

God Cares and Provides

SCOTT HOEZEE

His name said it all. My God is Yahweh. That is the meaning of the Hebrew name, Elijah. Because although he lived and worked in Israel, in Elijah's day, it was by no means obvious that everyone's God was still the God, Yahweh. Yahweh is the God who led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and eventually on into the Promised Land. Yahweh was the covenant God of all Israel, but by the 9th Century, BC, corrupt kings and priests had watered down the faith of Moses and David. People were as likely to worship Baal as Yahweh. So along comes this mysterious prophet named My God is Yahweh to set things straight. Today on Groundwork, we dig into the first stories about the great and powerful prophet Elijah. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are beginning on this program a short, four-part look at the ministry of Elijah; and so, as we do that, maybe on this first program it would be a good idea to set the historical stage a little bit.

DAVE BAST

Right; what we are going to be covering are several chapters from the book of I Kings in the Old Testament, and as you said, Scott, focusing on the life and work of Elijah, as you pointed out in the opening: My God is Yahweh; and it is during the time of the divided kingdom. So the historical background... If you are familiar somewhat with the Old Testament you may remember that David was the great king of Israel. He followed Saul, whose kingship ended in failure because he disobeyed the Lord, but then came David, the greatest and most famous king, followed by his son, Solomon, famous for his wisdom; but after Solomon, things went awry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Solomon was very wise, but he didn't leave a good plan of succession; so after he died, two different people vied for the kingship, and they split the kingdom, which had been united under David and Solomon. Now we have the northern kingdom with ten tribes; that was known as Israel with the capital city in Samaria; and then the southern kingdom of Judah, capital city, Jerusalem. The stories involving Elijah put us in that northern kingdom, and at the time of I Kings 17, here, we find one of the worst kings in all of Israel's history, Ahab, and his equally famous wife, Jezebel.

DAVE BAST

Yes; famous or infamous, you might say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Infamous, yes.

DAVE BAST

Interestingly, much of the Bible history follows the fortunes of Judah, and that is actually the kingdom that will endure and survive long term, and from that name we get the word *Jew*; even so, it is David's successors who retain the promise of God – the covenant promise to be the God of the people; but with the case of Elijah, as you say, Scott, the focus shifts. The action is taking place in that northern kingdom, which tended not to have any good kings. They were all more or less disobedient; and none of them more spectacularly so than Ahab. Jeroboam, the original king in Israel* in the north, the one who broke away and took the ten northern tribes with him, set up these two altars because he was afraid that the people would go south to Jerusalem and worship, and then they would leave loyalty to him. It wasn't the last time that politics would make use of religion for its own cause; but these at least were intended to represent Yahweh, the God of Israel; but then eventually foreign gods began to come in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob got watered down. They freely mixed in an amalgamation of Baal worship and also the goddess, Asherah; and so by Elijah's day, things are religiously an amalgamation. It is all mish mash; it is all confused; it is mostly idolatrous. The exact thing God most wanted Israel to avoid was adopting the religion of the Canaanites that they were supposed to displace, and now it is happening, and the kings like Ahab are aiding and abetting the process. And so, into that dismal situation, seemingly from out of nowhere, this mysterious figure emerges; and so let's hear the first verse of I Kings 17.

DAVE BAST

¹Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years, except at my word."
That is kind of a powerful statement to make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Very powerful statement; and he comes from out of nowhere; so, as you said, Dave, a few minutes ago, Elijah is arguably one of the most famous figures – the greatest prophet – along with Moses; in fact, Moses and Elijah will be the two to appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration...

DAVE BAST

Right. The Law and the Prophets.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Moses representing the Law, Elijah standing in for the Prophets.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, he comes from out of nowhere. There is no drum roll, there is no introduction. This is the first time Elijah is mentioned in the whole Bible. Whether he has much of a back story, whether Ahab had ever heard of him before this encounter, we don't know. We just know that it is very curious that one of the biggest figures of scripture just sort of gets plopped into the text from out of nowhere.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is totally curious and mysterious. I mean, we would love to know, where did he come from? How did he become a prophet?

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is from Tishbe; nobody even knows where that was geographically.

