

Elijah + John

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in an eight-part series

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Isaiah 40:3–5 (NIV)

³ A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Malachi 4:1–5 (NIV)

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. ³ Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty.

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ **“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.**

Luke 3:1–6 (NIV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God’s salvation.’ ”

Matthew 11:2–15 (NIV)

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’

palaces. ⁹Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written:

“ I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ **And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.** ¹⁵ **Whoever has ears, let them hear.**

Better together: Elijah and John

In the larger biblical story, there are certain figures who bind together the Old and New Testaments as no others. The first is Moses and Jesus, but more on that next week. The second pair is the prophet Elijah and John the Baptizer, hence, “Elijah + John.”

Elijah

The prophet Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel. Though no book bears his name, his ministry of proclamation imprinted itself deeply on the people of God. At the end of his ministry, Elijah does not die, but is taken to the heavens in a whirlwind while riding a chariot of fire (2 Kings 9:12). Based on Malachi 4:5 (“Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes”), the Jews of Jesus day expected that Elijah would return to announce the arrival of God’s Messiah. Indeed, both John the Baptizer and Jesus are mistaken for Elijah by the people.

What do we know about Elijah? The truth is, not much. We know nothing of his birth or his life before his ministry began. Elijah simply arrives on the scene unannounced and we’re told only that he is a Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, an area on the eastern side of the Jordan river. His name means “My god is the LORD.” It is the mid-ninth century BC and Elijah has come to confront the king of Israel¹, Ahab.

In 1 Kings, we are introduced to King Ahab a few verses before we meet Elijah. Ahab is the son of Omri and took the throne of Israel after his father’s death (873 BC). He reigned over Israel for about 22 years, until 852 BC. Like the other kings in the book of Kings², Ahab gets a report card from the biblical writers. Again like nearly all the kings, Ahab’s report card is bad, but, indeed, his is the worst of all. We’re told that “Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30). Quite an indictment!

In ancient Israel, most “prophets,” at least those who claimed the job title in the king’s court, were unwilling to be the messengers of bad news. 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of “prophets” in the court of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail. Micaiah stood strong before the king, unwilling to water down or even ignore the word that had been given him by God. Certainly, one mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

Elijah too is willing to come before the king and deliver bad news. Elijah tells Ahab that there will be a drought. At first glance, this looks like bad news that could come from any meteorologist who was brave enough to deliver the news. But this is no weather forecast.

¹The Israelite kingdom, unified under Saul, David, and Solomon, split in two after Solomon’s death. Israel was the name of the northern kingdom, whose capital was Samaria. Judah was the southern kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem. For more on this, see the page two text box.

²1 and 2 Kings is actually a single literary work. It was split in two only because it was too long to fit on a single scroll.

Baal, the Canaanite god, was the bringer of rain. And for people living in an arid climate like Israel, water was life. Thus, Baal was really the bringer of life . . . or so it seemed to Ahab and Jezebel.

Thus, when Elijah arrives at the king's doorstep and announces a drought, it is a direct challenge. It is as if Elijah says to Ahab, "You think your god brings the rain? Ha! My God, the LORD God of Israel, is going to bring a drought and there is nothing that your 'god' can do about it." It is really quite an "in your face" moment.

You can imagine how well Ahab took this "in your face" challenge. God wisely tells Elijah to run and hide from Ahab. He is to go to a certain wadi and hide out. God will command the ravens to come and feed Elijah.

And that is just what he did. The ravens would bring Elijah bread and meat in the morning and again in the evening. Sound familiar? After fleeing across the Red Sea, God's people found themselves in the Sinai wilderness. As supplies ran low they began to complain, to whine and moan that God had brought them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. But God provided them with food every day. It was called manna and they could gather it every morning. But it wouldn't keep overnight. God provided the people with *daily* bread, for which Jesus taught his disciples to pray. God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness, for Elijah in the wadi, and God provides for you and me. That's connecting some dots.

After a while however, Elijah had to leave the wadi and the ravens for there was no water as the drought worsened. So God sends Elijah, this speaker of truth, to the home of a widow. But that's another story.

Elijah departs, but does not die

When Elijah's ministry was coming to an end, God sent him to a younger man, Elisha, who would carry on this ministry of life. And, soon, it was time for Elijah to go. They made their way to the Jordan River. There, Elisha stood wide-eyed, staring at the river. He had heard the stories about Elijah. He had even dropped everything to follow the prophet. But nothing had prepared him for this. The water of the Jordan River had folded back on itself. Just like that. He wasn't sure how he'd describe it to someone else. The water had simply parted, as if Moses himself had been right next standing to them, lifting his staff to the heavens. But all Elijah had done was to take his mantle from his shoulders, roll it up, and strike the dry ground of the riverbank with it.

