Elijah: Trusting God

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WHAT’S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:
➤ to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
➤ to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
➤ to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background
The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.

Teaching Outline
provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs
are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!
There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session
Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.
Bible Background

A Wicked King

First and Second Kings, originally composed as a single document, provide chronological reflections on the successes and failures of Israel’s kings from the end of David’s reign to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

The writer describes how David’s son, Solomon, holds the kingdom together. Upon Solomon’s death, however, the kingdom splits in two, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The writer assesses the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, summarizing each reign by stating that the king did what was right or evil in the sight of the Lord. Kings are evaluated by the degree to which they hold the nation to the pure worship of Israel’s one God, Yahweh, as opposed to the practices of their Canaanite neighbors.

In this litany of royal ups and downs, Elijah appears as a prophetic voice during the reign of Ahab, who ruled Israel from 869 to 850 BC. From the perspective of religious purity, Ahab took the nation to an all-time low. In 1 Kings 16:33, we are told that he did more to provoke God’s anger than any king before him.

Ahab’s first offense is his marriage to Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre in Phoenicia. While politically advantageous for Israel, the marriage is a disastrous affront to the nation’s exclusive devotion to Yahweh. Jezebel is a devoted follower of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and vegetation—essential elements of life, especially in hot, arid climates. To people whose survival depends on enough rainfall to sustain a few crops, the idea of a god who assures an abundance of rain is seductive. Jezebel makes it her mission to share her worship practices with—or even impose them on—the people of Israel. Ahab not only joins her in the worship of Baal, but also erects an altar to Baal in Samaria.

A Righteous Prophet

Against this backdrop, Elijah, whose name means “Yahweh is my God,” arises as God’s messenger to Ahab and the people of Israel. His introduction in 1 Kings 17 revolves around three separate but interlocking stories. These stories establish Elijah’s validity as a man of God by placing him in situations that demonstrate his dependence on the God of Israel, setting the stage for a showdown with the prophets of Baal.

We first meet Elijah, a native of the wilderness east of the Jordan River, when he appears before Ahab with a somber, dramatic announcement. No rain will fall until Yahweh speaks. In the ancient world, people understood drought as a divine curse. When God is displeased, rain is withheld. The coming drought confirms God’s displeasure. Furthermore, Elijah’s statement challenges the king’s
reliance on the power of Baal to supply the land with rain. Elijah establishes his trust in Yahweh as the only source of life’s sustenance.

To test the depth of Elijah’s trust, Yahweh directs him to retreat to the wilderness. This first story places him far beyond the area Ahab controls. It is a place of total isolation where Elijah must depend on Yahweh’s care. God’s provision of food, delivered by ravens every morning and night, reminds us of the manna that sustained the Hebrews during their journey through the wilderness (Exod 16:8-12). Elijah drinks from the Wadi Cherith, an unreliable source of water, until it dries up. He makes the first step of faith by being obedient to God and depending fully on God’s sustaining care. With drought now a reality, Elijah receives his next directive from God.

A Canaanite Widow
The second story finds Elijah being sent by God to the town of Zarephath, where he is told that a widow will feed him. It is significant that God sends him to a town in Phoenicia, the home of Jezebel. Even here, in the home territory of the rain god, drought has reached devastating proportions. The widow he encounters is gathering sticks for a fire to prepare a final meal for herself and her son. When Elijah asks for food, she is placed in a difficult position. If she shares the little food she has left, she and her son will die of starvation. Yet hospitality to strangers was a sacred duty in the ancient world.

Elijah does not engage the woman in a discussion of her dilemma. He directs her to continue with her meal preparations, but to make him something first, assuring her that the little she has will provide what she and her son need to survive. Their sustenance will not come from Baal but from the God of Israel, who will see them through the drought and cause rain to fall in due time.

True to Elijah’s promise, the woman’s jar of meal and jug of oil provide enough to feed herself, her son, and Elijah for many days. We see a picture of day-by-day provisions as reflected in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: “Give us, Lord, our daily bread.” Again, Elijah’s needs are met. This time, he moves a step beyond passive acceptance of God’s care. He trusts God enough to assert boldly to the widow what God will do. God does not let him down.

In the final story, Elijah’s trust in God moves to yet another level. When the

Outline

I. Elijah trusts God by receiving what God provides. (1 Kgs 17:1-7)
   A. Elijah appears before Ahab and predicts a drought. (v. 1)
   B. God directs Elijah to a desolate place where God provides water and food. (vv. 2-6)
   C. The drought worsens and the wadi dries up. (v. 7)

II. Elijah trusts God by asking for help and proclaiming his confidence in God’s care. (1 Kgs 17:8-16)
   A. God directs Elijah to Zarephath where a widow will feed him. (vv. 8-9)
   B. The widow is preparing a last meal for herself and her son. (vv. 10-12)
   C. Elijah assures the widow that God will provide enough for all of them. (vv. 13-14)
   D. The widow is generous with what she has, and her meal and oil last for many days. (vv. 15-16)

III. Elijah’s trust allows him to become a channel for God’s life-giving power. (1 Kgs 17:17-24)
   A. The widow’s son dies. (v. 17)
   B. The widow blames Elijah. (v. 18)
   C. Elijah cradles the boy and asks God to revive him. (vv. 19-21)
   D. The boy is healed, convincing the widow that Elijah is truly a “man of God.” (vv. 22-24)
widow’s son becomes ill and dies, Elijah serves as the channel for God’s healing intervention and restores the boy to life. The widow’s relationship with Elijah began with the possibility of the death of her son by starvation. Now, that same relationship brings life to her son. She moves from skepticism to anger to joyful affirmation that Elijah is truly “a man of God” (v. 24).

