

The Lord Indeed is God

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- [0 : 0 0] Please be seated. As I said last week, it's a joy to be back at Holy Trinity, and I thank you for your prayers and support financially through CMS.
- And it's great to renew some fellowship and contacts in these few weeks that I come back each year to speak for CMS. And for those who don't have or have lost, if you want a fridge magnet to remind you to pray, then on the table out in the foyer where I'll be standing afterwards, I have plenty of those, as well as my latest newsletter.
- If you don't get my newsletter each month, then please do tell me, and you'd like to get it, please do tell me, and I'm happy to arrange that for you either by email or in the church pigeonholes here each month.
- I'm preaching from the passage from 1 Kings chapter 18. So on page 283 in the Bibles, if you'd like to have it open, you may find that helpful. And I'll pray for us now as we begin.
- Lord God, your word is light and life. And we pray that the life that you want to give us through your word and through your son may powerfully come to us now as we sit under this word from 1 Kings.
- [1 : 2 0] Teach us, correct us, rebuke us, and train us in righteousness. So that we may be equipped for every good work. For the glory of Jesus, we pray. Amen.
- Three years of drought. Three years of famine. Three years of the sky turned bronze. Three long and hard years for the people of ancient Israel.
- For three years, the prophet Elijah was hiding from the king. And for three long years, the king sought in vain to find him, the troubler of the nation.
- And during those three long years of drought, three private episodes of God's life-giving provision. In chapter 17, we read of God feeding Elijah in the drought by ravens.
- We read of God giving life to a widow and Elijah and the widow's son in the middle of the drought by a miraculous provision of food that never runs out.
- [2 : 3 2] And then when the son of that widow died, God miraculously giving life to the dead son through his prophet Elijah. For three long years, the king, the queen, and the people failed to heed the warnings of the drought.
- For three long years, they failed to turn back to God in repentance for their idolatry and their sin. For three long years, the people of Israel continued to live, turning their backs on the real and living God.
- For three long years, they continued to worship false gods, the Baals as they are called, brought into the land by the queen, Queen Jezebel.
- For three long years, they continued to worship false gods, the king, and the king of Israel. But now is the time for Elijah to return to the center stage. He's not found by the king, but now is the time when he himself comes forward to confront the king.
- And not only to confront the king, but to confront the people. For in essence, what Elijah does is not for the benefit of the king himself, but in fact for the people of the nation.

- [3 : 55] So Elijah comes, and we find now a great showdown between God and the false gods. This is the equivalent of the last day in September for ancient Israel.
- Well, as it is now the first Saturday of October in ancient Israel. This is the grand final contest between Yahweh and the false gods, the Baals of ancient Israel.
- When the king sees Elijah, who's coming to meet him, he says, is that you, you troubler of Israel? And in that very accusation, he exposes his own complete ignorance of what is going on.
- He thinks that somehow Elijah has pulled a magic trick to stop the rain for three years. That it is Elijah who's brought this trouble on the nation. And despite the fact that for three years there's been a drought, despite the fact that Ahab the king and the people should have known the reason for the drought, despite the fact that the old part of the Old Testament that they would have had tells that if they are disobedient to God, there would be a drought.
- Despite all of that, he accuses the prophet of being the troubler of Israel. And Elijah's response to him is, I have not troubled Israel.
- [5 : 18] Oh yes, it's through Elijah that God has declared the drought would come. But Elijah is not the real troubler. Elijah is not the real cause of this drought.
- Not at all. I have not troubled Israel, he says in verse 18. But you have and your father's house. Because you've forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.
- They've broken the law. They've broken the law of God. They ought to have known that law of God. But it's very clear in the old part of the Old Testament. But they've ignored it, abandoned it, broken it.
- And they are the real troubler. The king is the real troubler of ancient Israel. The people of Israel at this time, in fact, are two nations, not one.
- When King Solomon died, the kingdom divided into two. And the nation that's being addressed here is in particular the northern part of the kingdom of Israel. The southern part, called Judah, at least continued with kings descended from David and the Jerusalem temple.
- [6 : 27] But right from the start, this northern kingdom, when it broke away from the south at the death of King Solomon, set up false shrines, golden calves to bow down and worship.
- Their history is one fully of apostasy, idolatry, and turning away from Almighty God. So Elijah challenges. In fact, he demands of the king.
- He says, assemble all the prophets of Baal, 450 of them, plus the 400 female prophets, the prophetesses who worship Asherah, the female god who's sort of the wife of the male god Baal.
- Bring them all together and bring all the people together. And the king obeys him. It shows who's really got the authority. The king here, even though he's accusing Elijah of being the troubler, is actually now obeying what Elijah the prophet demands of him.
- And all the people come together. And it's to them, to the people, that Elijah speaks. The real thrust here, you see, is for the benefit of the people who've been so badly misled by this king Ahab and his apostate queen Jezebel.
- [7 : 39] The battle, you see, is for the people, not for the prophets, and not really for the king or the queen. It's to win the hearts back of the people.
- And so Elijah then addresses the people in verse 21. He came near to all the people and said, How long will you go limping with two different opinions?
- This idea of limping with different opinions is perhaps an idiom a bit like what we would say, Have a foot in both camps. If you have a foot in one camp and a foot in another camp, it's not all that easy to walk properly.

