

1 Kings 16:21-17:1

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Date: 22 September 2019

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[0 : 00] And you can turn back to your Bibles to that passage in 1 Kings chapter 16, it's on page 298 if you've got one of the church Bibles.

We're going to start a series tonight, that's the plan on Sunday evenings for a while, on the narratives of Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings.

And if we were to give this series a title, I guess it would be something like Life and Faith in a Lifeless Faithless Land.

Life and Faith in a Lifeless Faithless Land. Elijah and Elisha arrive on the scene in the story of God's people when the church seems to be in a lifeless and faithless place.

It is a low point in their walk with God. 1 and 2 Kings cover the period of history where kings ruled over them before the time of exile.

[0 : 59] And it's written to most likely the people who were in exile later on in Babylon. And the writer writes to them and he wants to give them a history of how they've ended up where they are, to teach them what went wrong and how God still is going to give them hope in exile.

It's written to them in Babylon. But the message is still for us today. To help us to know the hope of a God who is still working in a lifeless and faithless land that we live in.

So this evening we're going to work up to this in a little introduction to Elijah who appears in chapter 17. Now Elijah, he is the great prophet, isn't he?

The saviour figure who appears in chapter 17. And he arrives for three reasons that I want us to see tonight.

God tells his people in exile, I had to send Elijah to you. I had to send this saviour to you. For three reasons. First of all, you were falsely optimistic.

[2 : 14] You were falsely optimistic. You thought things were going really well. But there was a great danger. And I needed to send a saviour to you.

You had a false sense of security. Now at the end of chapter 16 we hear about the situation. Don't we? There is a couple of kings that are on the scene just before Elijah is sent to the people. There's this king Omri and his son Ahab. Now if you read the history books you'll see that these two kings reigned over Israel at a time of boom.

There was a new feeling in the air if you were living in Israel. There was a different flavour. A flavour of prosperity. And of safety. And of hope really.

So we're told in verse 24 of chapter 16. That this king Omri, he was a bit of a moderniser. So he decides to move the capital.

[3 : 12] And he sets up a new capital in Samaria. He fortifies this town which is on a hill. And it was a really astute thing to do.

It was a clever thing to do. This place on this hill that he called Samaria. It was a strategic place for commerce. It gave him the upper hand militarily.

It was a good place to house a military. It was a brilliant public relations move. That finally here was a king who was doing something new.

Something progressive. And the breeze of modernisation was kind of blowing through Israel. Through the land. Omri was a brilliant diplomat as well.

It's more than likely that he was behind his son Ahab's marriage. To a Phoenician woman who we'll meet later on in 1 Kings. Which opened up a world of trade.

[4 : 12] Through the Phoenician seamen ships. He's been able to negotiate and win overseas trade deals. And get the economy going.

It is a new age for Israel. It's a new era. King Omri. And I don't know. But I wonder whether we kind of think. Well that sounds really great.

That is the kind of thing that we dream of in our country right now. Isn't it? Maybe we dream of that kind of thing in the church right now. And for future generations. We'd love that wouldn't we? Imagine if someone could appear. Like King Omri. We'd love it if someone could just sort everything out. Win some trade contracts. Get us in with our neighbours. With the Phoenicians or with the Europeans. Or the Americans or the Chinese. Someone who could ramp up worldwide respect for Britain. [5 : 11] Maybe modernise things a bit. Move the capital to Manchester. What's the name? Because at the end of the day. You can't argue with prosperity. Can you?

If there's food on the table. Then things would be great. Wouldn't they? And for them it was boom time. And they felt secure in that. And you couldn't argue with that. So why does God send them a saviour like Elijah? Well because in their feeling of optimism. It was a false optimism entirely. It's interesting as you read the history narrative type books like 1 and 2 Kings. They are very very selective aren't they about what they tell us. So 1 and 2 Kings covers a period of about 400 years.

But it's done in only 50,000 words. Now just so you can get a kind of your head around that. Compare it with Gibbon's rise and fall of the Roman Empire. [6 : 12] That is 1.1 million words. So 1 and 2 Kings are very succinct aren't they? It's a potted history. It is a selective edited history.

He's had to leave a lot of stuff out. Now it's not that he's a poor historian. And he doesn't know all of the details of what happened. But actually what it is. Is that he's not just writing a history. But a prophetic history book. And he wants us to see what God's vision is. Of that history. And so the narrator. He highlights the things that God is interested in. And that are in God's vision of what happened. And behind the appearances of all this prosperity. Is a dark and dangerous presence. There is a false sense of security. You see verse 24. Yes Omri builds Samaria doesn't he?

