

Who was Elijah in the Bible?

The prophet Elijah is one of the most interesting and colorful people in the Bible, and God used him during an important time in Israel's history to oppose a wicked king and bring revival to the land. Elijah's ministry marked the beginning of the end of Baal worship in Israel. Elijah's life was filled with turmoil. At times he was bold and decisive, and at other times fearful and tentative. He alternately demonstrates victory and defeat, followed by recovery. Elijah knew both the power of God and the depths of depression.

Elijah, a prophet of God whose name means "my God is the Lord," came from Tishbeh in Gilead, but nothing is known of his family or birth. We first meet Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1 when he suddenly appears to challenge Ahab, an evil king who ruled the northern kingdom from 874 to 853 BC. Elijah prophesies a drought to come upon the whole land as consequence for Ahab's evil (1 Kings 17:1-7). Warned by God, Elijah hides near the brook of Cherith where he is fed by ravens. As the drought and famine in the land deepen, Elijah meets with a widow in a neighboring country, and, through her obedience to Elijah's request, God provides food enough for Elijah, the woman, and her son. Miraculously, the widow's barrel of flour and jar of oil never run out (1 Kings 17:8-16). The lesson for the believer is that, if we walk in fellowship with the Lord and obey Him, we will be open to His will. And when we are in God's will, He fulfills all of our needs, and His mercy to us never runs short.

We next see Elijah as the central character in a face-off with the prophets of the false god Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:17-40). The prophets of Baal call upon their god all day long to rain fire from heaven to no avail. Then Elijah builds an altar of stones, digs a ditch around it, puts the sacrifice on the top of wood and calls for

water to be poured over his sacrifice three times. Elijah calls upon God, and God sends fire down from heaven, burns the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones and licks up the water in the ditch. God proved He was more powerful than false gods. It was then that Elijah and the people killed all of the false prophets of Baal, in compliance with God's command in Deuteronomy 13:5.

After the great victory over the false prophets, rain once again fell on the land (1 Kings 18:41-46). However, in spite of victory, Elijah entered a period of wavering faith and depression (1 Kings 19:1-18). Ahab had told his wife, Jezebel, of God's display of power. Rather than turn to God, Jezebel vowed to kill Elijah. Hearing of this, Elijah fled to the wilderness, where he prayed for God to take his life. But God refreshed Elijah with food, drink, and sleep instead. Then Elijah took a forty-day journey to Mount Horeb. There Elijah hid in a cave, still feeling sorry for himself and even confessing his belief that he alone was left of the prophets of God. It is then that the LORD instructed Elijah to stand on the mountain as the LORD passed by. There was a great wind, an earthquake, and then fire, but God was not in any of those. Then came a still, small voice in which Elijah heard God and understood Him. God gave Elijah instructions for what to do next, including anointing Elisha to take his place as prophet and assuring Elijah that there were still 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed to Baal. Elijah obeyed God's commands. Elisha became Elijah's assistant for some time, and the two continued to deal with Ahab and Jezebel, as well as Ahab's son and successor, Ahaziah. Rather than die a natural death, Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-11).

John the Baptist's ministry was marked by "the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6. James uses Elijah as an example of prayer in

James 5:17-18. He says that Elijah "was a human being, even as we are," yet he prayed that it would not rain, and it did not. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The power of prayer is in God, not in our own human nature.

As was true for Elijah, when we focus on the tumult of life in this world, we can get our eyes off of the LORD and become discouraged. God does display Himself in mighty works of power and judgment such as wind, fire, and earthquakes. But He also relates with us intimately and personally, such as in the quiet whisper. God meets our physical needs, encourages us to examine our own thoughts and behaviors, instructs us in how to proceed, and assures us that we are not alone. When we are attentive to God's voice and walking in obedience to His Word, we can find encouragement, victory, and reward. Elijah struggled with typical human frailties, yet he was used mightily of God. It may not be through such obviously miraculous displays of might, but, if we are yielded to Him, God can use us powerfully for His kingdom purposes, too.