You'd limp along in a way. And that's probably the idea behind this expression. You see, they've abandoned the living God, but they've done it in a more subtle way.

The Baals, the Canaanite gods, the pagan gods, are polytheistic. That is, there are many of them. You have lots of them. So if there are lots of gods around, there's not much of an issue in just adding in Yahweh, the living God of Israel, who brought them out from Egypt and so on.

[8 : 48] That is, well, we can have lots of gods. We'll just add one into our mantelpiece of gods. A bit like adding another trophy or something like that. One more.

And that's the subtlety of that polytheism. Well, we'll just worship Yahweh, but we'll also worship the Baals, and we'll worship them, and we'll worship them all. Put them all together. But what Elijah is accusing them here, exactly what Jesus says later, of course, is you cannot serve more than one master.

What God demands is a total allegiance, not a compromised allegiance where it's shared with other gods. And that's what they're doing. They're limping along, a foot in both camps, trying to worship Yahweh and all these pagan gods.

But in effect, what that means is that they are not worshipping the living God. They've abandoned him. They've turned away from him. They are worshipping the Canaanite pagan gods.

And so Elijah sets down a challenge now. And this is the sort of grand final version for ancient Israel. He says, I only I am left of the prophets of Yahweh, Jehovah, or the name that's given to the living God in the Old Testament.

[10 : 02] So he says, let two bulls be given to us. That is, to you and one to me. Let them, the prophets of Baal, let them choose the first bull.

They go first. Cut it in pieces, lay it on the wood, put no fire to it. I'll prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it.

Then you call on the name of your God and I will call on the name of Yahweh. And the God who answers by fire is indeed God.

So there's the competition to set up the sacrifices, to call on the name of the gods. And whichever God answers by fire is indeed God.

So it's a sort of ancient version of Australian rules football in a way. Which God is going to win? Which God is going to answer by fire? The people are silent when Yahweh, when Elijah rather, accuses them of limping along.

[11 : 08] Exposes their own ignorance, indecision, and so on. But they agree to this challenge that is laid down. Well spoken, they say, at the end of verse 24.

Now the odds are stacked against Elijah here. If there was a TAB at the time, it would be a pretty safe bet to bet for the prophets of Baal.

After all, there are 450 of them, plus 400 prophetesses, one Elijah. All the people have been worshipping these Baals in particular. And the queen and the king have put their royal stamp of approval on this worship.

And what's more? It's at Mount Carmel on a mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Nice spot, by the way. But a place where the pagan gods would be worshipped.

It's their home territory. You know, it's like going down to Codrington Park or whatever it's called these days. And trying to beat Geelong down there. I mean, it's almost impossible, I would imagine. So it's a sort of an away match for Elijah, to a degree.

[12 : 12] And they go first. It's like going white in chess or serving in tennis, I suppose. They call on their god first. They've got the first advantage. All the odds are stacked against Elijah.

They choose the animal out of the two that are brought. Elijah doesn't choose the animal. There's no trickery here. No deceit or magic. They're having a sort of magic animal that's going to sort of burst into flames or something like this.

They go first. All the advantage lies with them. And so the challenge begins. Kickoff is not at 2.30 or whatever it is.