[7 : 12] But verse 25. Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He is the king who the history books tell us. Became the front man for the whole of Israel.

So for a hundred years. The Assyrians. Another neighbour of Israel. Changed the name that they referred to Israel. To the house of Omri. Omri was the man who put Israel back on the map again. But the narrator says no. What God concludes about him. Was that. Verse 26. He caused the people to sin against the Lord. And he provoked the Lord. He worshipped the idols that Jeroboam had set up. And that is the bottom line. Even though Omri did a lot of good stuff. A lot of amazing things. He was really impressive as a leader. And he did great deals and all of that stuff. At heart he was a king who caused the people to walk away from God. The writer wasn't ignorant of Omri's other achievements.

[8 : 16] He's just saying because he caused the people to break the first commandment. The other stuff doesn't really matter at the end of the day. In God's vision of history. In fact he says if you're interested in all the other stuff.

You can go and read about it in the chronicles of the kings of Israel. If you're bothered about that. It's not that prosperity and trade is a bad thing. But that God's vision of our need is much deeper than whether we've got an iPhone in our pocket. And God's vision of what was going on for them was much deeper than trade deals and economic progression.

Because they were rejecting him. And they were turning to another God. They were hoping to get what they needed from some other place and from some other God. And that spelled absolute disaster for them. And then comes Ahab the son. And it's the same picture with him as well. It all looks golden with him too.

[9 : 19] So if you look in verse 29. We're told that Ahab reigns for 22 years. And any nation would feel good about that wouldn't they?

Having one leader for longer than 21 months would be a good thing wouldn't it? But for 22 years. Who can keep peaceful control for that length of time.

It is a contrast to the previous chapters in the book. There are no coups. There are no assassinations. It looks golden for 22 years under King Ahab.

But again God's vision looks more deeply at the moral behaviour and the relationship with him for Ahab in verse 30 also did evil in the sight of the Lord.

And so in their false sense of security they needed a saviour. They needed an Elijah. Because God was provoked to anger by kings who turned the people away from him.

[10:20] And they had a misplaced optimism. So that's the first thing. Secondly he says to them in exile. You had a misplaced apathy.

You had a misplaced apathy. Now I was trying to think of a better word for this. But I think apathy is a good word. Because not only did they think things were going well. And also they didn't think things could get worse.

That things couldn't get any worse than they were. The picture of evil though builds up in the passage with Omri. He builds Samaria.

Which becomes, doesn't it, a byword for false idol worship. He continues in the worship of idols that Jeroboam had set up. The bulls that he'd set up to worship in the northern parts of the land.

Just after the tribes split. He'd set up a false centre of worship. Kind of alternative to the temple in Jerusalem. And that should have been enough to wake the people up.

[11:29] It should have been enough for the people to realise something is desperately wrong here. It was an especially dark time. Spiritually.

And so there was Omri. But then I think the writer places Ahab next. Of course it's chronological isn't it? And Ahab was the son of Omri. But he places them together to show us that there is a risk in God's people assuming that things just can't get worse when they're really bad.

That once you've reached a fever pitch of evil that the rot can't go any further. And we can watch can't we as we look around at the state of our land and the church maybe.

And it's particularly dark isn't it? And we lament at that. But for those sat in exile the lesson that they had to learn was that they weren't prepared for it to get any worse.

And they presumed on their own better nature. Because even though there was an Omri. There was yet still to come an Ahab.

[12:43] They were in the dark. But the shadow was not going to stop growing. And evil was capable of a kind of progressive and exponential progress.

Further into darkness. So notice what we're told of Omri. Omri was the acme of evil wasn't he? Verse 25. We're told he'd done more evil than all who were before him.

He is the ultimate bad guy. They were there in the days of Omri. And any of them with any sense. Would have thought well we have hit rock bottom here.

And it can't get any worse than this can it? But then there is this progression of evil. And we're told that Ahab is his son.

Did more evil than all who were before him. As if. Verse 31. It had been a light thing for him to do what Jeroboam had done.

[13:43] He brought in an altogether new brand of evil. And of wrongdoing. Wrongdoing. Because we're told. Not only did he have the bulls. That Jeroboam set up.

But verse 31. He built an altar for Baal. In the house of Baal. Which he built in Samaria. See Omri built Samaria.

And he was the worst you could get. But Ahab excelled his father in wrongdoing. And he ramped up the worship of idols and false gods.

And he built an altar to this god Baal. This pagan god. Of the people around Israel. He was the god of fertility. And the storm god.

Could it get any worse? Yes it could. Evil was progressive. We're told twice. He did more to promote the Lord.