These three stories progressively establish Elijah’s validity as a powerful vessel of God. Ahab and the prophets of Baal cannot ignore this man whose words and actions suggest that his God is the true source of life and sustenance.

As economic hardships affect many people today, Elijah’s experience demonstrates what it means to trust God in times of dire challenge.

A Way to Begin

This unit provides a rich opportunity for learners to explore the life of Elijah and what his story teaches us about trusting God. This session focuses on what it means to be completely dependent on God when our lives are stripped of the things we equate with security. Provide ways for learners to apply the truths of this lesson to the practical challenges created by times of economic uncertainty.

Economic Uncertainty

You may have people in your class who have lost jobs or homes as the result of economic factors beyond their control. If so, you may choose to begin the session by discussing these experiences. Guide the discussion toward a consideration of what it means to depend on God for our needs. You may prefer to arrange in advance for one person to share his or her story with the class.

Questions

➤ Can you recall a time when you faced financial insecurity?
➤ What were your greatest worries?
➤ How did this experience affect your faith?
➤ Did your priorities change in any way? If so, how?
➤ If you turned to others for help, what was that like for you?
➤ How did you experience God’s care during this challenging time?

“God Will Take Care of You”

Obtain copies of the hymn, “God Will Take Care of You.” Invite learners to read (or sing) the hymn, paying close attention to the words. On one level, these words make God sound like a magical problem solver who removes all difficulties. Encourage a deeper examination of the concept of God’s care with the following questions:

Questions

➤ In what circumstances have you experienced God’s care?
➤ How has God’s care been expressed during those times?
A Way to Explore Scripture

It is not always easy to place complete trust in God. What steps are involved in this process? Use the three interlocking stories in this lesson’s text to explore the evolution of Elijah’s trust in God’s care. Set the stage by providing background information concerning Israel’s adoption of Canaanite worship practices and why the Israelites may have placed their trust in these gods who supposedly controlled fertility and the forces of nature. Explain how Elijah’s prediction of a drought is a direct challenge to the nation’s increasing trust in the gods of its Canaanite neighbors.

Elijah’s Growing Trust

Read 1 Kings 17:1. Explain that, after announcing the imminence of drought to King Ahab, Elijah faces a series of experiences that test his trust in God and affirm his prophetic identity as a “man of God.”

Divide the class into three groups. Each group will read and discuss one of the three stories included in 1 Kings 17:

Group 1: 1 Kings 17:2-7
Group 2: 1 Kings 17:8-16
Group 3: 1 Kings 17:17-24

Provide each group with a copy of the resource page “Elijah’s Growing Trust.” Have them discuss the provided questions within their group.

After groups have had ample discussion time, ask for a summary of the stories and highlights of the group discussions. Point out Elijah’s progression from passive recipient of God’s care to bold proclaimer of what God will do to active agent of God’s life-giving power.

Receiving and Giving

Trusting God is sometimes a matter of receiving what God gives us; at other times, trust involves our willingness to give to others. Lead the class in examining the text to find examples of each kind of trust.

Questions

➤ Why was it necessary for Elijah to learn to receive God’s care?
➤ If you were in Elijah’s place, how would you have felt about asking the widow for help?
➤ How do you think the widow felt when Elijah asked her to share what little food she had?
➤ The widow’s generosity was a key element in the provision of God’s care. What does her example teach us about the meaning of stewardship when resources are limited?
➤ In what ways did Elijah bless the widow? In what ways did the widow bless Elijah?
Give It Away
Share the words of an old chorus that some learners may recall from their youth.

Love is something if you give it away, 
Give it away, give it away. 
Love is something if you give it away, 
You end up having more.

It’s just like a magic penny, 
Hold it tight and you won’t have any. 
Lend it, spend it, and you’ll have so many 
They’ll roll all over the floor.

Questions
➤ How is God’s love multiplied when you share with others? 
➤ When resources are limited, what challenges does generosity entail? 
➤ Where do you draw the line between taking care of your own needs and helping others?

The Widow’s Willingness
Read the following quotation as a closing meditation.

It was the widow’s willingness to take her last handful of flour and final tiny drop of oil to bake a *japati* for Elijah who saw her supplies stretched out to feed a whole family through months and months of famine. It is not what we possess that matters, but it is how we hold it in our hands. Do we timidly, hesitatingly clutch our little store close to our chests? Are we afraid it will not be enough? Are we concerned our resources will run out? (Keller, 36)

Resources


Crisis such as the loss of a job makes us realize how quickly possessions and security can vanish. Such an experience can also make us aware that real security comes through reliance on God. **Difficult times often teach us to receive God’s care and to bless others with what God provides. End the session by considering how we can experience God’s abundance even in times of economic uncertainty.**
The Gathering Storm

Three years have passed since Elijah announced to King Ahab that God would withhold the rain. True to his prediction, drought and famine have overtaken the land. Finally, God instructs Elijah to make another dramatic appearance before Ahab (v. 1). Elijah approaches his mission with clarity, confident that God will equip him for the task ahead. Rain is coming, but first, there must be a showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal.