Kickoff is, it seems, in the early morning. Because we're told that the prophets of Baal, they do all this. They prepare it all. And from morning until noon, they cry, in verse 26, O Baal, answer us.

And all morning, 850 prophets and prophetesses cry out, O Baal, answer us.

[13 : 19] Imagine doing that on and on and on, all morning, three, four, maybe five hours even. O Baal, answer us. Not quite as loud as the MCG yesterday, perhaps.

But probably loud enough, 850 of them crying out. O Baal, answer us. And what do we read? In verse 26, There was no voice and no answer.

Nothing. Not even a little flicker of a flame of a pilot light. Nothing. Not even a little rumble from heaven. Nothing.

And they limped about the altar that they had made. Their limping about here is perhaps a mockery of their limping between the two gods and the various gods.

But the idea perhaps of a sort of ritual dance or some sort of liturgical procession. Round and round the altar they go. All morning.

[14 : 29] And no answer. No voice. So Elijah does what any heckler from the southern stand would do in the last quarter to a Collingwood supporter or player.

Heckle. Make a mockery of them. Laugh at them. Throw in a few good one-liners. That's what Elijah does. At noon, Elijah mocked them, we're told.

Saying, Cry aloud. That is, you're not loud enough. Come on, it's sort of like the cheer squad leader, but in a mocking way. Shout out louder.

Oh, Baal, answer us. Surely he is a god. Come on, of course he's a god, but you've got to shout louder. Maybe he's a little bit deaf is perhaps the implication of this. What sort of god, after all, is deaf?

But maybe your god is a little bit deaf. Shout louder. Or perhaps he's meditating. Verse 27 says, As though God has put up a do not disturb sign, I'm praying.

[15 : 29] What sort of god is that? Cry louder. Or then maybe he has wandered away, the text says.

Now this is probably a very polite way of saying, He's at the toilet. That's what's suggested by the language. Now see what mockery of a god.

That your god's at the toilet, and presumably he's been there all morning. He's probably eaten something rather bad. Which does happen to us in Nepal earlier this year and other places.

Deli Belli and so on. So maybe your god's been at the toilet all morning. Making fun of their god. Or then it says, maybe he is on a journey. He's packed up and he's left.

Maybe he doesn't like the fact that there's no rain, so he's gone off to Malaysia where there's plenty of it. Or even Melbourne it seems to me now. Our times change. So cry louder.

[16 : 29] Oh Baal, answer us. Or maybe, maybe your god is asleep. So you've got to wake him up. Come on, oh Baal, answer us. Wake up, wake up.

Again, what sort of a god is this that needs to be awoken by the cries of the prophets on earth? Elijah taunts them. Taunts them to cry out louder.

Oh Baal, answer us. And they continue on. Past noon and through the afternoon. 850 of them getting louder and louder all day. They cried aloud, verse 28 says.

That is the idea being they are now louder than they were in the morning. And as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out. Sort of cutting themselves so the blood would flow as a way of trying to induce the gods to answer their prayers.

Oh Baal, answer us. You can see the frenzy that they are in. Round and round and round and round the altar. All morning, through the noontime, all afternoon, up to the time of the evening sacrifice, late in the afternoon.

[17 : 36] Shouting out over and over and over again. Oh Baal, answer us. And there was no voice. No answer. No response. Silence from heaven. Verse 29.

Not a thing. Not a whisper from their gods. Not a rumble of thunder in the distance. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Absolute silence from heaven. Well, they've had their turn. They've had the whole day. And not a thing.

And now it's Elijah's turn. The day is almost over. It's the time of the evening sacrifice. Elijah puts his altar together.

[18 : 36] Twelve stones. Reminding them of the twelve tribes of Israel that come from the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob way back in the book of Genesis. So completely forgotten, it seems, by the people of Israel of the day.

He puts together his animal and the wood and so on in verses 30 to 32. All of this is done in a way that reminds Israel, provokes Israel to see the old covenant promises from the beginning of the Old Testament.

He builds a trench around the altar and he gets them to pour water over his sacrifice. It's not a trick. There's no petrol there in those days, of course. This is water.

They get it. He's not doing a magic trick. You get water. They know it's water. It's water. Flooded with water. Do it more. Do it again. Do it again. The trench is full with water. The animal is drenched.