DAVE BAST

Right; except they say it is in Gilead, which means it is in the Transjordan. It is to the east of the River Jordan. Also in an area originally claimed by Israel, by the half-tribe of Manasseh, but outside the traditional boundaries of the Promised Land; and in the case of the writing prophets who would come later... people like Isaiah and Jeremiah and the others, they always start with an account of their call, but Elijah, as you say, he is just this mysterious figure – one of several in scripture – that almost seem to have no antecedents; but clearly he does have a call from the Lord, otherwise how would he dare make this rather bold pronouncement: It's not going to rain for three years.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unless I say so, which is also very brazen to say it won't rain unless I say so. So, he shows up from out of a clear blue sky, it seems. His name, as we said: My Name is Yahweh; and he confronts Ahab and the powers that be; but what a sign of hope Elijah must have been. Surely there were people in Israel who were trying to stay true to the true religion of Israel – to worship the true God of the Covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and they must have felt pretty under siege by this time with so much idolatry; and yet, suddenly from out of nowhere God provides somebody whose name itself is a sign of hope. Elijah shows up, and probably a lot of us in our own lives we can make similar testimony that we are... It seems like everything in our church is going the wrong way; everything in our family is going the wrong way; everything in our country is going the wrong way; and then, all of a sudden, God brings just the right person at just the right time to remind us: I am still God; I am still here; and here is somebody who can help.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is very true, and speaking of God's working in curious ways, what is coming up next in I Kings 17 is the first major story that deals with Elijah, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this first program in a series of four on the prophet, Elijah; and Dave, we just saw that Elijah makes a surprising, from out of the blue, appearance in I Kings 17; we had not heard of him before this. There had been no mention, no backstory, no call story. He just shows up, confronts Ahab and says: It is not going to rain unless I say so; and now we can turn to what is coming up next in this same chapter.

DAVE BAST

Right; and clearly, although it doesn't say so right at the outset, he had the word of the Lord behind that pronouncement or he wouldn't have dared to make it; and that in itself... you were just talking, Scott, about a sign of hope; his appearance is a sign of hope that God hasn't forgotten His people; that they are not alone; that there are still godly people left in Israel. It is also a sign of judgment, which in its own way is a hopeful thing; that God is not going to just allow this situation to go on and on. He is going to bring judgment, which is meant to get the attention of the king, to call him to repentance; and that judgment is going to come in the form of a drought. So here we read what happens next, because God also is not going to forget Elijah. He is going to be stuck in the drought like everybody, but this is what happens.

^{17:2}Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, ³“Leave here; turn eastward and hide in the Cherith ravine east of the Jordan. (In other words, go back to your home territory, interestingly). ⁴You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Cherith ravine east of the Jordan and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook; but sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

⁸Then the word of the Lord came to him, ⁹“Go at once to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food. ¹⁰So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar

so I may have a drink?” ¹¹As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

DAVE BAST

¹²“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said, but first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁵She went away and did as Elijah had told her; and so there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

I always loved this story when I was a kid. The idea that you could just keep pouring oil out of the jar...

DAVE BAST

Right, and it would keep on coming.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It kept refilling itself.

DAVE BAST

Like a magic jar... but what a great story; although not without its puzzling aspects as well. So first God says to Elijah: Go back home or go back toward home, across the Jordan. Go east of there. There is a little valley – a little ravine – and there is a brook there and you can drink the water, and I will command the ravens to bring you food every morning and every night. He is going to miraculously sustain Elijah’s life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is kind of Meals on Wheels or meals on wings...

DAVE BAST

Although the food... what they brought, you know...you wonder about ravens...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He didn’t eat the ravens; he ate what they brought him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they are scavengers, so I mean, maybe it was specially provided food, I don’t know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he goes to this brook called *Kerith* or sometimes it has been pronounced Cherith; in fact, my kids used to go to a summer camp called Brook Cherith; and God keeps him alive there, but oddly enough, God doesn’t keep the brook flowing. It dries up, too, as a result of the drought; so the brook doesn’t miraculously keep flowing; it dries up; and so then Elijah has to move on, and get sent now clean out of Israel to Sidon, way outside of Israel, to a place called Zeraphath, and to a widow who would not ordinarily be a source of life. Widows actually were always in danger of dying in the ancient world unless special care was given to them, because they were kind of socially marginalized and didn’t have any income. So, you don’t usually associate a widow as a source of life, but God says: This one will be a source of life for you.

