

A Walk Thru the Life of

ELIJAH

Standing Strong for Truth

Walk Thru the Bible



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Introduction

It seemed like a gift to humanity, a harmless pleasure meant to benefit all who partook of it. Sure, there were a few uptight naysayers who warned that tobacco might be dangerous, but they had no proof. Besides, the world is full of people who overreact, who can't loosen up and enjoy life. If you listen to all of them, you'll lose your mind. Most warnings from hypersensitive people turn out to be totally false.

For years, smoking was considered benign. Ever since native Americans gave tobacco to Columbus, there had always been a few detractors, but their voices went unheeded. And though suspicion of harmful side effects grew throughout the early 1900s, the general public wasn't concerned enough to curtail the habit. In fact, smoking's popularity grew; nearly half of American adults, particularly men, enjoyed cigarettes in the mid-1940s, including the vast majority of doctors. The habit was so entrenched that few people gave much thought to the seeming overreactions of detractors. The American Medical Association even argued in 1948 that evidence pointed more toward the health benefits of smoking, such as stress relief, than toward any physical ailments resulting from it. Huge cul-

tural trends aren't swayed by arguments that there "might" be a problem.

At the time of the Old Testament kings, few people were really bothered by Israel's idolatry either. Altars had been set up all over the territory of the northern ten tribes, and people freely worshiped Baal and Asherah and whomever else they wanted to worship. Did the God of Moses have a problem with that? Not as far as anyone could tell. Sure, a few prophets and priests here and there may have spoken up, but they were a distinct and easily ignored minority. Rain still fell in the right seasons, crops still grew in the fields, the building programs of kings signaled progress on every front—everyone seemed to prosper. Hardly anyone recognized that a deadly cancer had long been developing in the spiritual life of the nation. Even those with a nagging suspicion that there might be a problem weren't concerned enough to do anything about it.

That's where Elijah enters the stage of Israel's history. He is a warning signal, a voice in the wilderness, alerting God's people to their deadly practices. His message wasn't very popular—no one who successfully declares a three-year drought on his own people gets high marks in public opinion polls—and it didn't seem like the kind of message a loving God would speak. But it was necessary. A loving God doesn't just sit by and watch cancer spread among his chosen people. He sends a wake-up call in the form of Elijah.

The message of Elijah—and of most of the prophets, for that matter—is that God often disciplines his people harshly, not primarily because of his anger but because of his love. But the prophet who speaks of such discipline carries a very politically incorrect message. God's judgment on a nation can become a thorny theological issue. When his scriptural promises to bless those who love and obey him and to withhold his blessing from

those who don't are actually carried out, lots of questions arise. Are the blessings and curses of the Old Testament valid today? Where does grace fit into the equation? Why would God let the innocent suffer from the same conditions he imposes on the unrighteous?

The Bible doesn't thoroughly answer such questions. It doesn't even attempt to address them in 1–2 Kings, books written to chronicle how Israel experienced both the blessings and curses foretold in Deuteronomy. No, the purpose there is to report the highs and lows of God's people in the Promised Land—and ultimately to explain why God used another nation as a tool of his judgment to overthrow them. Long ago through Moses, God had given Israel very specific instructions and told them what consequences to expect both for obeying them and not obeying them. He would bless them if they kept his ways and worshiped him alone, and he would curse them if they didn't. The historical accounts of the Old Testament in general, and more specifically Elijah's story, are progress reports on their faithfulness.

The Elijah Enigma

Elijah seems to appear out of nowhere. No genealogy introduces him, he has no established reputation, and even today no one knows where his hometown of Tishbe was. He steps into Scripture mysteriously and disappears from it even more mysteriously.

One other figure visits the biblical story as a similar enigma. In Genesis 14, after Abraham pursues and overtakes an invading coalition of kings, a mysterious priestly figure named Melchizedek appears—no genealogy or hometown, no prior reputation, no explanation. Abraham shares a sacred meal with

him, offers him a tenth of the spoils of war, and receives his blessing. But unlike Melchizedek, who came to bless Abraham, Elijah has a confrontational mission. He came to warn Israel and, eventually, to curse King Ahab.

Unlike many of the later prophets, Elijah didn't write his prophecies. He simply emerged from the landscape, distinguished himself from the communities of prophets that functioned in kings' courts and around religious centers, and spoke brief but powerful decrees of what God would do in response to Israel's idolatry and injustices. The skeletal details of his life presented in 1–2 Kings only add to the mystery of who he was. All we know is that he lived in the ninth century BC during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah. An unusual, colorful character, his ministry lends itself to speculation.

Even after his departure from Israel's history, Elijah's personality hovers over its collective hopes. He still serves as a prototypical prophet—rugged and extreme, the epitome of countercultural zeal. In Hebrew thought, Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets. He shows up in the writings of later prophets and in the ministry of Jesus, who pointed to Elijah as an example of God's heart for the Gentiles (see Luke 4:25–26). And the expectations of his continuing ministry didn't end with the New Testament, as we'll see. He remains a dominant figure in the Jewish past and present.