The wood is drenched. You know what it's like to try and light wet wood. It doesn't work very easily. So all the odds are stacked against Elijah. So what does Elijah do?

[19 : 43] What's going to induce his God to do what the other gods have failed to do? The basic thing first is that Elijah prays. He doesn't shout.

He doesn't beat himself. He doesn't cut himself. He doesn't dance and rant and rave and go into a frenzy. He doesn't repeat loud, loud prayers.

It's one man. All day you've had this loud 850 voice choir going, Oh, Baal, answer us. The contrast will be marked. Elijah merely prays.

It's not a long prayer. It's not a complicated prayer. He doesn't use abracadabra type liturgical theological language. It's a simple, straightforward prayer.

But it's also a prayer of faith. Notice how his prayer begins. Oh, Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel.

[20 : 52] Elijah's prayer is not, Oh, God, if you are God, please do this. There's no if about it. There's no conditional. There's no doubt.

You are God in Israel. Let it be known that you are God in Israel. That's his prayer. Elijah is praying full of faith. And let it be known, he says, that I am your servant and that I've done all these things at your bidding.

That is, I've been obedient to your call, Oh, God. My faith in you has been shown in my obedience. Biblical faith is always reflected in obedience.

What's going to bring about an answer to this prayer? It's prayed in faith, backed up by his obedience. You are God.

Let it be known that you are God. Then a bit more about this prayer. It's motive. It's very easy.

[21 : 55] And it would have been easy for Elijah to pray for his own benefit. You think there are 850 prophets and prophetesses. There are thousands of Israelites around here.

Presumably the king is there. There may be even this evil queen Jezebel. What's going to happen at the end of the day if Elijah's sacrifice is not destroyed? What's going to happen at the end of the day if indeed the prophets of Baal's sacrifices consumed in fire?

Well, Elijah probably wouldn't have time to make a will. He'd be put to death. You can imagine him praying, God, I'm in a bit of a sticky situation here.

I'm about to die. I really need you to destroy this sacrifice. No. There's no sense of that in his prayer. His prayer is not for his benefit.

His prayer is not selfish. It's not self-centered. His prayer is for the glory of God. See what he prays. Answer me, O Lord, answer me.

[22 : 57] In verse 37. So that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God. That is that this people will give you the honor and glory that is attributed to you alone as God.

So it's a God-centered prayer, but it's for the benefit of the people. That they may know that you are God. It's not for Elijah saving his skin.

Here is a prayer that is motivated by God's glory and for the benefit of other people. That they may know that you are God. It's an important point that's being made here, I think.

Over the years, when I've visited people to pray for them, people who are ill or with a particular need or trouble or sometimes dying, it's easy to pray, God, please answer these prayers that reverse this situation, bring about a restoration, a healing or whatever.

It's easy to pray for those things. But as I reflected years ago on this very passage, I realized actually there's something more important in prayers.

[24 : 09] Because I've seen people who have a prayer answered, but then they just sort of wander off onto their own life again. The crucial thing is not that somebody would be healed or their trouble would be eased or whatever.

It's that they may know that you are God. That you have done it. That God has done it. So we may pray for healing and get healed and then go and live our life turning our back on God.

The issue is, do we see that this is God at work? That God has done it and now we live our life for God. And that's what Elijah prays for. He prays that the people may know that God is God and that God does it.

After all, fire could come down and consume the sacrifice and the people say, wow, Elijah, you're a great magician. How'd you do that? What's your trick? So Elijah wants not only the sacrifice to be destroyed, but ultimately and more importantly, that when it happens, they say, God did that.

That they know that it's God. And that's his prayer. It's a prayer for God's glory and for the benefit of these people. And God answers his prayer.

[25 : 21] Not because he rants and raves. Not because he uses exactly the right words as though it's a magic formula. Not because he prays for a long time. Not because he prays articulately.

God answers because God is God. God answers prayer. He doesn't go on journeys. He doesn't meditate and put up a do not disturb sign. He doesn't spend all morning on the toilet or anything else like that.

God hears and answers the prayers of his faithful people. Wow. And what happens after this relatively quiet prayer of Elijah?

The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. Wow, bang. No silence from heaven here.

A sudden, dramatic, and complete destruction of this sacrifice. And the people fall on their faces and say, Yahweh indeed is God.

