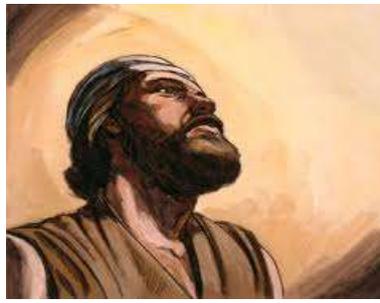


## STUDY ONE



# Elijah

## INTRODUCTION

Think of the great characters of the Old Testament: Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Samuel or David...

Think of the great prophets of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel...

How soon and how far up the list would Elijah appear? He appears in no more than 10 chapters (1 Kngs 17-19,21; 2 Kngs 1-2,9-10; 2 Chron.21; Mal.4), the same as Elisha. And yet no person from the Old Testament is mentioned as much in the New as Elijah – from the prophecy concerning the birth of John the Baptist before Jesus was even born, to the Transfiguration and to Calvary and the Cross.

## ELIJAH'S 'ETERNAL' SIGNIFICANCE

- **To his Own Generation.**
- **To Jesus' Generation.**
- **To the Last Generation.**
- **To Every Generation, including our own.**

- **To his Own Generation.**

Elijah lived in a time of godless and violent oppression, where the people were ruled over by a corrupt king and queen, the latter an implacable enemy of God; where the people had abandoned their faith; where those who remained true to the Lord were persecuted and killed or in hiding (1 Kngs 16v25,30-33; 18v4,13-14; 21v25).

And into this time and place stepped Elijah. All we know of him was that he was from Transjordan Tishbe in Gilead and he was sent by God to proclaim this message: *"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."* (1Kngs 17v1). He did not speak from his own initiative but as the divine mouthpiece, for this was exactly what God had said would happen were the people to turn away from God (Deut.28v15,23-24). And of course it was also a direct and very precise challenge to Baal, who as a nature and fertility god was supposed to control the rain.

Alone, for a period of 3 ½ years, Elijah single-handedly resisted Ahab and Jezebel, kept hidden and safe from the king's murderous pursuit (1 Kngs 18v9-10). First supernaturally sustained beside a brook through the ministry of ravens and then sent to a widow in Zarephath, on the coast to the north beyond Galilee, deep into the heart of territory controlled by Ahab's father-in-law and where the drought is also biting (1 Kngs 17v3-16). The strain and stress of those 3 ½ years is graphically revealed in Elijah's almost total collapse after his great victory at Carmel (1 Kng 19v1-3).

His courageous ministry is not cost-free, as he endures witnessing the result of God's judgement upon his people; the loneliness of enduring alone and unsupported; the responsibility of standing alone for God against the human wickedness and undoubtedly the powers of hell (cf Eph.6v12)

But on Mount Carmel he is vindicated and the people are turned back to God: At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: *"Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."* Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, *"The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"* (1 Kngs 18v36-39).

○ **To Jesus' Generation.**

**John the Baptist:** *But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* (Lk.1v13-17).

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."* And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. (Lk.1v76-80).

John the Baptist, as the new Elijah (Lk.1v15-17,76-77), bears witness to the Messiah and reveals the Messiah and at the same time prepares the people for Jesus (Jn.1v29-31; Mt 3v1-12). He even dresses like Elijah (2 Kngs 1v6-8; Mk.1v6; cf Zech 13v4). Against a fevered background of Messianic longing and expectancy, he is asked whether he is Elijah, the long-promised herald of the coming king (Jn.1v19-27). Although he denies it, there is truth in the question, as Jesus affirms (Mt 11v7-10; 17v10-13). Moreover, Jesus' description of John as the greatest man who has ever lived (Mt.11v11) also tells us something about Elijah, in whose spirit and power John ministered.

**Elijah:** at the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus is joined by Moses and by Elijah (Mt.17v1-3). Between them, these two figures represented the Law and the Prophets, Elijah representing the entire prophetic revelation from Genesis all the way to Malachi.

Ecclesiasticus was a book written some 200 years before the time of Jesus. It vividly demonstrates the power that Elijah and the promise of the coming of Elijah, held on the Jewish people's hearts and minds.

