



Making Spiritual Connections - Elijah's Story

Leaders' Notes



Elijah's Story short version

In the famous Mount Carmel story* we see different types of spiritual connections. The prophets of Baal are pagan spirit worshippers. Elijah has strong spiritual connections with God. He hears clearly from God; he is helped by an angel; he knows the power of prayer and fasting and he has an amazing spiritual experience on Mount Sinai. *1 Kings 18-19

When Elijah appears on the scene and announces the start of a drought, this is not merely a punishment on the nation for breaking the treaty with God. The pagan god Baal whom they were worshipping was believed to be the god of the winter rains. The challenge was clear.

Once the country was at breaking point, Elijah returned to complete the challenge. "How long are you going to keep jumping between two branches¹?" he asks the Israelites.

The people hadn't completely abandoned God. They were trying to see what the local culture had to offer during the week, whilst still turning up to worship Yahweh on the Sabbath and not realising how much it was harming them.

A contest between God and Baal was arranged. All the odds were generously stacked in Baal's favour. The seaward end of Mount Carmel was a Baal worship site. Each side was to prepare a bull to sacrifice and "the god who answers by fire – he is God." Lightning was a Baal speciality.

The 'home team' went first. Was it inevitable that they would get no response? It is clear from the reading of the story and what we know about pagan religions that they often did make contact with spirits. They were genuinely surprised when nothing happened. Any spirits who usually appeared knew full well that with Elijah there, God was going to show up in force so they were keeping well clear of the place.

Then it was Elijah's turn. What happened next was almost a re-enactment of a scene from the time of Moses ², nearly 600 years earlier. Everyone had been brought up on these old stories and the effect was not lost on them. God's fire not only burnt up the offering, it also rekindled the people's faith in God and healed their relationship with him, for a time at least. They had fallen out of touch with just how powerful he was and how brilliantly he could care for them.

... Deflated, demoralised and depressed, Elijah runs south towards Judah. By the time he stops, he is burnt out, physically, emotionally and spiritually. He finally pours it all out to God. "I gave this project my best shot. I put everything into it but it was all in vain and now I'm shattered. What was the point? Nobody cares anyway. What's there to live for that has any real meaning? I wish I could just die and be done with it all." ...

God meets his needs over the next few weeks in ways he could not have imagined. An angel to feed him; an intimate time with God in a place of pilgrimage and an apprentice to support him. He was not to know how much he would be held in awe by future generations.

It is harder to connect with God's Spirit than any other but it is SO WORTH IT! No matter who you are, you can have an awesome, amazing prayer life.³ James 5:16-18, paraphrased

¹ Young's Literal Translation of 1 Kings 18:21; ² Leviticus 9:24; ³ James 5:16-18, paraphrased



Elijah's Story longer version

Background (Star Wars style)

A long time ago in a far off land (*the Middle East*), there was a kingdom; a nation of people whom the great Yahweh (*aka God*) had adopted as his own children to teach them his ways and to be blessed by him.

This Kingdom had been united under Kings Saul (*former donkey farmer*), David (*the good-looking giant slayer*) and Solomon (*the wise*)
But Solomon for all his wisdom had made some bad choices, leading the nation into the worship of pagan gods (*Lots of them and mostly nature related but into some pretty bad habits*).
This broke the alliance with Yahweh, their Protector and Provider and it also broke the kingdom into two (*crack - sound effect!*).

The southern Kingdom of Judah was sometimes blessed by a godly king. But the northern Kingdom of Israel embarked on a troubled history. Successive Kings failed to provide strong and godly leadership. Half a century later, a man named Ahab came to the throne. He proved to be the worst so far, (*though he wasn't nearly as bad as his wife Jezebel*) adopting paganism wholeheartedly as a national religion and allowing the persecution of Yahweh's prophets.

In an attempt to save the North from certain destruction, God raised up two very godly men who repeatedly demonstrated his power in the same way that Moses had done before them. There was to be no one greater than they, until the arrival of the Messiah. The first of these was the great prophet Elijah... (*Drum roll*)

Enter Elijah

In the Elijah story we see different types of spiritual connections. On the one hand there are the prophets of Baal and Asherah who are pagan spirit worshippers. On the other hand there is Elijah who has strong spiritual connections with God. The prophet hears clearly from God and acts on it. He is helped by an angel; knows the power of prayer and fasting and has an amazing spiritual experience on Mount Sinai.