The journey to the river had also been puzzling for the prophet-in-training. Elijah had repeatedly tried to go on alone, forcing Elisha to tell the old man, "No, I will not leave you." They had gone to Bethel, just north of Jerusalem, where a bunch of prophet types had come out to meet them. They had told Elisha that this would be his last day with Elijah, for God was going to take him away. Oddly, Elisha somehow knew that they were correct. Indeed, he had known before they told him.

Now, Elisha stared at a group of prophet types who had followed them. But Elisha snapped out of it when he realized that Elijah was striding across the now-dry river bed. Elisha hurriedly tried to keep up. Soon, they were on the far bank and the waters of the river closed in behind the two men.

At that moment, Elisha knew that Elijah was about to depart and, this time, Elisha couldn't follow. Perhaps, Elisha thought to himself, this is what Elijah had meant all along.

When Elijah asked the younger man what he could do for him before leaving, Elisha's response was quick and certain. He asked for a double portion of Elijah's prophetic spirit. Elisha wanted to be Elijah's "eldest son" and successor.

Elisha felt a bit hurt by Elijah's response. If Elisha sees the old man taken away, he'd get the double inheritance. But if he didn't see it, then nothing. Like everything else, it seemed to be in God's hands.

So Elisha waited, unsure of exactly what he was waiting for it. If he'd known, he wouldn't have believed it anyway. It would make the parting of the river seem as ordinary as milking the family goat.

As the two men chatted, a fiery apparition swept in. It could best be described as a chariot made of fire pulled by horses of fire. In a single moment, Elijah had been swept upward and disappeared into a whirlwind that raced towards the heavens.

Elijah had not died. He had simply gone . . . or, more accurately, he was taken away.

It is little wonder that Elijah grew and grew in the minds of Go's people. Taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. Who was going to top that? Malachi, the last of the "writing prophets" closed his scroll with the announcement that the much awaited Day of the Lord would be announced by Elijah.

The announcement arrives

The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke words of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if the prophets were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah *will* change the world. God *will* abide with his people as he never had before and all *will* be right. Yes, the Lord's Day is coming.

With John the Baptist, we come to the present tense and a message of preparation and repentance. He called God's people to the Jordan River, plunging (*baptizo* in the Greek) them in the cleansing waters. John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God's people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Isaiah 40:3) And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived. What had been future would now be present.

John calls the people out to the Jordan river. Why there? More than 1200 years before John, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. And it was there that Elijah had been taken up to the heavens. Ever since, the Jordan River had been a symbol of salvation and hope. In baptizing people in the Jordan River, John was symbolically reenacting the crossing of the river. People came to be washed in

Reading Isaiah 40-66

The first section of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, is set in the period of Isaiah's ministry, about 700 years before Jesus. Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah as the northern kingdom of Israel was under enormous pressure from the Assyrians, who eventually overran Israel. These chapters are mainly concerned with the Assyrian threat, but, toward the end, look ahead to a time of exile.

The second section, chapters 40-66, is set during the period of the exile in Babylon. Thousands of Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding area had been moved a thousand miles from home. With seemingly no hope of returning after the burning of Jerusalem, the temple, and the ark of the covenant, the Jews sought to build new homes in their "prison," believing that their exile was punishment for their failure to trust God (e.g., v. 2 in today's reading). The later chapters of this section look ahead to the Jews' return to Judah and their continuing failure, but also speak to the glorious fulfillment of God's promise to restore all of creation.

Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah is the work of at least two authors. I'm persuaded that chapters 40-66 are the work of an anonymous (at least to us) prophet working during the time of the exile. There are sound literary and historical reasons to believe this, but I am most drawn to the emotion of these chapters. In them I hear the voices of people who have lost everything and the voice of the God who speaks to them.

the river, to give up their old ways, to be cleansed of their past, to be part of the renewed people of the covenant. Yet . . . John pointed the people to the one “more powerful than I who is coming after me” (v.7) who would baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). In Jesus, entering God’s renewed people will be a crossing over from an old life to a new life.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words drifted. The additional reading on Israel and Rome may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah. Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who had come to reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

John’s message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before. But for a time, so short a time, God would now walk among his people in the flesh. He would teach and love and heal, calling God’s people to return to the way of God, for it was time for the whole world to be reconciled to God.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, “the evidence of the presence of the future.” Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God’s wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day. Another way to say this is simply to proclaim that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God; i.e. God’s wondrous future.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

This week we will be considering questions we’d like to ask God.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.