

Lesson 12: Review and Conclusion of Elijah Study

Objective:

We will review some important points from our study of Elijah as we look at the expectation the Jews had for his return and the hope he represented for them. We will read the story of the Transfiguration when Elijah, Moses and Jesus all appear together. We will discuss mountaintop experiences (such as the experiences Moses had with God on Mount Sinai, Elijah had with God on Mount Carmel, Mount Hebron, and the disciples had with God on the mountain during the Transfiguration) - thinking through what scripture teaches us about them and what that means for us.

Throughout our study of Elijah, we have seen Elijah appear on the scene at different times without any warning. In I Kings 18:12, Obadiah tells him, "I don't know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you," giving us the idea that even people at the time felt that Elijah just appeared in one place or another depending on where the Spirit of the Lord brought him. So, it is understandable that when Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind, the company of prophets wants to look for him, wondering if he has been carried somewhere else.

Of course, the company of prophets cannot find him, and they see that Elisha is the clear successor to Elijah. If we were to continue to read 2 Kings, we would see that

God works through Elisha in just as powerful of a way as he worked through Elijah. We would also see Elijah's prophecies come true:

1. Approximately 10 years after Ahab's death, Omri's descendants cease ruling northern Israel.
2. Jehu kills Jezebel, all the descendants of Omri and the priests of Baal. (2 Kings 9, 10)

Even though Elisha continues the work of Elijah's; and in many ways, his career surpasses that of Elijah, it is Elijah who captures the imagination of the Israelites.

Why do you think it is Elijah who captures their imagination?

There are many ways that Elijah captures their imagination and ours - not the least of which is the way in which he is taken from earth. It is not surprising that with the way Elijah was known for appearing in the right place at the right time, that the Israelites anticipate the return of Elijah as is shown in Malachi 4:4-6.

Read Malachi 4:4-6

Once again, we see Elijah linked with Moses as we have seen throughout our study.

What are some of the ways that we have seen them linked or been reminded of Moses through Elijah?

Some ideas:

1. Elijah follows in the line of prophets of God who meet the description that Moses gives in Deuteronomy 18 - he is a prophet who speaks the word of the Lord and it comes true.
2. At the brook in the Kerith Ravine, God miraculously provides for Elijah much in the same way that He provided for Moses and the Israelites during their time in the desert.
3. Like Moses, Elijah goes through a time of solitude, a time of preparation before his ministry really begins.
4. Like Moses, Elijah experiences deep despair over the role that God has given him.
5. Like Moses, Elijah has a conversation with God on Mount Horeb.
6. Just as Moses parts the Red Sea, Elijah parts the Jordan River.
7. Elijah went up to heaven in the same area where Moses died - no one ever knew where Moses' body was buried, and Elijah's body would never be found.

As Malachi tells the Israelites about the day of the Lord - the day He returns - he directs them back to Moses and the revelation on Mount Horeb/Mount Sinai. God's final coming is linked with the day He gave Moses the law, the day He revealed Himself to the Israelites at Mount Hebron/Mount Sinai in thunder, lightning and smoke (Exodus 19). The God who will come in judgement is not an unknown god but one who has already revealed the law to the people. (Keck, et al, 1999)

Malachi then directs the people to anticipate the return of Elijah - this is one of the first times we see what will develop into a rich tradition of the “return of the Elijah” by the time of Jesus. Since Elijah was taken up to heaven alive, people were easily able to think about and expect that he would one day return. Many scholars also believe that Malachi 3:1 refers to Elijah, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.”

What hope does Elijah represent to the people in Malachi?

We see this expectation of a return of Elijah, the same prophet who turned the Israelites’ hearts from Baal to Yahweh on Mount Carmel, the same prophet called “the troubler of Israel” by King Ahab, the same prophet who prophesied the demise of an entire powerful line of rulers who did not follow God, now preparing the way for the Lord and reconciling people to each other.

Through Moses, God rescued Israel from Egyptian oppression and formed it as his people; through Elijah, God preserves the faithful members of his people amid paganism and persecution (Freedman, et al, 1992). We see here that Moses and Elijah stand together, the law and prophecy stand together, doing the work God needs done before His return.

What comes to mind as you read these verses in Malachi? Is there anyone in the New Testament that you think of, when you read about how Elijah must return?

The wild power of Elijah and the hope he represents are recognized again in John the Baptist and Jesus, whose counterestablishment words win them the ire of the Ahab's of their day. (Foster, et al, 2005).

The verses in Malachi combined with the fact that Elijah ascended to heaven, generated a wealth of legends and traditions in Judaism. The Jews had a high expectation for the return of Elijah, as we see throughout the New Testament. Here are some examples:

Luke 1:16, 17 (an angel to Zechariah telling him about the son he will have - who is John the Baptist): "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Matthew 17:10-12: The disciples asked him, "why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Luke 7:24-27: After John's messengers left, 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? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in places. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you,'"

It is not difficult to find similarities between John the Baptist and Elijah - both wore garments made of hair and spent time in the wilderness, both came proclaiming bold messages. John the Baptist was preparing the way for Jesus in a way that is reminiscent of Elijah's return in Malachi. Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1, saying that it was written about John the Baptist.

As we have done our study on Elijah we have also seen stories of Jesus that remind us of Elijah or would have reminded the Jews of Elijah. What are some examples?

A few:

1. Jesus went through a time of preparation in the wilderness in solitude just as Elijah did.
2. Elijah fed the Sidonian widow and her son miraculously; Jesus fed the multitudes miraculously.
3. Elijah raised the son of the Sidonian widow from the dead; Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain from the dead (Luke 7:11-17).
4. Jesus was provided for by angels in the wilderness as Elijah was provided for as he traveled to Mount Hebron. Both spent 40 days and 40 nights traveling in the wilderness.
5. Jesus' calling of the fishermen reminds us of Elijah's calling of Elisha.

We see Jesus talk about Elijah in the synagogue, comparing himself to Elijah (Luke 4:25-26). We hear reflections of Elijah in the teachings Jesus has in Luke 9:51-62 especially when Jesus says “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” We also get an idea of what the apostles were thinking as they follow Jesus and want to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village to destroy it - just as Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume Ahaziah’s soldiers. They saw in Jesus the same kind of power that Elijah had and wanted access to that kind of power!

It is not surprising that the disciples said that many people thought he was Elijah. In Matthew 16:13-16, Mark 8:27-30 and Luke 9:18-20, Jesus asks the disciples who the crowds say he is. **Read Luke 9:18-20.**

Who do the disciples say the crowds believe Jesus is?

Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.

Why do you think the crowds thought Jesus was Elijah or one of the prophets?

They believed that Jesus was behaving like someone through whom some great act of God was about to take place (Wright, 2004).

Who does Peter say that Jesus is?

Peter recognizes that Jesus is different - he is the Messiah. Jesus was more than a prophet - He wasn't just pointing to God's kingdom far away in the future but he was causing it to appear before people's eyes and setting in motion the events through which it would become established (Wright, 2004).

Read Luke 9:21-24

After Peter confesses that he believes Jesus is the Messiah, what does Jesus tell his disciples?

Jesus makes sure that the disciples know that everything will not be easy from here on out. There are dark and dangerous days ahead - Jesus does not come with the message that following him leads to an easy and pleasant life. Instead, he says that to save your life, you must lose it.

According to Luke, 8 days later, Jesus takes three of his disciples onto a mountain to pray. **Read Luke 9:28-36.**

Who appears there with Jesus?

Through our study, we have seen Elijah remind us so many times of Moses. Here they actually are together! Two great prophets - one representing the law, one representing prophecy - both together with Jesus who brings us the greatest hope of all.

Where did this take place? Thinking of who else appears there with him, does this location have any significance?

The exact location is unknown - but Jesus went on a mountain to pray - this combined with the fact that Moses and Elijah appear there make us think of Moses and Elijah's experiences on Mount Sinai/Mount Horeb.

What was Jesus' appearance? What was Moses and Elijah's appearance?

The appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning, reminding us of Moses' radiance when he descended from Mount Sinai.

Moses and Elijah appear in glorious splendor - these two whose time on earth ended long ago are now reappearing in glory.

What do the three talk about?

The three discuss Jesus' departure, his "exodus", which will be fulfilled in Jerusalem. In Jesus' death, Jesus will enact an event like the great Exodus from Egypt - Moses led the Israelites out of bondage and into the promised land. Jesus will lead all of God's

people out of slavery to sin and death and into their promised inheritance. (Wright, 2004)

What does Peter want to do?

Peter wants to build three booths - three shelters, commemorating the place, freezing the moment.

Have you ever had a “mountaintop experience”? How did it make you feel? Did you, like Peter, want to “freeze” the moment or stay on the mountain?

What has been your experience after a mountaintop moment?

What happened after Elijah’s experience on Mount Carmel? What did God instruct Elijah to do after his time with God on Mount Hebron?

