

Standing on God's Word

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[0 : 00] So 500 years ago, there was a German monk by the name of Martin Luther, and he was hauled before a court and commanded to repudiate his writings. Martin Luther was living in an age where the church itself was no longer following God's word. Its leaders were much more interested in power and politics, money and prestige. It was a time of corruption, but more importantly, it was a time where God's word had been rejected in favor of man's wisdom and the forces of culture.

What Luther sought to do was recover the truth found in God's word. He wanted people to know what God had said because the church and the world around them wasn't telling them. And in doing this, he sparked what is now known as the Reformation. And he told his gathered accusers, my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. And he finished his speech as the vulture circled with these powerful words. Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God. Amen.

501 years ago, Luther, in the power and confidence of the Holy Spirit, stood up to those who had rejected God's word. 2,900 years ago, another man was empowered by God to make the same stand. And that is the prophet Elijah, who's going to be the focus of the next three weeks. And these words of Luther, here I stand, they're the title of this new series as we do look at the life of Elijah, because they encapsulate his mission to a culture that had rejected God and rejected his word.

Elijah came for kings and queens, armies and priests. And he stood firm because he knew the one true and living God. And he trusted what God had said to his people in ages past. As we journey with Elijah, we're going to see his courage to stand. We're going to see why he stood firm. We're going to know the God that he stood for better. And we're even going to see what it looks like when our strength to stand can fail us and see how God equips his servants to stand in the face of unapproachable opposition.

Elijah's story starts by telling God's people that we can stand firm on the word of God. For if we wish to follow in the footsteps of Elijah and Luther and countless others, we need to know that God's word is trustworthy. We need to know that we stand on solid ground if we are going to stand at all. And so as we begin the story of Elijah, there's three things which I want us to notice in our time together. One, culture. Culture rejects God's word. Two, Elijah.

[3 : 21] Elijah himself speaks God's word. And thirdly, and most importantly, God. God gives life through his word. And those points are up there on the screen to help us as we work our way through this passage in 1 Kings.

So firstly, culture. Culture is the first thing we need to notice. Although there are some wide cultural, historical, and geographical water between Elijah's world and ours, one thing that never changes across time and place is people and human nature. And in both Elijah's world and ours, culture has rejected God's word. Our story begins in Israel at the time of the divided kingdom.

So Israel used to be a unified nation under King David and under his son, King Solomon. But when Solomon died, the kingdom was split. Judah was the southern kingdom, where the heir of David reigned as king in Jerusalem.

And then Israel was the northern kingdom, where a string of kings and dynasties reigned from a new capital called Samaria, which was built by the evil king Omri. And our story concerns Omri's son Ahab.

Ahab was king in the north, and he had inherited a kingdom of security and prosperity. Israel was doing rather well. Its economy was thriving. Its borders were safe due to a number of successful alliances that Omri had made with the surrounding states. In particular, there was an alliance that had been made between Israel and the Phoenician kingdoms of Tyre and Sidon on the coast. And this alliance was ratified with a wedding. Omri had married his son Ahab to the princess of Sidon, Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal. So things in Israel to human eyes look rather good. But it's often

only when you cut into the fruit that you discover it's gone bad. The writer of Kings tells us in chapter 16, verse 30, that Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. And then in verse 33, Ahab did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.

[5 : 47] So what constitutes evil in the eyes of God? Well, the answer is maybe not one we're likely to come up with on our own. And it's certainly not an answer that our culture would feel particularly comfortable with. Ahab was evil because of who and what he worshipped. We're told he not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, that is to worship God in the wrong way, but he also married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria.

So he didn't worship God in the way that God had taught his people to worship him, and he worshipped the gods Baal and Asherah, false gods of the Phoenicians and the Canaanites, even building a temple to this god Baal in Samaria. Now idols ultimately are those things that we give our lives to, the forces and goals that shape our decisions and control them. Money, sex, family, career, identity, ideology. Israel turned to Baal and away from God because the successful nations around them did. Because Baal apparently promised rain and fertility. Because following him was much easier.

They rejected God pretty much for similar reasons that our culture has. The following God is seen as archaic, pointless, and requires a heck of a lot of effort. Now a case study of the problem in Israel at the moment is Jericho. Generations earlier when God's people first came to the land, they were opposed by the fortified city of Jericho. And God famously brought its walls crashing down. And at the time, Joshua said this. He was the leader of God's people. He said, cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn son, he will lay its foundations. At the cost of his youngest, he will set up its gates. And under Ahab, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho at the cost of both his sons.

God's word had been rejected so thoroughly that his own chosen people, Israel, were content to ignore what he told them never to do and ignore any possible consequences, no matter how dire. The building of Jericho shows that the lives of children would be happily sacrificed on the altar of freedom from listening to God.