DAVE BAST

Although she is on the brink of starvation herself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, yes.

DAVE BAST

When Elijah meets her. Interestingly, too, we might point out that Sidon and Tyre, its neighboring city, were the territory that Jezebel came from; and Jezebel had brought Baal with her and established Baal worship and the prophets of Baal. So God is kind of sending Elijah into the lion's den here, and saying in effect: In your face, Baal. I can keep my prophet alive in your homeland, but you are going to have trouble keeping your people alive in my homeland. Just one of the interesting details of the story; but here is this wonderful, this lovely encounter with a poor, starving woman. She is just gathering a few sticks, she tells Elijah, and she is going to make one last cake of bread with her last drop of oil and her last handful of flour; and he says: Oh, make me one first, would you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so she does, and then finds that she is also able to make one for herself and for her son, and that this goes on for some time. So once again, the presence of God in God's creation so often in the Bible where God goes life follows. We will see that in Jesus' ministry eventually, too, like when he feeds 5,000 people in a wilderness place. Where God goes, abundance follows; where God goes, life follows; and God is in Elijah; God is working in Elijah; Elijah stands for the presence of God. So, out in the middle of nowhere, in this place called Zephath, well outside of the circle of anything associated with Israel, God brings life. So, as you said, Dave, it is a sign of judgment in a way, against Israel; but it is also a sign that God cares for all people in all places.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is the promise of life; it is the contrast, really; and a contrast that Jesus – no one less than Jesus – no less an authority figure than Jesus – would bring out in the New Testament when He says in Luke Chapter 4: ²⁴Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown...a prophet is not without honor save in his hometown, Jesus says. ²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time when the sky was shut for three-and-one-half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zephath, in the region of Sidon.

So Jesus picks up on this story as if to say: Not only does God care about the poor and the destitute, but he is singling out a non-Israelite widow to care for her when the people of Israel themselves had largely turned their back on him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, this was in Luke 4, when Jesus was in his hometown of Nazareth, and they were rejecting Jesus. They said: Oh, this is just Mary and Joseph's boy. What is so special about him? And so Jesus was saying to the people in his day: You remind me a little bit of Israel in Elijah's day. They weren't believing either, and so God took care of somebody outside of Israel as a sign of judgment against them. So, interestingly enough, we have a sign of hope and a sign of life – a reminder, really of what God promised Abram way back in Genesis 12, which was that the salvation that was going to begin in Israel would one day spill over to all nations. This is a sign of that; this is a symbol – a preview – of that; as well as, as you said, a sign of judgment against how bad things were in Israel at that time.

DAVE BAST

I remember a line by Philip Yancey, the noted Christian writer, who said after experiencing scenes of revival in Russia some years ago, in his opinion, his conclusion was after traveling the world: God goes where he is wanted; and you just have this sense that this humble widow, who as an act of faith, takes what she thinks is her last bit of flour and gives it away to the prophet at the invitation of the word of the Lord; you know, Elijah says to her: The word of the Lord to you is, give me that cake; and when she does she finds life, and the miracle is repeated and the jar just keeps flowing and the flour bin never quite empties. It is a blessing to her as a sign that God does go where he is wanted, and where he is not wanted there is drought and famine until people will turn to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so there is a lot of hope in what happened to this widow; but as the story concludes, hope shines even more brightly, and we will look at that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in I Kings 17, Dave, looking at the very first stories involving the great prophet, Elijah. We just saw that he has gone to Zephath. Everything is going wonderfully, but then this happens starting at verse 17.

DAVE BAST

Sometime later, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come here to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" ¹⁹"Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying and laid him on his bed. ²⁰Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord, my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with by causing her son to die?" ²¹Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord, my God, let this boy's life return to him."