One of the key factors in Israel's alliance or covenant with God was that they worship only him and keep his laws on how to treat each other. He would then ensure that they prospered as a nation with good harvests and no enemy attacks.



When Elijah, who was probably just a humble shepherd, appears on the scene and announces the start of a drought, he isn't making an early and extremely accurate attempt at weather forecasting nor is this merely a punishment on the nation for breaking the treaty with God. The pagan god Baal whom they were worshipping was believed to be the god of the winter rains and of fertility. The challenge was clear. God's response was 'Okay. Let the pagan gods meet your needs then.'

When the country was at breaking point after 3 years with no rain, God sent Elijah back to complete the challenge.

King Ahab had no hesitation in arranging a meeting between the two religions. It wasn't just his food store that was at risk from the lack of rain. His precious war horses might not live otherwise. That would undermine his defence systems and make the country vulnerable to enemy attack.

A contest between God and Baal was arranged. All the odds were generously stacked in Baal's favour. The seaward end of Mount Carmel was a Baal worship site. Each side was to prepare a bull to sacrifice and "the god who answers by fire – he is God." Lightning was a Baal speciality.

"How long are you going to keep jumping between two branches? Elijah demands of the Israelites.

The people hadn't completely abandoned God. They were trying to see what the local culture had to offer during the week, whilst still turning up to worship Yahweh on the Sabbath and not realising how much it was harming them.

The 'home team' went first. Was it inevitable that they would get no response? It is clear from the reading of the story and what we know about pagan religions that they often did make contact with spirits.

They began their rituals in the usual way and after a few hours progressed to bloodletting 'as was their custom'. Like pagan worshippers in Mesoamerica they believed that blood sacrifices nourished the gods and that it was the duty of priests to offer their own blood as it opened up a pathway to the spirit world. They were genuinely surprised when nothing happened all day. Any spirits who usually appeared knew full well that with Elijah there, God was going to show up in force so they were keeping well clear of the place.

Then it was Elijah's turn. In order to really make his point he soaked the offering and filled the surrounding ditch with sea water. (They weren't at the top of the mountain). You will probably want to read the dramatic part to them directly from the Bible (e.g. Youth Bible aka New Century Version). It's 1 Kings 18:36-39.

What happened next was almost a re-enactment of a scene from the opening ceremonies of the Old Covenant back at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses, nearly 600 years earlier. (Leviticus 9:24) Everyone had been brought up on these old stories and the effect was not lost on them. God's fire not only burnt up the offering, the stones, the water and the 'dust', it also rekindled the



people's faith in God and healed their relationship with him, for a time at least. They had fallen out of touch with just how powerful he was and how brilliantly he could care for them.

Elijah then climbed to the top of the mountain and started to pray. Now Elijah was a prayer warrior. When he prayed, stuff happened! James 5:16-18. He knew how to pray and he knew how to keep praying until God gave him a sign that the answer was on its way.

It had been a great spiritual victory. Elijah had never doubted the outcome and it had been awesome. Vast numbers of people had turned back to God. So why is he then fleeing for his life? This had not been part of his hopes and dreams.

Ahab is unchanged. Jezebel also is still in power and championing the enemy cause. If Jezebel really intended to kill Elijah, why did she send a messenger rather than a soldier? She was angry but she was also badly shaken. This was a power the like of which she had never encountered before. Better to just use bully tactics to chase him out of the country. Caught unawares, her tactics worked as fear took a hold of Elijah.

Deflated, demoralised and depressed, the man of God runs south towards Judah. By the time he stops, he is burnt out, physically, emotionally and spiritually. He finally pours it all out to God. "I gave this project my best shot. I put everything into it but it was all in vain and now I'm shattered. What was the point? Nobody cares anyway. What's there to live for that has any real meaning? I wish I could just die and be done with it all."