First Kings 18:2-16 is not a part of the focal passage, but it provides insight concerning how the nation fared during the drought. Conditions are so severe that King Ahab and his assistant, Obadiah, scour the land for grass or water that might keep the animals alive. During this search, Obadiah meets Elijah. We learn that Obadiah is a follower of Yahweh even though he works in the royal palace. He has secretly protected a hundred worshipers from Jezebel’s efforts to slaughter those who stood firm in allegiance to the God of Israel. This is a clue that a remnant of the faithful refused to adopt the worship practices associated with Baal.

We also learn from Obadiah that Ahab has issued a death order on Elijah. Ahab blames Elijah for the drought and is determined to bring his life to an end. In spite of this imminent threat, Elijah instructs Obadiah to bring Ahab to him.

“Two Different Opinions”

Our central passage picks up with verse 17, where Ahab and Elijah meet. Sparks fly immediately as the two exchange accusations of blame for Israel’s troubles. Elijah maintains the upper hand with his assertion that Israel’s difficulties are a result of how Ahab and his father Omri before him led the nation down the path of Baal worship, in clear disobedience to God’s command.

Without giving Ahab an opportunity to respond, Elijah forges ahead with plans for a contest that will prove once and for all which god is more powerful. There will be a showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The number of prophets directly involved in the contest is unclear. Verse 19 says there were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. When the contest begins, however, only the prophets of Baal are mentioned (v. 22). All the prophets are linked to Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, who was instrumental in advancing Canaanite religions in Israel.

Before the contest, Elijah confronts the people directly. He insists that they must make a choice between Baal and the God of Israel. They cannot continue “limping with two different opinions” (v. 21). “Limping” is the same word used to describe the cultic dance associated...
with Baal worship. Elijah’s point is that the people of Israel are hopping back and forth between cultic practices associated with Baal and pure worship of Yahweh. The technical word for this phenomenon is syncretism, the blending of religious beliefs and practices from different sources. This attempt to live in two completely different—and antagonistic—religious worlds leads to a fragmented life that “limps” and eventually falls. Elijah’s ultimatum for the people to take a stand is met by silence.

The Old Testament presents the worship of Yahweh in distinct contrast to the Canaanite religion. In recent years, however, archaeological research in what was the Phoenician city of Ugarit has uncovered ancient writings that suggest that the Canaanites’ outward worship practices—temples, priesthood, sacrifices, the liturgical calendar, etc.—may have been more like their Israelite equivalents than the biblical writers indicate. While worship practices may have overlapped, it is clear that underlying theologies differed radically. The Canaanite gods were closely connected to the forces of nature. They could be manipulated and controlled. They waxed and waned with seasons and natural events.

Yahwistic faith, on the other hand, is based on creation theology. God, the Creator, formed life out of nothing. God maintains control of all creation, but is not enmeshed in the forces of nature in a way that invites manipulation. Faith in Yahweh always involves standing in awe before the sacred mystery of God and life. This is quite different from the Canaanite worshipers’ relationship with the gods whose images occupied their homes and villages.

The Fire Falls

The ensuing contest puts both gods to the test. If the people are unable to decide where to place their allegiance, a dramatic object lesson will make things unmistakably clear. Both sides will place a bull on an altar and then pray for their deity to send fire. Throughout the contest, Elijah makes it a point to give Baal an edge. He goes it alone against 450 prophets of Baal. He lets the opposition choose which bull to place on the altar to eliminate accusations of a set-up. When, after hours of dancing and incantations, the prophets of Baal do not succeed in getting their god to act, Elijah douses his own altar with water before he calls on Yahweh. He wants no doubt to remain about the sovereignty of Israel’s God.

The prophets of Baal engage in a frenzied show, “limping” and shouting, even cutting themselves to try to get the attention of their god. But there is “no voice, no answer, no response” (vv. 26, 29).

**Teaching Guide**

**Outline**

I. God instructs Elijah to return to King Ahab and promises to end the three-year drought. (1 Kgs 18:1)

II. Elijah confronts Ahab and proposes a contest. (1 Kgs 18:17-19)

III. The Israelites and the prophets of Baal gather on Mount Carmel. (1 Kgs 18:20-38)
   A. The people must make a choice to serve God or to serve Baal. (vv. 20-21)
   B. Elijah presents the rules for the contest. (vv. 22-25)
   C. The prophets of Baal have their turn, with no results. (vv. 26-29)
   D. Elijah changes the mood and prepares the altar for his turn. (vv. 30-35)
   E. Elijah prays to God and fire consumes the altar. (vv. 36-38)

IV. The contest ends. (1 Kgs 18:39-40)
   A. The Israelites confess renewed faith in God. (v. 39)
   B. Elijah destroys the prophets of Baal. (v. 40)
Elijah cannot refrain from sarcasm. Perhaps their god is meditating, or gone on a trip, or even asleep (v. 27).

When it is Elijah's turn, the frenzy subsides as he makes sacred preparation for God's response. Elijah rebuilds the altar “in the name of the LORD,” using twelve stones to represent the twelve tribes (vv. 31-32). Methodically, he prepares the bull and then douses the altar with twelve jars of water, again evoking the significance of the twelve tribes as the backbone of Israel's history (vv. 33-35). With all preparations made, Elijah offers a calm and meditative prayer in stark contrast to what has gone on before (v. 36-37). Immediately, the altar bursts into flames, consuming the water that fills the surrounding trench (v. 38).

The contest succeeds in convincing the people that “The LORD indeed is God” (v. 39). As a dramatic conclusion, the prophets of Baal are killed in a nearby wadi, a dry bed that will soon be filled when Yahweh sends refreshing rain.

**A Way to Begin**

*What does it mean to follow God's will? How do we discern God’s voice among the many voices that compete for our attention? Begin the lesson with an opportunity for learners to think about how they seek and experience God’s guidance.*

**Important Decisions**

Invite learners to name some of the most significant decisions they have faced. The list may include decisions about vocation, marriage, retirement options, etc. After listing the situations mentioned, ask learners to reflect on their experiences by considering these questions:

**Questions**

➤ How did you go about making these important decisions?
➤ Can you recall a time when you felt absolutely certain that you were making the right decision? How did you know?
➤ Can you think of a time when you had to make a decision but did not feel a clear sense of direction? How did the decision turn out?
➤ How do you experience God's guidance in the decision-making process?
➤ How do you distinguish between your desires and what God wants you to do?

**God's Direction**

Give each learner a piece of paper. Ask them to reflect on a situation they are currently facing that involves making a decision. Allow time for them to write a brief description of the situation. Assure them that they will not be asked to share what they have written. Invite the class to discuss this question:

**Question**

➤ How does God provide direction for us when we face crucial decisions?
A Way to Explore Scripture

The contest on Mount Carmel is one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament. Elijah faces this incredible challenge with courage and confidence in God’s guidance, even though it is a tremendous risk for him to confront the prophets of Baal in such an unconventional way. This passage challenges learners to a deeper understanding of what it means to trust in God’s direction.

○ Telling the Story
Ask someone in your class with a dramatic flair to be prepared to read the portions of the text that are spoken by Elijah. Another good reader can take the part of the narrator and read the additional sections.

After the Scripture is read, ask the class to identify the characters in the story. Discuss the following questions.

Questions
➤ How do you think God communicated with Elijah?
➤ What religious perspective(s) did each individual or group bring to this event?
➤ How do you interpret Elijah’s description of the Israelites as “limping with two different opinions”? (v. 21)
➤ Do you think any characters in the story began the contest with uncertain feelings about what the outcome would be? Explain.
➤ How did opinions change as the contest progressed?

○ Taking Risks for God
Explore the seemingly foolhardy nature of Elijah’s actions. Guide learners to think about how doing God’s will sometimes means doing things that go against the grain of conventional wisdom and religious norms.

Questions
➤ How might Elijah have been viewed by the religious establishment of his day? By Ahab? By Jezebel? By his fellow Israelites who had embraced Baal worship?
➤ How do you distinguish between God’s voice and other voices?
➤ Is there always one distinct course of action that God desires, or can the will of God be carried out in different ways?
➤ Is it possible for God to work through us even when we make wrong choices?

○ Calm Assurance
Direction sometimes comes as a calm assurance of God’s presence. Guide learners to compare the actions of the prophets of Baal with the actions of Elijah during the contest.

Questions
➤ How did the prophets of Baal seek to get their god’s attention?
➤ What was different about Elijah’s appeal to Yahweh?
➤ How does Elijah transform the frenzied atmosphere into an occasion for worship?
➤ What part do prayer and worship play in seeking God’s direction?
A Way to End

Unlike the Israelite people who “limped” and faltered as they attempted to serve multiple gods, Elijah’s faith was firmly grounded in the God of Israel. This solid spiritual foundation gave him the courage to act with confident assurance that God was guiding his decisions and actions. Close the session with an opportunity for learners to reflect on their relationship with God.

Lesser Gods
Ask learners to identify some of the “gods” that interfere with wholehearted commitment to God. These may include the pressure to meet cultural expectations, internal demands we place on ourselves, or our twenty-first-century obsession with multi-tasking so that our time and energy are scattered in too many directions.

Question
➤ What is one thing we can do this week to lessen the influence of these other forces and deepen our relationship with God?

How Do I Know I’m Doing God’s Will?
Distribute copies of the resource page “How Do I Know I’m Doing God’s Will?” Use the quotations from Frederick Buechner and Barbara Brown Taylor to help learners think about how they interpret God’s will in their lives.

Questions
➤ Do any of your experiences resonate with the words of these two Christian thinkers? If so, describe.
➤ How has God’s will been communicated to you through your own sense of gladness?
➤ When have you trusted your intuition, believing that you were experiencing the nudging of the Holy Spirit?

Closing Prayer
If you began the lesson by asking learners to write about a decision they are facing, end the session with a time of silent prayer. Close the time of silence with a spoken prayer for God’s guidance.

Resources

A Short-lived Victory

Elijah has little time to savor his victory on Mount Carmel. As promised, the rains return to end the drought; but Elijah’s slaughter of the prophets of Baal enrages Jezebel, their lead supporter. Furthermore, the outcome of the contest has significant political and religious implications. The contest proves that Yahweh—not the king, not Baal—wields ultimate control over Israel. Jezebel wastes no time in sending word to Elijah that she will put an end to him just as he put an end to the prophets of Baal.

The man who has shown such courage is now filled with fear. Elijah knows what Jezebel is capable of doing (see 1 Kgs 18:4, 13). He runs for his life, heading for the wilderness to hide beyond the reach of Ahab and Jezebel. He leaves his servant in Beersheba so he can make the rest of his journey alone. Perhaps he senses that he and God need some one-on-one time.

After a day’s travel, he collapses under a broom tree, a small shrub that probably provided the only shade he could find. Physically spent and emotionally drained, Elijah cries out in despair and asks God to let him die. He has nothing left to give. He sees no hope for the future.

How do we reconcile the image of the courageous messenger of God who stood firmly against 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel with this picture of Elijah, fleeing in fear and wishing for death? The writer of James describes Elijah as “a human being like us” (Jas 5:17). Even the strongest of God’s servants reach the limits their humanity imposes. No doubt Elijah was physically exhausted by the long contest on Mount Carmel. Then, perhaps expecting to be greeted by cheers of affirmation, he descended the mountain to face Jezebel’s death threat instead. Is this what he gets for obeying God?

A Wilderness Retreat

By the time Elijah makes a hurried and anxious retreat into the wilderness, all his reserves are spent. When our bodies are tired, we are emotionally and spiritually vulnerable. The adrenalin rush that energizes us to achieve great things often leaves us feeling drained and empty. Psychologically, it is not uncommon for people to experience depression immediately following great success. No wonder Elijah was physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted.

The prophet falls into a deep sleep only to be awakened by an angel who directs him to eat and drink. Walter Brueggemann observes, “Sleep (when the guard is down) is a time when the inscrutable powers of God work their will with us” (234). God is not finished with Elijah! When Elijah is at his lowest point and can see no way up—even when he is
not aware of being hungry—God provides what he needs. Physical renewal that comes from rest, food, and water is a prerequisite for the spiritual renewal that follows.

After more sleep and a second meal, Elijah follows God’s direction and makes the forty-day journey to Mt. Horeb. There, Elijah has his most profound encounter with God. The forty-day period parallels the wilderness experiences of Moses in the past and Jesus in the future, and indicates a period of spiritual testing and preparation. Moses descended Mount Sinai to find his people worshiping a golden calf. Jesus left the wilderness to begin a radical ministry that would lead to his crucifixion. Elijah will learn that he must go back and confront King Ahab.

A “Sound of Sheer Silence”
Rather than offering immediate solace and assurance to the weary prophet as we might expect, God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v. 9). The question implies more than a geographical location. God is forcing Elijah to look within to evaluate his spiritual state. The first step toward spiritual healing often involves facing complex questions. Elijah’s answer reveals the depth of his despair and feeling of abandonment. He did everything God asked him to do. He risked his reputation. Yet, now his life is in danger. He is totally alone. Elijah feels forsaken by God. What a long way he has come from the pinnacle of Mount Carmel! On another mountain, he now faces an even greater challenge than the prophets of Baal. He must face himself and his inadequate understanding of who God is.

God sends a series of dramatic forces of nature often associated with divine presence. Surprisingly, Elijah does not experience God in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. What follows is “a sound of sheer silence” (v. 12). Other translations render the phrase as “a gentle breeze” (CEV) or the more familiar “still small voice” (KJV).

I. Elijah is a prophet on the run. (1 Kgs 19:1-8)
A. Jezebel issues a death threat. (vv. 1-2)
B. Elijah flees to the wilderness where an angel cares for him. (vv. 3-7)
C. Elijah makes a forty-day journey to Mount Horeb. (v. 8)

II. Elijah meets God. (1 Kgs 19:9-17)
A. God confronts Elijah with a question. (v. 9)
B. Elijah expresses despair. (v. 10)
C. God sends wind, earthquake, and fire, followed by sheer silence. (vv. 11-12)
D. God and Elijah repeat their conversation. (vv. 13-14)
E. Elijah receives a new commission from God. (vv. 15-17)

The silence of God’s presence brings Elijah out of his cave. God repeats his question to Elijah, and once again Elijah’s response reflects despair and self-pity. Nothing about his situation has changed, but what follows this period of profound and sacred silence is Elijah’s perception of a new calling.

Once he makes his way out of the cave, he clearly hears God’s voice affirming him by giving another assignment. God directs Elijah to get back into life, back into the conflict he is trying to escape. He must complete his mission by helping to select new leaders for the nation and passing his prophetic leadership on to Elisha.

As Richard Nelson notes, “God’s therapy for prophetic burnout includes both the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that transcends the prophet’s own success or lack of it” (129). Suddenly, the decisions are not just about Elijah; they are about God’s purpose.
God appeared dramatically on Mount Carmel, sending fire to devour the altar that Elijah built and unmistakably defeating the prophets of Baal. On Mount Horeb, Elijah learned that there are ways to experience God other than the deafening roar of fire, wind, and earthquake. When he was in need of spiritual renewal, a time of intense quiet allowed him to find his way back to God and back to the mission to which he was called.

A Way to Begin

Maintaining spiritual vitality is not easy. Work, family, and church responsibilities can overwhelm us. Even significant accomplishments and success can leave us feeling empty and doubtful of God’s presence. Life can sap our energy and cloud our sense of purpose and direction. Such times can become rich opportunities for us to assess our spiritual health and renew our relationship with God. Begin the lesson with an opportunity for learners to evaluate their spiritual well-being and consider their need for renewal.

Pressure

Bring a fully inflated balloon as an object lesson. Talk about how the balloon expands as it fills with air. At some point, it reaches an optimal volume. Beyond that point, additional air can cause the balloon to burst. Invite learners to draw comparisons between the balloon and our lives.

Questions

➤ What are some of the things that “inflate” our lives with meaning and purpose?
➤ How do we know when we are at the optimal point? What practices or disciplines help us maintain that important balance?
➤ What factors can cause our lives to be “over-inflated,” even with good things? What do we do to release the pressure when life becomes too full?

Point out that Elijah responded to such a crisis by retreating to the wilderness where he experienced profound renewal.

Question

➤ Have you ever reached a crisis point that became an occasion for spiritual renewal? If so, how did renewal happen?

Loss of Meaning

Older adults may struggle with the loss of meaning that comes with the many losses that accumulate in later years. Give them an opportunity to talk about the spiritual impact of retirement, loss of loved ones, declining health, decreased independence, and other factors that can present special challenges as we grow older.
A Way to Explore Scripture

Most learners can relate to Elijah’s experience in today’s text. The emotional high from his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel quickly evaporates into fear and despair. Then, God meets him at his lowest point with a message of profound hope and renewal. Elijah’s story resonates with the ups and downs that make life both meaningful and challenging. Guide learners to hear God’s voice as they see themselves in Elijah’s story.

Life’s Ups and Downs
Remind learners of Elijah’s dramatic victory on Mount Carmel—the pinnacle of his career. What emotions might Elijah have experienced at the end of the contest?

Invite a volunteer or volunteers to read through the text, one or two verses at a time. What emotions might he have felt at the various junctures described in these texts?

A Sense of Purpose
Share the following quotations.

The story is really about Elijah’s attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God’s insistence that he continue. Elijah and his mission are the focus, not God’s presence or absence. (Nelson, 123)

Elijah had lost faith in himself because he felt that God had lost faith in him. (Sockman, 161)

Depressed persons cannot usually be talked out of their gloom. What does sometimes help is a sense of purpose, and that is exactly what God provides with a new commission. (Nelson, 127)

Discussion Questions
Discuss the following questions.

Questions
➤ Elijah had recently experienced God’s presence on Mount Carmel. Why did God not reveal himself in the wind, earthquake, and fire?
➤ When does God tell Elijah to come out of the cave?
➤ At what point does Elijah finally emerge? Why the delay?
➤ How does Elijah respond to the profound silence of God’s presence?
➤ Compare verses 9-10 with verses 13-14. What does it mean that Elijah’s response does not change?
➤ How does Elijah’s experience affect his ability to hear God’s new assignment?

Questions
➤ What factors might have caused Elijah to lose his sense of purpose?
➤ What does the text tell us about God’s various responses to the dejected prophet?
➤ What new direction does God provide?
Noise
Ask learners to share examples of how our lives are bombarded by noise.

Questions
➤ Is it easier to turn off the noise from without or the “chatter” within?
➤ Can you recall a time of silent encounter with God?

Silence
Invite responses to the following quotations.

One of our main problems is that in this chatty society, silence has become a very fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up. As soon as the minister says during worship service, “Let us be silent for a few moments,” people tend to become restless and preoccupied with only one thought: “When will this be over?” (Nouwen, 59)

The idea of linking silence with prayer may sound like an out-and-out contradiction to many Christians. We are accustomed to thinking of the familiar forms of prayer that people use when they might join together to worship or ask God for something.... There is another, equally important way of praying in which a person becomes silent and tries to listen instead of speaking.... One’s effort is to be silent enough to hear, first the deepest needs of one’s own heart, and then the prompting of the creative spirit in whatever direction it may indicate. (Kelsey, 93)

Guided Meditation
Lead the class in the prayer exercise on the resource page “Guided Meditation.” If you prefer, simply close with a period of silence, encouraging learners to be open to the quiet presence of God.

Resources
Bible Background

Prophets and Kings

At the conclusion of Elijah's encounter with God on Mount Horeb, God instructs the prophet to anoint Elisha as his successor (1 Kgs 19:16). Scripture does not indicate that any anointing took place, but 1 Kings 19:19-21 tells us that Elijah finds Elisha going about the mundane work of plowing a field. Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha's shoulders, and Elisha follows as his servant. The mantle will become a significant symbol of the transfer of God's power from the older prophet to his young protégé.

The text then returns to the chronology of kings. We learn of Ahab's victory over the Arameans and God's continued displeasure with the king. It is clear that Elijah's prophetic presence is a force to be reckoned with during this phase of Israel's history. He brings God's word of judgment against both Ahab and his son, Ahaziah, who succeeds him (1 Kgs 21:17-29; 2 Kgs 1:2-18). Today's text follows the announcement of Ahaziah's death. The writer breaks into the royal narrative to tell the poignant story of Elisha's final days with his mentor and Elijah's dramatic departure.

Elijah's mission is complete. It is time for new prophetic leadership in Israel. Elisha will pick up Elijah's mantle and carry on his mentor's spiritual legacy.

Walter Brueggemann notes that this episode stands in stark contrast to the chronological accounts that surround it, placing it literally "outside royal time." He further notes,

It is likely that the text is intentionally placed as it is, in order to suggest that the remarkable moment of prophetic transition is so odd and so exceptional that it cannot be held in royal time or understood in royal rationality. This text is deeply "other" and so it is placed "otherwise." (293)

The Prophet and the Protégé

First Kings 2 begins with the announcement that God is "about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind" (v. 1). The events leading up to Elijah's departure are structured around a final meandering journey that takes him from Gilgal to Bethel, Jericho, and finally the banks of the Jordan River.