That, I would argue, something our own culture pursues egregiously. When we peer through the looking glass into Ahab's Israel, we actually see a reflection of our own culture. Scotland may not be God's chosen people in the way that Israel were. But like Israel, Scotland has known who God is in the past and has chosen to reject him in the present. Our post-Christian world is actually not so dissimilar from Ahab's world. Israel rejected Yahweh, the God of Israel, in favor of Baal and Asherah, a religion and philosophy much more in keeping with the spirit of their age.

[9 : 32] And can you imagine Queen Jezebel telling Ahab, it's the ninth century BC. The world's moved on from the God of Israel. His rules are restrictive. His morals are bigoted. You'll never flourish on the world stage if you keep following those old ways. New is always better. Baal is always better.

And here we are in the 21st century. Christian morality has no place in our age, nor does the Bible. It's why so many churches want to rewrite it or reinterpret it altogether just to fit in.

God's word is deemed obsolete, offensive, and foolish. We live in a culture that completely rejects God's word. And if this story is anything to go by, that's a really bad thing. I think sometimes we forget just how serious that is. But Ahab was about to discover that he was wearing the emperor's new clothes. He thinks he's asserted his freedom and is wise, much like our own generation and culture.

But he's about to get a rather rude awakening. Now I quite like a bold character entrance. You're like, like when Darth Vader appears for the very first time in Star Wars. A bold character entrance alerts us. You're this person is important and the status quo is about to change. Elijah enters the stage and he speaks God's word. And that's us onto our second point. Now Elijah's name's interesting. It means Yahweh is my God. Yahweh being the name of the God of Israel. And Elijah's name's great. It really captures his character and captures exactly what it is that he stands for. Yahweh is my God.

He comes to Ahab declaring in chapter 17 verse 1, as the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve. There will be neither dew or rain in the next few years except in my word.

[11 : 42] And then he leaves. God tells him to go and Ahab is left presumably rather speechless at the audacity of the prophet. I wonder if he believed him at first. If he didn't, as the days went by, and the cloudless skies continued, the new state of affairs would have become alarmingly clear.

The rain had stopped. The ground was drying up. Israel had abandoned God and now they were suffering the consequence. And just like with the Jericho incident that we heard about earlier, it's not like they weren't given due warning. In the book of Deuteronomy, which is a book that summarizes God's law for his people, a book that Israel were to read and to study and to teach to their children and their grandchildren forever. Well, it says, be careful or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving to you. So they should have known better.

But it wasn't very fashionable to listen to God in their generation or ours. And so they didn't. And so our culture doesn't. Which is why Elijah was appointed by God to be his prophet, his spokesman and his ambassador, if you like. Elijah speaks God's word because no one else will.

Now, though the country is descending into drought, God sustains his prophet. Elijah, he's sent to the eastern edge of Israel to the Kerith ravine and there God gives him food through ravens and water from the running brook. Now, this isn't a promise that God will always stop his faithful people from suffering. Narrative, when we read it, we must remember is not necessarily normative.

Rather, what God is doing in preserving Elijah was preserving his messenger, the one whom he had chosen to speak his word to a king who hated it and to a nation that had abandoned it. And though Elijah, his messenger, was lying low, God's word was not inactive. Elijah had made a devastating, but as we saw from Deuteronomy, not at all unsurprising, declaration of God's discipline through a drought. And that drought was taking effect. Even Elijah has to move on because the Kerith ravine had dried up. And the time would come when Elijah was to return to Israel with God's word once again. Now, the later prophet Isaiah would write about God's word, this, as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater. So is my word that goes out from my mouth.

[15 : 04] It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I send it. So the people have rejected God's word and they are reaping the wasteland as a result.

God's word does what it intends, what he intends it to do. God's word is powerful. It is always at work, even when it seems like no one is listening. That's why we ought to read it ourselves as often as we can. It's why we're reflecting on it together now. It's why we study it week to week in our community groups. And it's why, despite our culture's rejection of it, we continue to trust in it. After all, this culture is going to pass away. But given how God's word has endured, well, I trust and I hope we all trust that it will continue to do so and continue to be true.

Elijah's fidelity to God's word is an example to us all. Ahab's rejection, a chilling warning. And all of this is laying the ground for the central message of this first Elijah story.

God's word is true and it brings life, which is our third point. This truth is illustrated compellingly through Elijah's extended stay with a widow in Zarephath. Now notice where Zarephath is.

The writer tells us, the word of the Lord came to him, Elijah, go out once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have instructed a widow there to supply you with food. Zarephath is in Sidon, Queen Jezebel's homeland, Baal country. And what God will do here through his prophet will show not only the power of his word, but also show that he is Lord not just of Israel, but the whole world.

[17 : 18] Now, Zarephath's proximity to Israel means that they're also suffering the results of this drought. Elijah meets the widow that God told him about. She's gathering sticks for a fire. She's going to eat her last meal with her son and then die. But God had other plans for her.

