

1 Kings 17:1-24

Introduction

Whose word do you trust?

You may be familiar with the motto of the London Stock Exchange: 'My word is my bond'. For more than two centuries, the stock exchange trading system has worked on the basis that a trader's word can be trusted.

The problem is that, away from the Stock Exchange, too often the opposite is true. We protect ourselves with contracts and legal agreements because, so often, a person's word can't be trusted. We lie to each other. We tell half-truths. We use words to deceive and mislead.

In fact, sometimes, you could be forgiven for wondering whether we're really concerned with truth at all. A bit like the joke about a witness in a court case who complained to the judge that she had sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth but every time she tried a lawyer objected.

We constantly need to decide whether to trust someone or not.

Whether it's a plumber, a second-hand car dealer, a politician or any number of other people, we're constantly having to ask ourselves whose word we can trust.

And it's no different when it comes to matters of God. Numerous competing voices claim to speak with authority about spirituality and God.

And that was the issue of the day in the Bible passage that we're looking at this morning.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to read about a man called Elijah. He's one of the great figures of the Old Testament. He was a prophet who lived nearly 3,000 years ago in Israel, during the reign of a King called Ahab.

Now, Ahab wasn't a great king. In fact, we're told in chapter 16 that **[he] did more evil in the eyes of the LORD, than any of those before him**. That's quite an achievement because we're told that the kings that came before him were a bad bunch. Ahab has the distinction of standing out as the worst of them all.

So, how did Ahab gain such a bad press? Well, we're told at the end of chapter 16 that **He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, 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. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.** (1 Kings 16:31-33)

That's a lot of bad press. Ahab had changed the nation's religion and brought a passionate evangelist for Baal into the corridors of power as his wife.

And now the question is: who would the Israelites listen to? Whose word would they trust? The word of the LORD or the word of Baal?

We don't hear much about Baal these days; in the end, he turned out to be just a lump of carved wood. But when it comes to the fundamental questions of life, there are still many voices to listen to.

The passage we're looking at this morning gives us three good reasons to trust God's word alone.

Here's the first. The word of the Lord is powerful.

That's our first heading.

The word of the Lord is powerful

Please look down at verse 1. Suddenly, this great figure Elijah bursts onto the scene: **Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, '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.'**

Elijah's name means, literally, 'The LORD is God'. And he's acting here as God's word-bearer. So when he says that **'there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word,'** what he's saying is that there will be neither dew nor rain except at God's word.

We could hardly imagine a clearer display of the power of God's word. Baal was believed to be a fertility god. It was believed that he controlled nature. So if you wanted to ensure a good and bountiful harvest, you sacrificed to Baal.

One ancient Baal worshipper wrote this. He said, "the dew and the rain are the goodness of Baal's voice and the heaven's rain oil, the river's run with honey, so I know that the mighty one, Baal, lives."

"No," says Elijah, "It is the LORD who controls the world. And he's just turned off the taps, and they won't be turned on again except at his word."

Actually, King Ahab had forgotten the words God had spoken many years earlier, through Moses, as the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land. He had said this: **'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 you.'** (Deuteronomy 11:16-17)

Worshipping other gods and bowing down to them was exactly what King Ahab had done. And now Elijah announces God's displeasure. Israel is about to experience God's judgement.

And having delivered the message to the king, he leaves. Verse 2: **Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: 'Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have instructed the ravens to supply you with food there.'** So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there.

Now, notice that whilst God had withdrawn his provision from Israel, nonetheless, he continues to provide for his faithful servant, Elijah. God's word is a word of judgement to Israel but a word of life to Elijah. Verse 6: **The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.**

Without God, the farms, the vineyards, the marketplaces of Israel can produce nothing. But God rules over the natural world. He is in complete control. With him, even ravens are able to provide food for Elijah to eat. And Elijah doesn't just eat; he eats abundantly, morning and evening.

God's word has power.

And that power was plain to see when he entered our world in the person of Jesus. With just a word, he calmed a storm. With a word, he directed fishermen to a catch so large that their nets couldn't hold it. With a word, he healed the sick and gave sight to the blind. At his command, a lame man took up his mat and walked home.

The word of the Lord is powerful.

And secondly, the word of the Lord transforms people's lives. That's our second heading.

The word of the Lord transforms people's lives

Verse 7: **Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him: 'Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have instructed a widow there to supply you with food.'** So he went to Zarephath.