[26 : 22] You see, the prayer is answered. The people recognize, Yahweh is God. It's Yahweh who's done this. He is God, not the Baals. Yahweh alone is God.

Elijah's prayer is answered. Well, Elijah is one of the superheroes of the Old Testament. He's in the Old Testament Hall of Fame.

He probably would win the Norm Smith medal for this occasion here. But that's not the point. See, one of the most remarkable lines in the New Testament is this.

Elijah was a man just like us. Wow. You read this story of Elijah and think, I'm just like him?

No, no, no, no, I don't think so. But yes, Elijah was a man just like us. We are being encouraged by the letter of James where that verse comes.

[27 : 24] Not to see Elijah as a superhero. Wow, the amazing things that he can do. But to see, we're just the same. The prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective, James says.

Elijah is a man just like us. We are being encouraged to pray faithfully out of a life of faithful obedience just like him. To know that our prayers have the access to God that his did.

Ours, even more clearly so, through the opening of Jesus' death for us. To go right to the throne of God's grace. Over the years, people ask me sometimes to pray for them.

Happens in Asia, in fact, very often indeed. But sometimes behind it is, I think, a troubling theology. Whilst, of course, I'm happy to pray for people and do.

What troubles me if behind it I detect somehow, well, you're a minister. You pray, not me. That your prayers are somehow better than mine.

[28 : 29] That's not what we're being encouraged to think here. Elijah is a man just like us. That is, any of us with faith in the living God can pray knowing that God listens and answers our prayers as is best for us and most glorious for him.

All of us can pray. The New Testament is very clear about that. That we do not need a mediator to pray for us like an ordained minister. Oh yes, it's good to ask other people to pray but not as a substitute, not as a mediator, not because their prayers will be better or more effective than yours.

All of us here are being encouraged to think Elijah is like us. Our prayers are powerful and effective. If Yahweh is God, if the God of the Bible is God as indeed he is, then pray in faith, out of obedient faith, with confidence that God is there, God hears and God is powerfully able to answer prayer.

But this episode also challenges us. It challenges us about whether we are limping with God or not. Do we have a foot in two different camps?

My observation about Australia is that it's very easy for us to do that, maybe even without realising. We live in a country where it's easy to be a Christian and in our affluent and complacent culture, it's very easy, in fact, to drift into having a foot in God's camp, but a foot into the values of our world, our pagan, secular society of Australia.

[30 : 17] Some of the values are not bad in themselves, but when they replace God and they challenge God, it's very easy to walk along with a foot in both camps, serving God and money or God and financial security or God and pleasure or God and something else.

Where I work is a little bit different. There are certainly Christians who are sort of in a bit of both, but often the choice is much starker and in some ways, therefore, it's actually healthier.

So I live and teach in Malaysia and teach in Pakistan, Islamic countries, Malaysia increasingly so. If you're a Christian, it's very clear. That is, there's not sort of quite the same temptation to think, well, am I or not?

I'm sort of trying to get a bit of both worlds. Now, there is a sort of affluence and wealth and so on, a bit like Australia and Malaysia, less so in Pakistan. I teach in India sometimes.

I was there two or three weeks ago. A Hindu country. If you're a Christian there, it stands out. It's clearer. It's a sharper choice. I teach in Buddhist countries like Myanmar and Thailand quite frequently.

[31 : 32] There again, the choice is very obvious and clear. And the same in communist countries like Kyrgyzstan, where I was a few weeks ago, and China in the past, Russia last year.

Australia, the edges are much more blurred in a way. We perhaps face the same sort of danger of ancient Israel, maybe in a way more insidious and subtle than perhaps in Asia, where I teach.

What this challenge is saying to us is, if Yahweh is God, if the God of the Bible, the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, if He is God as He is, and if He is really the God as He is, then serve Him alone.

Don't limp around with foot in both caps, which is so often our temptation and tendency in this country. Serve God alone.

Let's pray. O Lord God, O Lord God, we thank you that you are the living God. we thank you that you alone are God.

[32 : 45] We thank you that you enable us to pray for you with confidence because of Jesus, knowing that you hear us and answer our prayers. Lord God, we pray that we may serve you and you alone.

Prevent us from having feet in both camps or other camps. Prevent us from compromising our faith and allegiance of you. but help us to serve you and you alone, radically and fully in our lives, for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen.