

# Dr. John Oswalt, Kings, Session 14, Part 1

## 1 Kings 17-18, Part 1--Introducing Elijah

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Welcome to this continuing session in our study of the Books of Kings.

Let's begin with prayer.

Heavenly Father, we come to you with joy, knowing that you hold all things in your hands, knowing as we look at scenes of political conflict, of tension, that you are in control.

Thank you. We pray, Father, that you will do your work in our hearts as we study this part of your book. We pray that you will renew our confidence in you.

We pray that you will renew our confidence in your people. We pray that you will renew our confidence in your control of the world around us. Thank you.

Open our hearts to what your Holy Spirit would like to say to each one of us through this study, and we'll thank you. In your name, Amen.

We come to the second subdivision of the division that I have labeled the Divided Kingdom.

The Divided Kingdom extends from Book 1, chapter 12 to Book 2, chapter 17. It is the major division in the two books. This subdivision is the largest single division of any part of the book.

Excuse me, I should say the largest single subdivision of any part of the book. Solomon, with 40 years, received 11 chapters. These chapters covering about 80 years are Book 1, Chapter 17 to Book 2, Chapter 13, and 19 chapters devoted to some 80 years.

Notice that the 55 years between Solomon's death and the coming of Elijah rate only five chapters. What is it that makes these chapters or this content worthy of such extended treatment? What it is dealing with is the conflict between Yahweh and Baal. In many ways, this is the central conflict of the entire book.

Because if the Northern Kingdom were to abandon Yahweh and make Baal their God, almost unquestionably, Judah would have followed sooner or later. And the result would be that we wouldn't have the Bible today. Or if we did, it would be very, very different.

So, this conflict between Baal and Yahweh is absolutely vital. It's the central part of the whole material of the two books. The chapters, 117 through 213, cover apparently two ministries, Elijah and Elisha.

But in fact, this is a single ministry. The battle with Baal is not really won until the concluding part of Elisha's ministry. And we'll see, as we go through the books, how the two are blended.

They're two very different individuals, almost polar opposites in some ways. But on the other hand, it is a single ministry. It is a single goal, a single mission that is being followed here.

Now, what about this God, Baal? Baal, B-A-A-L, or in Hebrew pronunciation, Baal, is the God of the atmosphere. He's the God of the storm. He's the God of rain.

He's also the God of fertility and vegetation, and so he is vitally important in the mind of a Canaanite. Babylon and Egypt both had large rivers, which they could use for irrigation. So, it didn't really matter that much whether it rained or not.

But for Canaan, there is no large river. The Jordan, from our perspective, is more of a creek than a river. And it was down in the Rift Valley, so there was really no way to get that water to any significant amount of land.

This meant that the Canaanites and then the Israelites were absolutely dependent on the storms that came in off the Mediterranean. If those storms don't come at their appointed times in the fall and again in the spring if they don't come, people are going to die. So we need a God that we can manipulate, that we can make do what we want.

Yahweh, on the other hand, is uncontrollable. You can't use magic on him. He's not part of this world.

He's other than this cosmos, and you can't make him do what you want through magical ritual. All you can do is trust him. Oh, my goodness.

And then surrender to him. Oh, my, my goodness. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

I'd rather have a God who is part of this world that I can manipulate, that I can cause to make him bless me. Notice how often our worship of Yahweh is pagan. That we think that we can do things that will make him give us what we want.

Not true. And that's the core of this battle. A God that you think you can control to provide your needs, and a God you can't control, and you have to trust him and surrender to him in order to get your needs supplied.

So, Baal, as you see on the screen here, is the God of the rain. You can see that the stone has been lined with the rainfall. And in his hand, he holds a tree.

But if you look at the bottom of it, you can see there's a point there. This is lightning. And in his other hand, he holds a mace.

Bam, the thunder. This is the God of the storm. So, it's no accident the way this incident develops.

We see Elijah being introduced in chapter 17. And we notice, right at the outset, the theme that's going to emerge. Elijah says, Ahab, there's going to be no rain until I say so.

Now, of course, Elijah does not for a moment believe that he has the power to give the rain. His word, Elijah's word, will be the same as Yahweh's word. And when we look through this section, chapter 17, verses 1 to 24, notice the number of times when God speaks or when the word of the Lord is mentioned.

In verse 2, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. Verse 5, he did what the Lord had told him. Verse 8, the word of the Lord came to him.

Again, in verse 14, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says. Again, in verse 16, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. And finally, in verse 24, now I know that you're a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

The point that's being made here is Yahweh is the God who speaks. Baal cannot speak. Oh yes, his image has a mouth, but no sound comes from it.

Yahweh does not have a mouth, but he can speak. Right through the Bible, this idea is that God can reveal himself through the mysterious medium of language. And so Elijah says, when I speak, it will be the voice of God.

Because God is speaking through me. You and I can hear his voice. You and I can be guided by him and directed by him.

Not perhaps in the dramatic ways that Elijah and Elisha experienced, but nevertheless, we can know him, know him as the living, speaking God who directs our ways and directs them in wonder. Now we have in this chapter 17, three miraculous events. First of all, he is sent to the brook Cherith.

The brook is on the other side of the Jordan River, somewhere in this area. This is also Elisha's home area. He is from Gilead, which is in this area here.

And so, God sends him and says that the ravens will bring him food, and he can drink from the brook. Then we have the miracle of the oil that does not cease, the flower that does not stop. And third, we have the miracle of the widow's son being brought back to life.

Now, what's going on here? Many scholars simply talk about this whole section as legends of the prophets, and the reason we've got all this miracle stuff is simply because this is legendary, and people love to tell amazing stories when they are making up legends. I don't think that's the case at all. In fact, we have in the Elijah-Elisha narrative, more miracles than in the whole rest of the book of Kings put together.

In some ways, it is in the rest of the Deuteronomistic section from Joshua through Kings. What's going on? The same thing that's going on in the stories of Jesus. Notice again that when you deal with the apostles, they clearly had the ability to do some miracles.

The disciples had the ability to drive out demons, we're told. But by and large, once you get past the Gospels, you don't see many miracles. You don't see Paul primarily as a miracle worker.

You see him as a preacher and teacher. What's going on? These are moments, moments of crisis, moments when everything is hanging on what happens here in the ministry of Jesus, in the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. Another period of many miracles was the Exodus.

I like very much what C.S. Lewis says somewhere. He says miracles are the sparks that fly up when the steel of revelation strikes the turning wheel of time. Isn't that good? Yes, God is particularly revealing himself in these crisis hours.

He's revealing himself in Egypt. He's revealing himself now in the conflict with Baal. And he's revealing himself in Jesus climactically and ultimately.

So, these miracles are not merely legendary creations of people. They are, in fact, expressions of the things that took place. Now we notice in the miracles a kind of progression.

We begin with food and water in a somewhat natural sense. Okay, the ravens are bringing it, but the ravens can find it and bring it. So yes, and the water is in the stream.

But then the water gives out, and God tells Elijah to do something rather amazing. He tells him to go from there to wherever he is in Gilead.

He tells him to go clear across the land all the way up into the territory of the Phoenicians to the village of Zarephath. Do you see it there? About halfway between Tyre and Sidon, a long distance, nearly a hundred miles through, if you will, enemy country to a village which is really not part of Israel. This is taking a great step of faith to go to a land that is not your homeland, to go to a place presumably he had never been before, to meet someone he had never met before, and to go to a widow.

Now, the widow, in many ways, is the poorest person in the land. She does not have a husband to provide for her or care for her. In many ways, this is crazy.

And I think all of us who have followed the Lord's will have experienced things like this. God, this doesn't make any sense. But there it is.

It starts all the way back with Abraham. For us to genuinely trust God means again and again, we have to step away from any ability of ourselves to take care of ourselves. That's frightening.

But I can prattle on and on about how I trust God when, in fact, I'm trusting my own ability to take care of myself and provide for my needs. It's when God calls us to launch out that then we find out whether we truly trust him. And so, he comes to the widow, who, when he asks her for a drink of water, very kindly, generously goes to get it.

And he says, Oh, by the way, bring me a scrap of food to eat. And she says, Mr., I'm down to my last drop of oil and my last few bits of flour. I'm collecting wood to make a fire to cook these together, give them to me and my son, and we'll eat them and die.

And he says, Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you've said. But first, first, make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me.

Give off the top and then see what's left. In Karen's and my experience, this is the principle of tithing. Now, John Wesley says very well that the 10% rule is the Old Testament.

All your money is God's. The only question is, how much of it are you going to spend on yourself? Tithing 10% is a good place to start. But here's the issue.

If you wait until the end of the month to give your offering to God, you won't have anything to give. It'll be gone. Give your offering to God off the top.

And you'll be amazed how much farther your money goes the rest of the month. Now, I can't explain that, but it's a principle. It's not something you can bet on.

OK, God, I'm going to give you this offering, and you will produce better. That way is the way of disaster. God cannot be manipulated.

God cannot be blackmailed. But Elijah says, give me what you've got and then see what's left. And lo and behold, the miracle of supply.

The oil that did not stop the flower that did not quit. And then there's the third miracle, life and death. Do you see what I'm saying about a progression? God, in many ways, I think, is demonstrating his power to Elijah as much as anybody else.

Elijah, I have power over the ravens. Elijah, I have power over the basic staples of life. Elijah, I have power over life and death itself.

And so, the little boy dies. And the mother says, you came here, you came here to convict me of my sins and killed my son because of this. That's, of course, how the devil operates.

When tragedy comes, we say, oh, somehow I've earned this. Somehow this has caused I have caused this by my sin. That's what the comforters tried to convict Job of.

Oh, life is much more complicated than that. But that's her natural reaction. And Elijah says, Lord God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I'm staying with? Faith in God doesn't mean we don't have questions.

Faith in God doesn't mean we don't have moments of despair and uncertainty. But look what Elijah does. He stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, Yahweh, my God, let this boy's life return to him.

And he did. This is a God who has all power. This is a God who is able to touch every part of life and deliver us in it and through it.

Now, one other thing before we leave this section, notice what Elijah is called. He is not called a prophet. But he is called the man of God.

Interestingly, this is how the woman describes him. In verse 18, she says to Elijah, what do you have against me, a man of God? And then, in the very end, she says, I know that you are a man of God. Notice that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

Yes, yes. This is why I call this chapter—Introducing Elijah.

It tells us who this man is. He's a man of God. And I want to suggest to you that that lies beneath the prophet. The prophet is a profession.

The prophet is a role. Man of God is a character, a nature, a being. You and I may not be prophets or prophetesses, but we can be men and women of God.

That's more important than being a prophet. He is the man of God. Throughout this section, Elijah and Elisha will be primarily referred to as men of God.

Do they carry out the role of the prophet speaking the word of God to the nations? Oh, yes. But deeper than that is their character, who they are, who they are in relation to God. That's the issue that stands before us.

So, chapter 17 introduces Elijah.