God meets his needs over the next few weeks in ways he could not have imagined: Firstly he sends an angel to meet Elijah's immediate physical need for food and water. This gives him the strength to travel for 40 days to a place of pilgrimage where he experiences an intimate time with God that renews and strengthens him spiritually. He shows Elijah that although he can sometimes be found in dramatic exciting events, those quiet times of solitude when we reach out and connect with the presence of God are also essential to us.

What did God's new instructions to Elijah actually mean?

- Anoint Hazael as king of Aram = *my plans are more far reaching than you might expect.*
- Anoint Jehu as king of Israel = *It may look as though nothing has changed but just you wait.* No one stays in power forever. Ahab and Jezebel's days in power are numbered. They were succeeded by someone who ruthlessly wiped out Baal worship.
- Anoint Elisha = *you have been on your own long enough.* It is time for you to take an apprentice who will provide support through friendship.

Elijah was not to know how much he would be held in awe by future generations.

Elijah may have been a humble shepherd, but God has no favourite children. No matter who you are, you can have an awesome, amazing prayer life. James 5:16-18 paraphrased



For Reflection

- It is harder to connect with God's Spirit than any other but it is SO WORTH IT!
- Have we so lost sight of God's love and power that even we do not realise how much he has to offer us in comparison with local/modern culture?
- Do we want to deepen what we have? How can we do that? (Accept that some may not be ready to move forward in their spiritual journey yet)
- Elijah was probably a humble shepherd. Whether you are a king or a school kid, you can have a powerful prayer life.

How to strengthen spiritual connections

- Prayer – how can we bring this alive?
- Meditation – how can we chill with God?
- Fasting – increases spiritual awareness but health issues need to be considered especially with adolescent aged children.
- How can we have a healthy spiritual life within our modern lifestyle?

Kick-Starting A Habit

John Wesley was instrumental in changing the spiritual climate of Britain. In the 18th Century, his open air preaches gathered enormous crowds, with many encountering the person of Jesus for the first time. His efforts founded the Methodist movement, which has since spread worldwide. All without the help of ticket promoters, cars, phones, TV appearances, anything.

His fuel: prayer. He said, 'I have so much to do that I must spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it.' Much prayer, much blessing.

Over five-hundred years ago, **a little known German monk** lost patience with a greedy and ungodly Church. His bullet-pointed criticisms spread across Europe and ignited the Reformation, a major historical turning point for getting the Church back on track.

Martin Luther's secret was this. 'Prayer is the most important thing in my life. If I should neglect prayer for a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith.' Much prayer, much blessing.

A tiny Albanian nun became one of the most beloved and inspirational women of the last century for her work in the slums of Calcutta.

Her secret to endurance, 'Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of Himself.' Much prayer, much blessing.

Word 4U 2Day 28 Dec 2012



Further Notes on Elijah

It was the custom for priests to sacrifice animals to their gods and it was part of the old contract between God and his people. Vegetarians will shudder at the idea of animal sacrifice, but that was the whole point – a sacrifice is something that is **difficult** to make.

Many of the ancient pagan religions also offered human sacrifices which were strictly banned within Old Testament law.

There is plenty to deal with in this story and it may be better not to say much about the fate of the pagan prophets as the young people may find it horrific. If they do comment on it, acknowledge that this is seen as a big issue nowadays, but try to keep to your main aim if you can, returning to it later if necessary.

To consider the execution of the pagan prophets, see Deuteronomy 13 and Deuteronomy 17:2-5. It is worth realising that such people were seriously into child abuse, child sacrifice and other demonic practices. They would make headline news in many cultures today and would probably be beaten up in prison.

Distances travelled

Carmel – Jezreel = about 20 miles

Jezreel – Beersheba in Judah = over 100 miles

Beersheba – Mount Sinai = about 200 miles

Take a look at a map at some point.

Sources

1 Kings 18:21

... and Elijah cometh nigh unto all the people, and saith, `Till when are ye leaping on the two branches? -- if Jehovah [is] God, go after Him; and if Baal, go after him;' and the people have not answered him a word.
Young's Literal Translation (YLT)

The Prophets of Israel: H L Ellison

Civilizations - ten thousand years of ancient history: McIntosh and Twist; BBC

Further reading

Prayer – The Key to Revival – Paul Y Cho

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