How to Use This Guide

The discussion guides in this series are intended to create a link between past and present, between the cultural and historical context of the Bible and real life as we experience it today. By putting ourselves as closely into biblical situations as possible, we can begin to understand how God interacted with his people

in the past and, therefore, how he interacts with us today. The information in this book makes ancient Scripture relevant to twenty-first-century life as God means for us to live it.

The questions in this book are geared to do what a discussion guide should do: provoke discussion. You won't see obvious "right" answers to most of these questions. That's because biblical characters had to wrestle with deep spiritual issues and didn't have easy, black-and-white answers handed to them. They discovered God's will as he led them and revealed himself to them—the same process we go through today, though we have the added help of their experiences to inform us. Biblical characters experienced God in complex situations, and so do we. By portraying those situations realistically, we learn how to apply the Bible to our own lives. One of the best ways to do that is through in-depth discussion with other believers.

The discussion questions within each session are designed to elicit every participant's input, regardless of his or her level of preparation. Obviously, the more group members prepare by reading the biblical text and the background information in the study guide, the more they will get out of it. But even in busy weeks that afford no preparation time, everyone will be able to participate in a meaningful way.

The discussion questions also allow your group quite a bit of latitude. Some groups prefer to briefly discuss the questions in order to cover as many as possible, while others focus only on one or two of them in order to have more in-depth conversations. Since this study is designed for flexibility, feel free to adapt it according to the personality and needs of your group.

Each session ends with a hypothetical situation that relates to the passage of the week. Discussion questions are provided, but group members may also want to consider role-playing the scenario or setting up a two-team debate over one or two of the

questions. These exercises often cultivate insights that wouldn't come out of a typical discussion.

Regardless of how you use this material, the biblical text will always be the ultimate authority. Your discussions may take you to many places and cover many issues, but they will have the greatest impact when they begin and end with God's Word itself. And never forget that the Spirit who inspired the Word is in on the discussion too. May he guide it—and you—wherever he wishes.

Far from God

BACKGROUND

It was one of life's strange mysteries, an eerie echo from the deep, dark past. Out of the blue, with no warning from the gods, an ancient curse was tragically fulfilled. One of the founding fathers had uttered this jinx, but no one really believed it anymore. The fathers had uttered plenty of predictions that never came true. This was just one legend among many.

Until now. This prediction was startlingly accurate. One day, the entrepreneur who had been building a city on the long-neglected ruins of Jericho suddenly lost his oldest son in the building of the foundations. Soon after, his youngest died in the building of the gates—exactly according to Yehoshua's legendary words.

Why? What capricious deity was responsible for such a travesty? This noble kingdom had easily matured beyond its forebears' predictions. None of the other ancient curses had been fulfilled. The founding fathers had promised drought if Elohim's primitive commandments were abandoned, but everyone knew this threat was simply to manipulate the people. The old superstitions were obviously no longer relevant. Baal had been worshiped freely for years, and he always brought his rain in season. The rider of the clouds was plentiful with his storms. Serving Baal had served Israel well. So why would this singular curse from age-old writings come true?

Such was the spiritual climate in Israel after its split from Judah following Solomon's death. Jeroboam, the first northern king after the split, had set up altars in Bethel and Gilgal where golden calves could be worshiped. He was making a major statement against the southern kingdom and its recently built temple, departing from the religion of David's dynasty. Six kings later, Ahab and his queen made Baal worship the state religion by constructing an altar in Samaria and building worship centers for Baal's consort, Asherah, around the country. Many Israelites worshiped both Baal and Yahweh without any sense of contradiction. Yahweh was the absentee God above all other gods, but Baal was the practical deity who brought rains and harvests. Like adherents of many religions today—including Christianity—they accepted a hybrid or compromised version of the pure faith once given to them and called it "progress."

We see throughout Scripture, and specifically as we examine Elijah's life, that God is constantly calling his people back to the beginning. That's why orthodox Jews still rigorously study the Torah, and Christian pastors and theologians appeal to the authority of the Gospels and Acts. When God has spoken and

GODS AND GODDESSES

Ahab built a temple dedicated to Baal, a storm god who, in Canaanite culture, was responsible for bringing rains and harvests. In the eyes of true devotees, allegiance to him could make a huge difference in the semiarid climate: if Baal was pleased, the entire country would have food and water; if not, the people would suffer hunger and drought. Devotion to Baal was expressed in various ways throughout Canaanite history, including self-laceration and, at times, ritual prostitution. Ahab seems to have been influenced heavily by both his father, Omri, and his wife, Jezebel. As the Phoenician king's daughter, Jezebel may have been a high priestess of the Phoenician Baal, a god of war and death. Together, she and Ahab set up a system of worship that exalted the Canaanite Baal and his consort, Asherah, who was worshiped openly at poles set up throughout the countryside in her honor. The king/priest and queen/priestess possibly saw themselves as an image of this divine couple.

later generations have gotten off course, it's important to return to the roots—to revelation in its purest form. In Elijah's day, the kings of Israel had seriously departed from their ancient roots in the exodus and the words of Moses. God sent a prophet to turn them back.

