on Mount Carmel. It was there that Elijah exposed the powerlessness of Baal and his consort, Asherah, by humiliating and killing 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. The Law prescribed the death penalty for false prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1-18), and Elijah demonstrated his commitment to God’s commands by killing the prophets. This was not a careless act of violence, but a response to Jezebel’s cruelty and obedience to the Law. After this powerful demonstration of God’s superiority over Baal, rain returned to the land (1 Kings 18:41-46). There was subsequently no question who provides the rain! The people of Israel were witnesses of these events (1 Kings 18:19) to call them to repentance. Ahab returned home and reported the incident to Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1), but Jezebel was not to be intimidated!

LESSON
Scripture is not shy about revealing the weaknesses of the faithful. What happened following the victorious event that occurred on Mount Carmel shows how quickly difficult circumstances can change the heart of the faithful. Jezebel threatened Elijah through her messenger, probably just to intimidate him. If she wanted him arrested, she would have sent soldiers. Elijah then plummeted into a state of depression and fear. Jezebel had proven how far she would go by killing the Lord’s prophets. His life was in danger. In 1 Kings 19:3, there is a question regarding the original text. The Hebrew text begins the verse with “and he saw,” but most translations prefer the Greek text “and he was afraid.” Despite which reading is preferred, there is no doubt Elijah was afraid. Elijah fled to Horeb (1 Kings 19:3).
to Beersheba, a city on the southernmost border in Judah (see 1 Kings 4:25). There he left his personal servant and traveled even farther south beyond the borders of Judah for one day’s journey, about 20-30 miles, into the wilderness. Was he abandoning his mission? Had his fear driven him into such despair he could no longer face his responsibilities? Had his focus and vision blurred, and he no longer could see God’s purposes and work? Elijah needed a spiritual and emotional rekindling, to refocus on his mission. Jezebel had intimidated him and blurred his vision. Sitting under a broom tree in the wilderness, God sent His angel twice to care for his physical needs by providing food and water. Physically replenished, God called him to Mount Horeb, which is Mount Sinai (see Exodus 3:1). It was time for him to open his eyes to see the purpose of his mission. God brought him to a cave. Jewish tradition claims it is the same cave Moses hid in when he saw the back of God (Exodus 33:17-23), but that claim cannot be substantiated. In this cave, God asked a question all believers should pause and ask themselves: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (see also Genesis 3:9). This should be considered a rebuke, albeit a gentle one, calling him to reassess his choice to flee from his mission. Elijah’s response was intensified by a somewhat skewed view of his situation (1 Kings 19:10, 14). He claimed to be “jealous” for the Lord, a word which carries the idea of undivided loyalty, even when used of God Himself (Exodus 34:14). He claimed this loyalty had put his life in jeopardy. The people of Israel had forsaken God, destroyed the places of worship, and killed the prophets. He no longer felt he had a place among the people, but God had a different view. Elijah would see the bigger picture through a series of natural events caused by the hand of God.

Elijah stood on the mountain, and God sent a great wind, caused the earth to quake, and sent fire, but God remained silent after each event (1 Kings 19:11-12a), choosing not to respond to these disturbances of nature. It was when God caused a gentle, “small” sound that He finally spoke to Elijah. The first three acts are revelations of God’s power and judgment and may have meant to convey His anger toward the people
of Israel (see 2 Samuel 22:7-16; Isaiah 30:30; Psalms 18:7, 12). They might have also been reminders of what happened on the mountain centuries before when Moses brought the Law to the people of Israel, and they became God’s covenant people (Exodus 19:9, 16; 34:6; Deuteronomy 5:23-26), bringing Elijah’s attention to the purpose of his mission by reminding him what happened on Mount Sinai years earlier under Moses’ leadership. The phenomenon need not be negative in their meaning, but ways that God intended to assuage Elijah’s fears and doubts by showing him the significance of his work. All three natural phenomenon led to the climatic act of God’s speaking in a gentle voice. The soft voice of God then reiterated the question He asked before: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Despite the gentle way God approached Elijah, the question of his mission remained. The voice of God called Elijah to evaluate his choices and focus on his mission, which he had woefully neglecting. Only when God spoke and confronted Elijah did he understand his calling. The word of God convicts and heals. The “small,” gentle voice came not in weakness or timidity, but with a calming power and gentle authority. God then sent him back to anoint Jehu as king of Israel, Benhadad as King of Syria, and Elisha as his successor. All three would play a role in bringing Ahab, Jezebel, and the Baal cult to an end. His mission would not be fruitless. God would vindicate him!

In his depression, Elijah had distorted the reality of his situation. He had claimed he was the only faithful worshiper left in Israel. What about Obadiah, the faithful servant of Ahab? What about the 100 faithful prophets Obadiah had hidden in caves (1 Kings 18:3-4)? What about Elijah’s own servant he left in Beersheba (19:3)? His fear and despair led him to irrational claims that may have been the impetus of his fleeing from his mission. God makes it clear to him that he was wrong. He had 7,000 still faithful among the people. Elijah was not alone despite his perceptions or feelings. God makes it clear that he was the reason for the continued existence of the faithful, and He would sustain Elijah through it all (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah had to go back, but he would not be alone. His work was not done, and God was not going to allow him
to make excuses not to complete it. God expected Elijah to get back to work! That’s the same expectation God has for all of us, too. When the path seems long or frightening, know that God’s purposes for our lives are so much bigger than our fears, and He is walking beside us—directing our steps.

APPLICATION
In both good and bad times, God is present and working to accomplish His will. We cannot allow that truth to be obscured by the world around us. Elijah, the prophet, would struggle with this issue. His world was in turmoil, and hostile forces plagued him. What was God doing in all of this? How could he continue a mission that seemed like it was destined to fail? Elijah ran. Despair and depression temporarily won out, but God did not let him flee from his responsibilities. He needed a fresh perspective, a new outlook. He needed God to open his eyes and see the real purpose and goal of his calling. God graciously called him back to where the covenant began, and like Moses, Elijah was given a unique experience of God’s presence to encourage him to continue his mission. Elijah would be imbued with confidence, not only by experiencing the power of God through symbols of power and judgment, but also by the healing and gentle power of His voice. It was then that God confronted Elijah with a question we all should ask ourselves: What are we doing here? What should we be doing?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Elijah flee to the wilderness? In what ways do we flee from God and our responsibilities to Him?

2. Was Elijah right when he told God he was the only faithful person left in Israel? What was God’s response? What can we learn from his response for our lives today?

3. What do the wind, earthquake, and fire represent?

4. Why did God reveal Himself in a “still small voice“ last? What did this mean to Elijah?

5. What lessons can we learn from this story about fear and depression? How did God help Elijah deal with his fear? His depression?

6. What did God want Elijah to discover about God’s nature on Mount Horeb? What was God saying about Elijah’s mission?

7. Why would Elijah have thought he was the only faithful member of God’s people left? How often do we feel alone? How can we as a community help one another feel supported in our struggles?

8. Answer the following question as a community: What are we doing here? How can we know we’re doing what God wants us to do?