*“Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch. He brought a famine upon them, and by his zeal he made them few in number. By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours? You raised a corpse from death and from Hades, by the word of the Most High. You sent kings down to destruction, and famous men, from their sickbeds. You heard rebuke at Sinai and judgements of vengeance at Horeb. You anointed kings to inflict retribution, and prophets to succeed you. You were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire. At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob. Happy are those who saw you and were adorned with your love! For we also shall surely live.” (Ecclus. 48v1-11).*

### ○ To the Last Generation

The reason that so many people were speaking about John the Baptist as Elijah and why Jesus’ disciples asked about Elijah in the context of Jesus declaring Himself to be the Messiah (Mt.16v16-[17,10-13]), is found in the Book of Malachi (his name itself meaning ‘messenger’). *“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. (Mal.3v1).*

*“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (Mal.4v5-6).*

The Lord foretells that He will send Elijah as the forerunner to the coming of the Messiah. Whether this will literally be Elijah, who uniquely with Enoch is not recorded as ever dying but as being caught up into Heaven (2 Kngs 2v11-12), or whether it will be another servant of God coming, as did John the Baptist, *“in the spirit and power of Elijah”*, only the final generation will know. It is and was for this reason that today at Passover Jewish families put out a cup of ‘for Elijah’, whereas in Jesus’ day, it was the custom to spend Passover night in watchful prayer. Many would make their way to the Temple Mount where the Levites would re-open the gates for the people to continue to worship - *“As the Jews were celebrating the feast of unleavened bread, which we call the Passover, it was customary for the priests to open the temple gates just after midnight.” [ANT.18.29].* Why were the Temple gates left open? To welcome Elijah...

### ○ To Every Generation, including our own

What are the three distinguishing features of Elijah, identified by Elijah himself and by the apostle James?

**Elijah:**

➤ *“I have been very **zealous** for the Lord God Almighty...” (1 Kngs 19v10).*

(In so doing Elijah became the poster boy for the Zealots, as did Phinehas Num,25v1-13)

A burning love for God; a consuming passion for His glory; the courage to stand for God in the face of insults and opposition; a confidence in God’s ultimate victory and vindication, are the themes that run through Psalm 69. *“I am a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother’s children; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.” (Ps.69v8-9).*

(Significantly this Psalm also contains a prophetic reference to the crucifixion (v.21).

And that same passion was the very heart of the Son of God. In John ch. 2 Jesus clears the Temple, challenging the religious vested interests of His day and the way that the holiest place on earth had been defiled. The disciples remembered those words from the Psalmist and also that Jesus had made reference to His death (Jn.2v13-22).

As the preacher and pastor Henry “Butcher” Varley once remarked to DL Moody: *“The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him”*. Those words took hold of Moody and gripped him, as he recorded afterwards. *“The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him...A man! Varley meant any man. Varley didn’t say he had to be educated, or brilliant, or anything else. Just a man. Well, by the Holy Spirit in me I’ll be that man.”*

#### **James:**

➤ *“Elijah was a **human being / with a nature like ours**, even as we are...”* (Jas.5v17).

Elijah was not some sort of super-man, or a person untouched and untroubled by the challenges and pressures of life. Far from it, as his almost total collapse after Mount Carmel amply demonstrates.

*“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors...” And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”* (1 Kngs 19v3-4,9-10).

Discouragement, depression and despair fill his conversations with God and yet equally truly his *“nature like ours”* was a heart on fire for God.

*“He **prayed earnestly...**”* (Jas.5v17).

In 1 Kngs 18v41-45 we read: *“And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling...”* (cf Mt.7: *“Ask and keep on asking; knock and keep on knocking; seek and keep on seeking...”* and Isa.62v6-7: *“I [God] have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth.”*

James tells us that when a righteous person who is equally a very human person and yet a person full of zeal for the Lord prays, then their prayer is mightily powerful and effective.

#### **IN CONCLUSION**

What might we take from the life of Elijah into our own walk with Jesus; into our own prayer life; into our prayer for and witness to our nation?