SCOTT HOEZEE

²²The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive." ²⁴Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

DAVE BAST

Wow; so there is another story, isn't there? This Elijah is something else. So far he has called down a drought that has gone on for three-and-one-half years. He has been miraculously fed. He has spoken a word from the Lord and the oil continues to flow and the flour doesn't run out; and now, when the widow's son falls deathly ill, and in fact, dies, Elijah prays and life returns to the child.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is interesting, the woman thinks that maybe God killed her son on account of her sin, and Elijah wonders if God killed the boy, or let him die. It is a great mystery. If God is providing and he did all that to feed the kid, why let him die? It is kind of a mystery, but...

DAVE BAST

You know, I mean, there is a string of them here in this story, isn't there? Why does God send Elijah to the brook and then let the brook dry up?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Why does he send him to the widow and miraculously deliver her and her son from death, and then the boy dies anyway?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and maybe a partial... I mean, we don't know the whys and wherefores, and Elijah doesn't fully either; although we might start to get a hint as to maybe what was behind this when the miracle of Elijah raising the boy back to life, or God's power through Elijah, better said, convinces her that indeed Yahweh is the true God. Elijah is speaking the word of God – what Elijah says is the word of truth. So this woman, if she wasn't a convert before, she for sure is now. So that could be part of God's purpose; who knows; but the point being, you know, life is busting out all over in Zeraphath, or at least in just one little household.

DAVE BAST

Yes; not everywhere.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just three people – the whole story is about three people.

DAVE BAST

And that is another why I guess: Why this woman – and outside of Israel? We already talked about that a little bit, and Jesus will draw attention to that. There were plenty of widows in Israel that God could have sent Elijah to. Some of them died, I am sure, of famine. Why this one? The mysterious ways of God... You know, this is very like a story that happens later in the book of II Kings to Elijah's successor, Elisha; and we have chosen just to deal with Elijah in this series of programs. Maybe another one on Elisha would be in order at some point; but a very similar story, where he befriends a woman – the Shunammite woman – tells her prophetically she is going to have a child, and then the child dies; and in both cases, these women react the same way: What have you done to me? What have you done to me? I mean, you give me hope, you give me life, and then you take it away from me. Is it because of my sins? It is almost inevitable, given our human nature, that when tragedy strikes we ask why, and we look at God and say: What have you done? You know, what have I done to deserve this from you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

But God shows...

DAVE BAST

Hard questions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but God here shows that he is on the side of life, and he brings this particular boy back; and I think the whole thing, Dave, is really...it is a sign of God's care for all people. I mean, we don't even know the name of this woman and her son. They are anonymous figures. They are historical ciphers. They are little people – little people on the margins – outside of Israel even; and yet, God sees them. Nine hundred years later, God's Son is going to be in flesh on this planet, in the name of Jesus, and he is going to do the same thing. He is going to see the little people, the marginalized people, the widows, the lepers, and he elevates them and he brings them life; and I think that for all of us who read this story, aside from just being a charming little historical story, pastorally it means we all will be forgotten someday – twenty or thirty years after we're dead – there won't be anybody else alive probably who remembers us; but God does. God sees us in our littleness; God stoops low, as the Psalms sometimes picture it, to lift up the widow and the orphan and the little people; and I think there is a sign of that kind of compassion of God in this story.

DAVE BAST

And I also think there is a sign of the life that God intends ultimately to give to all who belong to him. You know, it is not God's will that the world should be the kind of place where children die. That is not right. It does fill us with puzzlement and make us ask why and make us cry out: God, have You done this to me because of my sins? And God says: No, no; that is not what it is about; and someday I am going to fix it so that there won't be any more children who only live for a brief period of time; or anyone fails to reach a ripe

old age, as the vision of Isaiah has it of the kingdom of God's shalom – of God's peace. So, it is also a sign pointing to that. One day, God will raise every mother's son, and wipe away all tears; and until that day comes, his word of promise holds forth, and we can accept it and receive it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God, indeed. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. We always want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, to suggest topics and passages to dig into next on Groundwork.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates Judah as the Northern kingdom. Israel is the correct reference for the Northern kingdom.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/god-cares-and-provides>

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