Accounts of each phase of the journey follow an almost identical pattern. Each time, Elijah announces that God has sent him to a new destination. Before each departure, Elijah instructs Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha always insists on going with his master. His forceful statement, "I will not leave you" (vv. 2, 4, 6), expresses Elisha's determination to be with his mentor until the very end. It is not clear why Elijah asks Elisha not to accompany him. Perhaps he is testing his disciple's
commitment and loyalty. Perhaps, as Richard Nelson suggests, Elijah feels that he must face the future alone (158). The recurring presence of a “company of prophets” rounds out the repetitive pattern. Sometimes referred to as “sons of prophets,” these men lived a communal life and stood outside the normal structure of society. According to Old Testament scholar Roy L. Honeycutt Jr., “They were ecstatic and susceptible to frenzied actions which often caused some to look askance at their conduct” (230). These spiritually inclined men appear at each juncture of Elijah’s journey. On the first two occasions, when Elisha declares his intention to go with Elijah, the prophets pull him aside. They are spiritually attuned to the nearness of Elijah’s final departure and feel compelled to ask Elisha if he senses it also (vv. 3, 5). Elisha does, indeed, know what is coming. The remaining time is too sacred and must not be spoken about.

The Mantle and the Spirit
The final leg of Elijah’s journey takes him to the Jordan River. Here Elijah strikes the water with his mantle, parting it so that he and Elisha can cross (v. 8). The similarity with Moses and the parting of the Red Sea—and especially Joshua’s later parting of the Jordan River (Josh 4:21-24)—is unmistakable. Once the two men are on the other side of the Jordan River, they are beyond the domain of kingly power. They are in the wilderness, where God’s power prevails (Brueggemann, 295).

In preparation for his departure, Elijah gives Elisha an opportunity to make a final request. Elisha asks for a “double share” of Elijah’s spirit, referring to the portion of inheritance that an elder son would receive from his father.

Elisha realizes that the mantle alone will not empower him to continue the prophetic mission. He has experienced firsthand the life energy (ruach, “spirit”) of his master, who has become like a father to him. He longs for that spiritual energy to be multiplied within him. This is not a tangible gift that Elijah can place in Elisha’s hands. It is a gift that only God can give. Elisha will prove that he has received the gift if his spiritual vision allows him to witness Elijah’s departure.

The Chariot and the Whirlwind
First, a fiery chariot and horses appear, symbolizing the presence of God. Note that the purpose of the chariot and horses is not to provide transportation for Elijah, but to separate him from Elisha. God is doing for them what they cannot do for themselves. Elisha can no longer insist on following his master. The time has come for their ways to part.

As Elisha watches from a distance, Elijah is picked up by a whirlwind. The grief that overtakes Elisha as he watches his spiritual father ascend to heaven is
accompanied by the realization that it is time for him to pick up his master’s mantle. The act of tearing his clothes into two pieces could be an expression of grief. More likely, however, it is Elisha’s way of breaking with his previous identity as “disciple” in order to put on the mantle of prophetic leadership that Elijah has left behind. He picks up the mantle and strikes the water as Elijah had done earlier. Perhaps Elisha is testing himself and God. Has he inherited the spiritual power necessary for the task ahead? The waters part, providing the answer he seeks. Elisha steps into the future, unsure about what he will face, but certain that the same spirit that empowered Elijah now rests on him.

A Way to Begin

The end of Elijah’s life marked the beginning of Elisha’s prophetic ministry. Begin the lesson by providing opportunities for learners to think about the concept of “legacy.” How do our lives reflect the influence of those who have gone before us? What is our responsibility toward those who will follow us?

○ Dearly Departed
Bring several obituary pages from newspapers. Pass them around for learners to read. Ask learners to imagine the stories behind the brief biographical summaries. How might this person have touched the lives of others? What achievements are listed? What lasting impact might these have?

Note that a long list of achievements is not the only indicator of a life well lived. Discuss the many ways in which people’s lives continue to influence their families and communities after they are gone.

○ Mentors
Plan ahead for two or three people to talk about someone who has had a significant influence on their lives. Ask them to share how this person served as a mentor to them and how their own lives reflect what they learned through that relationship.

○ Giving and Receiving
Provide paper and pencil for each participant. Invite learners to reflect on their lives and to write the names of three people who influenced them significantly. What did they learn from these individuals?

Then ask them to think of three people for whom they may have been a mentor or role model. What lessons or values did they impart to them?
A Way to Explore Scripture

Our study of Elijah has taught us important lessons about the meaning of trust. Review previous studies about trusting God in times of economic hardship, trusting God to provide direction, and renewing our spirits when trust in God falters. This study covers the concluding chapter of Elijah’s life. As Elijah passes the mantle of prophetic leadership to Elisha and prepares to leave earthly existence behind, he has complete trust that the future rests in God’s hands.

A Long and Winding Road

Use the map of Israel from the resource page “A Long and Winding Road” to trace the route that Elijah and Elisha traveled. Guide learners through the Scripture with the following points. Material from the Bible Background section can provide further illumination.

➤ God directs Elijah to each destination.
➤ At each juncture, Elijah tells Elisha to stay, but Elisha insists on following him.
➤ Elisha is questioned twice by a “company of prophets.”
➤ Elijah uses his mantle to part the waters.
➤ Elijah and Elisha cross alone.
➤ Elisha asks for a “double share” of Elijah’s spirit.
➤ The two are separated and Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind.
➤ Elisha takes Elijah’s mantle and parts the waters.
➤ Elisha crosses the Jordan to begin his prophetic ministry.

Group Discussion

Divide the class into two groups. Instruct Group 1 to discuss the feelings Elijah might have experienced as he faced his final journey. Group 2 will discuss how Elisha might have felt. Ask for responses from each group.