[14:39] The god of Israel. Ahab. To anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. And notice how just like his dad. Ahab does his own building project.

He builds up. Doesn't he? In verse 34. The ancient city of Jericho. Now again. The people could have thought. This is great. It's a really good strategic move.

It's a good place to have a fortified city. It's a good place to have a military. It was in a significant place geographically. But the project to build Jericho.

Was in open defiance of God's words. It was cursed from the beginning. If you remember back in the book of Joshua. Early on.

Joshua pronounces a curse. On anyone who attempts to rebuild Jericho. After it was destroyed. That their children would die.

[15:40] It was an awful thing. But it was a curse. To prevent Jericho from being rebuilt. Because Jericho had come to symbolise. All that was wrong.

About the land that God wanted to make right. It was the city that they rescued Rahab from. Do you remember? A city that was devoted to destruction.

Because of the awful things that were going on there. And Jericho was the historic gateway. To a land that was full of spiritual evil. A land full of idols.

And deceit. And darkness. And unhappiness. And here Ahab wants to bring it back. He wants to rebuild the monstrosity.

That God helped Joshua to demolish. And so he knowingly goes against God's words. And he sends his lackey.

[16:40] Do you see? In verse 34. Or this lackey Hiel. To do the job. It is a bit like sending someone. To go and rebuild Chernobyl.

Or somewhere like that. It was a cursed project. From the very beginning. And if you're reading this. And you know the history. You're thinking. Who would be mad enough.

To start a project that dangerous. Surely no one would be evil enough. Or mad enough. To go against God's word. And rebuild Jericho.

Surely we're at rock bottom. But things can't get any worse. Can they? But evil it seems. Is progressive. Because one day there was an Omri.

But then the next day. His son arrived. There was an Ahab. And Ahab sends this guy. To heal. To do the work. And after he builds the foundations. We're told. That the curse.

[17:37] Comes true. Isn't it? One of his sons dies. And then when he finishes the gate. Another one of his sons dies. This young boy. Called Segev. These are real people.

And it was to fulfil. The word of the Lord. He spoke through Joshua. It was a cursed project. From the very beginning. But Ahab had the gall. To push against God.

Even further. And then maybe the people. Should have seen it coming. I think they were apathetic. They were at least unwary. But what this passage shows us.

Isn't it? Is the reality of evil. And what it is capable of. It is capable of. Exponential progress. Into something much worse. Worse.

Just when you think. Things can't get any worse. They can. And they do. Often. And this is what kingdoms.

[18:38] Can be like. Isn't it? This is what leaders. Can be like. Godless leaders. It's what sadly. God's people. Can be like at times. And we might look around us.

To say. We might shake our heads. At the tragedy. Of. Of a place. In which we live. Of faithless. And lifeless land. And many. Many other places.

Like it. In the world. But sadly. We're kidding ourselves. If we think. Things can't possibly. Get any worse. If we think. Well. We'll just let things slide.

Because things will be okay. We can look around. Can't we. Can we say. Well. Things aren't as bad. As they could be. Things aren't as bad. As they are in. In China.

Or North Korea. Because somehow. We're different. Aren't we? I'm not as bad. As I could be. We might even say. We're basically. Good people. But we're reminded.

[19:34] That the only reason. We're not as bad. As we could be. Is not because. My bad side. Has a limit. Is because. God holds evil back. Because. Left to itself.

Evil. Is. Progressive. It isn't static. It grows. More. And more. And more. Rotten. When it's left. To do what it wants. And that is why.

God had to send. A saviour. That is why. God had to send. This Elijah. Because without. A saviour. The damage. That we can do. To ourselves.

And the offence. That we can. Give. And cause to God. Can grow. And grow. And get worse. And worse. So we might be living. In the days of Omri. But. There might be.

An Ahab. So we need. A saviour. You were falsely. Optimistic. You said. You were. Apathetic. To your own evil. And thirdly.

[20 : 31] And lastly. You were. Utterly. Hopeless. You were. Hopeless. In your situation. It is a really dark passage.

This isn't it. It's not an easy. Thing to read. For the exiles. They were being taught. Why they'd been invaded.

And why they needed a saviour. And at the end of chapter 16. It just feels utterly hopeless. Doesn't it. This is evil.

And rebellion. And. Walking away from God. Like nothing we've seen before. We're told Ahab. Did more evil. Than anyone else.

Before him. And it seems hopeless. Doesn't it. Because this is a country. That is severing itself. From its spiritual moorings. This God.

[21 : 25] Baal. Is now. The God. Who people support. And he's got. Growing. Allegiance. The Babylonians.