Elijah, almost brazenly, asks her to make him a loaf of bread before she feeds herself. Because he tells her in verse 14, 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. Now, this widow is not a follower of the God of Israel. But she listens to the prophet and he does as and she does as he asks. If he's wrong, she would be giving her last meal before she and her son die of starvation to a brass-necked stranger.

So what a remarkable step of faith this is. And the writer of Kings tells us, she went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For

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. Notice then that the writer is keen that we recognize that the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah is true. And more than that, the word sustains the life of Elijah as well as this Sidonian woman and her son. God's word sustains and gives life.

But tragedy strikes. Sometime later, we're told, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing. This woman who's already lost her husband and has been brought back from the brink of despair by a miracle that has kept her and her boy alive has now lost him. Don't you sympathize with her anger and her confusion? How can we make sense of it? She said to Elijah, what have you against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?

The Bible never gives us easy answers to such questions, for they are not easy questions and they can't be answered with a sentence or two. So long as sin remains in this world, such grief and confusion will exist. Even those who know God will face tragedy such as this.

[20 : 10] And what subsequently happens to the widow's son is not normal. Your narrative is not normative. But it teaches those of us who read this story today something really important about the word of God.

Elijah takes the widow's son, carries him up the stairs, and 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?

And 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. And the Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah's strange physical response to the boy's death is hard to explain in totality, but it's likely a cultural physical expression that matches his verbal expressions to God in prayer. God answers his prayer. Life returns. Life prevails. The dead boy is brought back from death through the grace and power of God. The widow sees her son alive again, and notice what she says.

Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth. It's surprising what she says, isn't it? If your only child had been saved from death, would you be praising the truthfulness of God's word? You might thank God for his kindness, or his mercy, or his mercy, or his power, but the truthfulness of his word? What are we to make of that?

[22 : 08] Well, this Sidonian widow had perceptive wisdom. She recognized the life-giving power of God's word in the mouth of his prophet. Moreover, she recognizes that Elijah serves and stands for the one true God whose words are nothing less than absolute truth. And the one true God has power to raise the dead and breathe life back into dry bones.

I love reading the Old Testament stories, not just because they're full of drama, not just because we see God at work in them, but we see God at work in them, though both of these things are true. I love seeing how they lay the foundations for Christ. Jesus himself brought the dead back to life, the daughter of Jairus, the son of another widow, Lazarus his friend. These miracles and the miraculous answer to Elijah's prayer, which we see here, all lay the ground for the greatest miracle of all.

Jesus' resurrection and the gift of eternal life to all who believe in him. It's no accident that in John's gospel, John calls Jesus the word who became flesh. He's the word of God incarnate.

It's a really significant phrase that we quoted from Isaiah earlier. What Isaiah said is that God's word never fails to do what it was intended to do. God speaks and things happen. A creation he spoke and everything came into being. God's word and God's actions are intimately intertwined.

And so it's natural that when God appeared in human history as a man, Jesus, of course he would be described as the word. He is God in flesh, God in action. He came to live, to proclaim the good news of eternal life, to call people to abandon their sin and follow God, to die on a cross for the sins of the world and to rise victorious from the grave, defeating death in one fell swoop that brings hope to a world in darkness. This is the word of God, Jesus, the word made flesh. The word we have in our Bibles and the word Jesus Christ are intimately related. You're both are God's word working in this world to speak truth and bring life. Jesus said he is the way, the truth, and the life. And the word we have in the Bible, it's all about him. Jesus is the word of life. And the written words of the Bible are his words of life.

[25 : 32] As the boy breathed again and was brought back to life, his mother recognized that God's word is true and God's word brings life. God had sustained her through the famine and brought her son back from death through his word. No other God is like this, for there is no other God. Where was Baal? The false God was tellingly absent. But the true God was there. Now, we won't escape

all the pains and the trials of this world. God never promises his people that. But what Christians hold on to, what we must hold on to, is that God's word is true. And God's word is active. And God's word brings life.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, said this to encourage them as they lived in a culture that had rejected God's word. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure children of God. And you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. Stand on Jesus, the word of life, and stand on his words of life as we have them in the Bible.

In a culture where truth is cheap, we have the true words of God. And in a world where death is inescapable, we have the words which, when believed in, promise us eternal life.

Elijah's stand against his culture was not easy. He had many fights ahead of him. But the reason he could stand was because he trusted in the truth and power of God's word. He knew the life it brings and the death that comes when it is rejected. And with such firm convictions, convictions that the widow came to understand and share, how could Elijah do anything but stand firm on the word of God?

And centuries later, when Martin Luther understood for the first time, the power and truth and life in God's word, he too felt he could do nothing other than stand on it and stand for it.

[28 : 28] And the only question that remains is this. Will we? ...