Detours: 1 Kings 16:29–34

When Solomon died, his son was advised to take it easy on the people. After all, the great king had almost enslaved them to get the temple and his palace built. But Rehoboam vowed an even harsher reign than that of his father. The result? The northern ten tribes of Israel seceded and formed their own kingdom. Jeroboam established alternate worship sites, replete with golden calves. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin could

keep Jerusalem and its shrine to Yahweh. The northern people of Israel would worship however they saw fit.

Omri was the sixth king in the north, and he “sinned more than all those before him” (16:25). He built Samaria as the capital city and allied his kingdom with the Phoenicians—a relationship sealed with the marriage of the crown prince Ahab to the Phoenician princess Jezebel. When Ahab became king, he continued in his father’s idolatry. In fact, like his father, he too “did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him” (16:30). He and Jezebel made Baal worship the kingdom’s official religion.

That probably seemed innocuous enough to most Israelites, who assimilated lesser gods into their belief in a single supreme deity. Few Israelites would have seen themselves as having abandoned the religion of Yahweh, even though they hardly knew his commandments and broke them without much sense of disobedience or guilt. They may have committed to have no other gods *before* him, but their conscience didn’t seem to dictate against having plenty of gods *beneath* him. They were nominal

ISRAEL’S KINGS

Jeroboam led the revolt against Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, and became the first king of the northern ten tribes, referred to as Israel. The southern kingdom retained the name of its largest tribe, Judah. During the era of the divided kingdom, nineteen kings ruled in Israel before the Assyrian conquest (Ahab was the seventh); and twenty kings ruled in Judah before it was carried off to captivity in Babylon. Of the twenty kings of Judah, eight were commended for at least partially following the ways of the Lord. But of the nineteen kings of the north, none were commended. All nineteen allowed open idolatry and “did evil in the sight of the LORD” (16:25).

believers in the God of the exodus without adhering to his laws. Over time, they became comfortable with a hybrid faith—and with Yahweh fading further and further into the background. The temple of Baal and the poles erected in honor of Asherah, Baal’s feminine counterpart, didn’t seem to bother them.

Discuss

- Do you see any parallels between Israel’s departure from true faith and Western Christianity today? If so, what are they?

Consequences: Deuteronomy 11:13–17; Joshua 6:26

Roughly six decades had passed since Jeroboam split from Judah and built altars to golden calves in the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12). But Yahweh didn’t seem to mind; in fact, Israel was prospering as much as any other country. The kings who succeeded Jeroboam walked in his ways, ignoring God’s desire for exclusive worship at a designated place and cultivating instead a pluralistic society with a range of deities to choose from. God’s chosen people, at least in the northern kingdom of Israel, had forgotten what it meant to be chosen.

But some of them remembered. Some who had not yet bowed to Baal recalled God’s words in Deuteronomy 11—the promise of rain and harvests if God’s people worshiped him alone and the warning of drought and famine if they didn’t. Still, it had been six decades, and the fields remained fertile. That’s why

perhaps it was a shock when Joshua’s ancient curse came true. Centuries before, when the walls of Jericho had fallen, Joshua proclaimed that whoever tried to rebuild the city would lose his firstborn son in the foundation and his youngest son in the gates. The reconstruction would come at a heavy price. And he was right. A builder named Hiel found out the hard way that with God, old words are not forgotten words.

Discuss

- In what ways do we tend to compromise our worship of the one true God? What “idols” do you think people wrestle with most?

- Do you think the promises and warnings of Deuteronomy—abundance for those who worship God and scarcity for those who don’t—apply at all to us today, either literally or figuratively? If so, in what ways?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: You live in a society steeped in its religious traditions and confident that it is special in the eyes of God. Its scriptures

are in every bookstore and on most coffee tables but are hardly ever read. Its worship services are attended regularly but rarely seem to impact daily life. While nearly all people assume their own piety, you've noticed a huge discrepancy between what they claim as truth and how they actually live. In fact, their "sacred" beliefs and traditions are violated daily without regret. And, given your strong belief in the God of the sacred past, you're frightened by how he might respond.

- How would you address the situation? Would you make a public but extremely unpopular stand, or would you simply worship in your own way and let others do the same? Why?
- In what ways would you expect God to correct the false assumptions this society has about him?
- What discrepancies do you see between your society and its sacred traditions? How do you think God might want to address those discrepancies? How should you?