After Elijah’s time on Mount Carmel, where the Lord brought fire to a soaked altar and the people all declared that Yahweh was God, Jezebel tried to kill Elijah. On Mount Hebron, God instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha to carry on his work.

How do the disciples and Jesus experience God on this mountain? What does he tell them?

As God appeared on Mount Sinai in a cloud, he speaks now from a cloud and tells them, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." God makes clear who they are to follow - it is not Moses nor Elijah but Jesus the Son of God.

Where do we know Jesus headed to?

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, to the cross.

What will be required of the disciples as they listen to Jesus and follow him?

True faithfulness will require following him to Jerusalem to the cross - not staying on the mountain. As much as the disciples were awed by what they had seen, they weren't ready to be witnesses to Jesus. They had to follow more, undergo the grief of the cross, the joy of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit before they were ready to witness to what God had done in Jesus. "Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced." (Keck, et al, 1999).

If we were to continue reading, we would see that the very next scene in Luke takes place the next day when they come off the mountain, and Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy whom his disciples had been unable to heal. The work of Jesus goes on.

In your experiences have you found that mountaintop experiences are followed by more difficult times?

Even the young recognize that mountaintop experiences do not last forever. A young Christian recently told another young person thinking of getting baptized, "I realized that just because of being baptized, all the rocks were not taken out of my path. Don't expect everything to get easier. It may even get harder."

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow the story of the transfiguration with the story of the demon-possessed boy - possibly to show us that the two experiences go together - a mountain-top experience and difficult service or a confrontation with evil. Many of us would like to live on the mountaintop, but these mountaintop experiences are not there just for our own edification - they are to equip us to serve God, to be a witness for him to others, to serve him in this needy world. We often want the dramatic spiritual experience but do not want the demands that come afterwards.

Why do we like the mountain top experiences so much? How does it make you feel to know that those in scripture do not "live on the mountain" - they experience God then move into deeper ministry, often encountering great difficulties?

Not being able to live on the mountain may be frustrating, but it can also bring comfort to know that we are not expected to live in on the mountain. In today's world, we often

judge our own spirituality by the feelings that we experience for God, the experiences that we have when we feel deep connection with God. However, this is not the biblical model for life with God - a constant experience with God without ministry, without difficulties. Robert Mulholland, Jr. defines spiritual formation in his book *Invitation to a Journey* (1993) as the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. Our experiences with God are not meant to be only for our own edification but are meant to transform us into people full of grace and love for others - a grace and love that is lived out in action.

A common teaching in our day is that following God should be easy or that following God means being happy all the time. These ideas can give us a temporary hope that comes crashing down when life inevitably gets difficult or doesn't feel "good". Instead, we see in scripture that mountaintop experiences are combined with everyday, difficult experiences. Jesus' identity and work can't be understood apart from the cross and the resurrection - only in their light do we understand the character of God and the significance of Jesus (Keck, et al, 1999).

Another common teaching is that the greatest joy lies in finding one's own truth, what brings you joy. However, God's words to the disciples at the Transfiguration are completely different, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen, listen to him." Just as Elijah gave up his life to follow Yahweh, we give up our lives to follow Jesus, to follow God. It is in giving up ourselves to listen to Jesus, to be conformed to this image, that we can replace our indifference with compassion, our resentment with forgiveness, our

coldness with kindness, our defensiveness with openness (Mulholland, 1993). It is in the giving up of ourselves that we find true joy.

Conclusion:

How appropriate that two men who gave their lives over completely to following God are with Jesus as it is becoming more and more clear who He is - Peter has confessed that He is the Messiah, God speaks to the disciples in the cloud, saying "This is my Son." The disciples will need to follow Jesus in the same way that Moses and Elijah followed Yahweh, without reserve, ready to sacrifice. As we studied the life of Elijah, we saw his commitment to following God: he was ready to take the next step without knowing where it would lead; he was willing to courageously announce God's word, knowing it might not be received well; in his times of despair, he continued to seek the Lord and do what God asked him to do.

Throughout our study of Elijah, we got a glimpse of who is really running the world. Although Ahab may have thought he was in charge, it was always God who was in charge. Our part is to be like Elijah and to follow God no matter what - to be who He wants us to be, to do what He asks us to do. We remind each other that we must remain faithful and that we must trust in the God whose kingdom is everlasting - the God who really reigns. What hope it brings us to see the glory in which Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus! We now await not the return of Elijah but the return of Jesus who ascended into heaven and will return to us one day.