We're not told the widow's name. What's more important is her address. She lives in Zarephath, just a few miles down the road from Sidon – so we're deep into Baal country here.

Elijah finds the widow, who's almost certainly a Baal worshipper, and he asks her for food. She replies, verse 12: **'As surely as the LORD your God lives,** (notice that this is Elijah's God, not hers – she's very clear about that) **I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a**

jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.'

This poor woman's plight couldn't be more desperate. The famine's hit hard and she's at the end of her resources. She's off to make a last supper. And she fully expects that, once they've eaten, she and her son will both die. It's a desperate situation. And it's slightly surprising, then, that Elijah asks her for the first helping.

Verse 13: Elijah said to her, 'Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: '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.'

Do you see what Elijah's saying? 'Baal can't feed you, but my God can. My God will give you an endless supply of food. But first you're going to have to trust him – so much so, that I want you to give me the first serving.'

And then we're told, in verse 15: **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.**

There couldn't be a clearer demonstration of faith in this woman's actions. Faith is staking everything, daily, upon the truth of God's word. And that's what she does.

That's the great miracle in this story. It's not the daily provision of food (although that is a miracle.) The greatest miracle is the widow's faith. She converts from faith in Baal to faith in God. Her life is transformed from faith in a wooden idol to faith in the living God. Spiritually speaking, she's crossed over from death to life.

That's what God's word does: it transforms people's lives.

And the message couldn't be clearer: you don't have to be a faithful Israelite prophet in order to experience the life-giving power of God's word. If this widow, who lives in the heart of Baal country, could have her life transformed by God's word, then so can you and I.

The story's a sign for us, pointing to the day when God's word would extend beyond the borders of Israel to transform the lives of people of all nations, through the message of Jesus Christ recorded for us in the Bible. Today, that message really is transforming people's lives around the world. It brings forgiveness to the guilty and salvation to the lost. It comforts the distressed and strengthens the weak. It gives meaning and value and purpose.

So, the word of the LORD is powerful, and it transforms people's lives. And finally, it conquers the grave.

The word of the Lord conquers the grave

Verse 17: **Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, 'What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?'**

Life can be going well one minute and then dump us on our backsides the next.

That's the great struggle that so many Christians have. We trust in God's word, yet we continue to live in a suffering world. Just like everybody else, we grow ill, and we suffer. We grow old, and we die. We face loneliness, rejection, depression, bereavement.

But that isn't the end of the story. The widow thinks it is, but Elijah knows better. With her permission, he takes the boy's body upstairs and he prays. Verse 20: **Then 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?' Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, 'LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!'**

Elijah doesn't work some holy abracadabra. He isn't a religious magician. He's a servant who can do nothing but plead with his God. We're not told why he stretched himself out on the boy as he prayed. But what's clear is that his prayer is the crucial part. Prayer is God's appointed means of grace for our difficulties.

And wonderfully, we're told in verse 22: **The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, 'Look, your son is alive!'**

Can you imagine the expression on her face?

Look at her conclusion, in verse 24: **Then the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.'**

She already knew that God could cross any geographical border and reach into any country he chooses. But now she knows that there's another border that he can cross – the border from life to death. He can even reach into the grave and bring out new life.

It's what Jesus did. With a word, he raised Jairus' daughter back to life. With a word, he reunited the widow of Nain with the son she thought was lost to her forever. With a word, he called Lazarus out of the grave.

And one day, if we belong to him, we too will hear his voice calling us out of the grave, and we will rise to live with him forever in the glory of a new heaven and a new earth.

He has given us every reason to say, along with the woman from Zarephath, **'Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.'**

Conclusion

So, whose voice will you listen to as you go about your daily life? You can listen to any number of voices who claim to speak with authority about the big questions of life. You can listen to any number of voices who can tell you how you should set your priorities and values, how you should spend your time and your money and your energy. Or you can listen to the one whose word is powerful, whose word transforms lives and whose word conquers the grave. In short, the one whose word gives life. Which will you choose?

And if it is God's voice, then don't just say it. Live by it. Listen to what he says. Do all that he commands. And trust all that he promises.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for your life-giving words, recorded for us in the pages of the Bible. Please help us to read them attentively and to take on aboard all that you reveal to us about yourself, about ourselves, and about the world we live in. Please teach us to trust them and to build our lives upon them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.