What does it mean for Elijah to entrust his future to God? What does it mean for Elisha to entrust his future to God? Do you identify more readily with Elijah or Elisha? How does the relationship between Elijah and Elisha remind you of your relationships?

Passing the Mantle

“Passing the mantle” is a phrase that refers to leadership transitions. Whether these changes occur in the workplace, at church, or in the family, they are occasions for both anxiety and celebration. Use 1 Kings 2:1-14 as a basis for discussing the significance of leadership transitions. Invite responses to this quotation from Richard D. Nelson:

Biblical literature [insists] that change is meaningful and bearable because God is the author of change. God’s whirlwind blows away every love, every security, every safety. The same changeless God pushes ceaseless change on the world. Yet God’s commission for ministry transcends change. Elisha picks up the mantle of prophetic office and turns the word of God loose on yet another generation. (163)
**A Way to End**

Elijah’s greatest legacy was his faithfulness to God and to his calling. Through a variety of circumstances and challenges, Elijah trusted in God for strength and guidance. When his mission on earth ended, Elijah was prepared to let go and be swept up into the fullness of God’s presence. He was confident that God’s mission would continue through his disciple, Elisha. Conclude the study of Elijah by providing opportunities for learners to reflect on their faith journey. Do others look to them as examples of faithfulness? What will their spiritual legacy be?

**The Fall of Freddie the Leaf**

Obtain a copy of *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia. A hospice program in your area may have a copy you can borrow. You may also find this story in an audio or video version.

Read the story to the class as a closing meditation. Invite learners to share responses to the story. What does Freddie learn from Daniel? What connections do you see between this story and the story of Elijah and Elisha? How does this story speak to your own life?

**Legacies**

Give each learner an index card. Ask them to think about how they want to be remembered. Invite learners to write a few sentences describing what they hope their legacy will be. Suggest that they write the names of people who look up to them.

Pray that learners will trust in God’s guidance and that their faithfulness will serve as an example to others.

**Unit Review**

Conclude the session with a review of Elijah’s story. Remind learners of the challenges Elijah faced and how God was faithful to him in all circumstances.

Point out that Elijah’s final journey took a circuitous route, perhaps reinforcing his trust in God’s guidance, even when the directions seemed counterintuitive.

Ask learners to reflect on the crooks and turns of their own faith journeys and how they experience God’s guidance.

**Resources**


Leo Buscaglia, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* (Thorofare NJ: Slack, 1982).


ELIJAH’S GROWING TRUST

Select someone in your group to read your assigned passage aloud. Use the questions below to focus on how Elijah trusted God’s care. Appoint a scribe to record notes for reporting back to the large group.

1. Where does God instruct Elijah to go?

2. What challenge does Elijah face?

3. How does God provide for Elijah?

4. What does God expect of Elijah?

5. What lessons does this story teach about trusting God?
HOW DO I KNOW I’M DOING GOD’S WILL?

Both Frederick Buechner and Barbara Brown Taylor suggest that God’s direction may come to us in ordinary ways. Buechner believes that when we make a decision about vocation, we need to be aware of the activities that give us joy. Taylor talks about the role of intuition when we face difficult choices.

The voice we should listen to most as we choose a vocation is the voice that we might think we should listen to least, and that is the voice of our own gladness. What can we do that makes us gladdest, what can we do that leaves us with the strongest sense of sailing true north and of peace, which is much of what gladness is? Is it making things with our hands out of wood or stone or paint on canvas? Or is it making something we hope like truth out of words? Or is it making people laugh or weep in a way that cleanses their spirit? I believe that if it is a thing that makes us truly glad, then it is a good thing and it is our thing and it is the calling voice that we were made to answer with our lives. (Buechner, 31–32)

Intuition may be one way of speaking about how God...takes things from here to there.... In general, I tend not to pay much attention to it until I have completed all of my research, compiled my lists of pros and cons, and made a rational decision based on facts. Then, when I cannot sleep because the rational decision seems all wrong to me, I start paying attention to...recurring dreams and interesting coincidences. I let my feelings off the leash and follow them around. ...At this point, reason is all but useless to me. All that remains is trust. Will I trust my intuition or won’t I? The more I do, the more intuitive I become. This is as close as I can come to describing the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Taylor, 8)

Sources
Let this prayer be your guide for silent reflection.

O God, I understand how Elijah must have felt when he descended Mount Carmel expecting applause, only to learn that his life was in danger. My life seems to make similar U-turns, causing me to want to run and hide.

Like Elijah, I have felt exhausted and alone. I confess that I have sometimes resented the time and energy I have given in service to you and to others.

Like Elijah, I have spent my share of time in caves of doubt and despair.

Like Elijah, I have avoided the difficult questions that challenge me to move out of my comfort zone. I don't like the questions that force me to look within, questions that push me to enlarge my understanding of who you are.

Like Elijah, I have longed for a sign of your presence, only to discover that what I expect is quite different from what you want to show me.

Like Elijah, I have felt your loving care when I was too tired to feed myself.

Like Elijah, I have found new direction through times of disappointment and discouragement, times when you have given me the courage to face the tough questions and move on.

Like Elijah, I have been surprised by your presence when you come to me, not in the ways I expect, but in a quiet peace that overwhelms me and renews my spirit.

Help me, O God, to be still enough to hear your voice through the sheer silence of your presence.
A LONG AND WINDING ROAD