Will come and take them away. But actually. It's as if they've already arrived. Isn't it. In the land of Israel. And God's people. Find themselves. Living in a lifeless. And a faithless land. And everything. Seems to be going. The way of Baal. This false God. And the tide. Is pulling people. Away from. The true God. Towards this false God. Towards whatever.

And whoever. They want to live for. Instead. Just turn on. Samaria TV. And hear the subtle. But persuasive. Preaching. Of the false gospel. Of Baal.

And everyone. Is happily. Listening to it. It is. A hopeless. A hopeless. It feels a lot like. London today. Doesn't it.

[22 : 22] And that is why. God. Sends a saviour. When we are hopeless. When we. Don't even want. A saviour. God.

Sends him to us. And it's then. That we meet him. In our darkest. Time. When we turn from him. So. Elijah. The name Elijah. It means. My God. Is Yahweh. And as.

Chapter divisions. Go. This is probably. One of the worst. There is. Because this story. Cannot end. At the end of chapter 16. We cannot stop there. We need.

At least. The first. Two words. Of chapter 17. Since in a world. Of growing evil. This. One man. Is sent. Look at.

[23 : 17] The first. Two words. Of chapter 17. Now. Elijah. Now. Elijah. My God. Is Yahweh. Arise. There is. One. Isn't there. In all of this. Darkness. And rebellion. Who is truly. God's man. And his arrival.

It's done in such. An abrupt way. Did you notice. It's a very. Sudden appearance. Isn't it. That there's no. Introduction. There's no. CV. There's no. Family history.

Of Elijah. He just. Seems to appear. Out of nowhere. We don't even know. How he meets. Ahab. The king. But God.

In the hopelessness. Raises this man up. And places him. At the heart. Of the problem. He lands him. At the very heart. Of the darkness. To pronounce.

[24 : 13] God. To evil. King Ahab. And this. Saviour. Is going to stop. The growth. Of evil. He is going to.

Pronounce. God's covenant. Curses. Of drought. Which is what it does. Isn't it. There will be no rain. Except by my word. On the people. To wake them up. Now that is a lovely touch.

Because Baal. Was the storm god. And so. God. Has sent his man. Elijah. My god is Yahweh. To go and make a fool. Out of Baal.

He is going to. Literally. Dry up. Baal's reputation. He is going to. He is going to. Close the tap. On Baal's influence. And his power. In this land.

Of lifelessness. And faithlessness. God will perform. Amazing things. Through this man. And he will. Stop the growth. Of evil. And turn it around.

[25 : 10] Just as we close. When we look around us. And when we. We stare at the world around us. For long enough. It can seem like a pretty hopeless place.

Can't it. And when we look at. The state of the church. In this land. Compared with what it was. Maybe. It can feel pretty hopeless.

But we learn. That in the background. Here. God is preparing. And arranging. To send his man. He is secretly.

And mysteriously. Preparing. A counter movement. To the works of evil. He is working. Underground. And he can raise.

This man. From nowhere. Just like he does. With Elijah. One commentator. Says. That whenever. Evil flourishes. It is always.

[26 : 09] A superficial. Flourish. For at the height. Of the triumph. Of evil. God. Will be there. Ready. With his man. And at the height.

Of evil. God. Can send. An Elijah. He sends. A saviour. A Christ. Who appears.

Out of nowhere. Out of some. Little town. In Galilee. That no one's ever heard of. To enter. Into the very. Headquarters.

Of evil. To enter. Into the heart. Of darkness. Itself. At the height. Of the triumph. Of evil. God. Is there. With his man.

He has prepared him. Quietly. And secretly. Before the foundation. Of the world. God. And Jesus Christ. Is the saviour. Isn't he. Who God.

[27 : 05] Has prepared. To enter. Into the darkest. Of places. And who continues. To reign. And who plans. And who works. Behind the scenes.

He is the Christ. Who can suddenly. Appear. And by the power. Of his holy spirit. Through. His servants. Seemingly. Out of nowhere. He can raise.

An Augustine. He can raise. A Calvin. He can raise. A Wesley. He can raise. A Lloyd-Jones. He can raise. A normal person. Like you and I. To go into.

A workplace. Or a home. Or a school. Or a street. That is utterly. Hopeless. And is full of darkness. And is just. Allured. By a false sense. Of security.

Can it get any worse. In this country. That we live in. Yes it can. And we need to be aware.

[28 : 02] Of that. But we look to a God. Who prepares. And sends hope. In a lifeless. Faithless land. And at the height.

Of the triumph. Of evil. God is there. With his man. Let us pray. Let us pray.