

7-SESSION
BIBLE STUDY

FAITH AND FIRE

Elijah

PRISCILLA SHIRER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Whether in packed-out arenas or intimate Bible study group settings, Priscilla Shirer's influence has been steady and trusted. For more than twenty years her voice has resonated with raw power and unapologetic clarity to teach God's Word. Through her speaking ministry, best-selling books, and Bible studies, or even on a movie screen, Priscilla's primary ambition is clear—to lift up Jesus and equip His children to live victoriously.

Priscilla has been married to Jerry Shirer for twenty-one years. Together they lead Going Beyond Ministries, which exists to serve believers across the spectrum of the church. To date, the ministry has released more than a dozen video-driven studies for women and teens on a myriad of biblical characters (like Jonah and Gideon), as well as topical studies on *Discerning the Voice of God*, *The Armor of God*, and others. Priscilla has also written a fiction series called *The Prince Warriors*, in addition to award-winning books like *Fervent* and *The Resolution for Women*.

She and her family make their home near Dallas, Texas, where between her writing and studying, Priscilla spends her days trying to clean up after (and satisfy the appetites of) her three rapidly growing teenage sons.

INTRODUCTION

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING.

It was 2014 when I first started studying and teaching on the life and ministry of Elijah. After sharing parts of his narrative in bits and pieces, I knew I had to write about him one day. Little did I know the resource you're holding in your hands would take another seven years to materialize.

The reasons are many. Several other projects elbowed their way in, taking priority and pushing this one to the background. The busyness of my sons' lives and my involvement with them accelerated exponentially as they blossomed into young manhood. But most of the delay came from a number of unexpected, back-to-back tragedies (I'll tell you about them soon), each of which pushed the pause button on my life, forcing me to sit still for long stretches of emotional and physical recovery.

Before any of this happened, I'd felt compelled to start keeping a journal specifically for the purpose of chronicling my own spiritual journey—keeping track of God's faithfulness, recording my raw conversations with Him, tracing the often imperceptible shifts that His Spirit was working in me at the time. I'm so glad I did. Because while I'll never know my Father's reasons for all these delays—or for the losses, hurts, and challenges that precipitated them—I do know they were, at least in part, for you.

In flipping back through those handwritten entries, reliving the many things that God reframed and refreshed in my heart, I couldn't help noticing how His work in me had added layers of heartfelt depth that would've been missing from these lessons if I'd stayed on my earlier timetable. In His providence all these delays have become detours, aligning you and me in this current season of our lives. I'm convinced God has infused this work with a power that only comes through brokenness, weakness, and struggle. And I'm praying the proof of this holy impact is somehow reflected on each page—that you don't only learn something but experience something.

A renewed faith. A fresh fire.

Our world, more than ever, is longing for the sons and daughters of God to arise in the spirit of Elijah. That's why I think this might just be the perfect time for our paths to cross here, so that God can comfort you, strengthen you, encourage you, and prepare you for the Mount Carmels that lie ahead.

Welcome, my friend—I've been waiting for you. And it's been a long time coming.

Priscilla Shivers



Gilead

THE STARTING POINT

FAITH: COMMITTING TO GOD'S PROCESS

WEEK ONE

THE START OF A PROCESS

Everybody wants the Mount _____. We want the flashy display of God's _____ in our lives.

And yet in the shadow of these magnificent events is a _____.
There's always a _____.

We've got to _____ to go through the process.

Are you willing to do _____ to get _____?

First and Second Kings shows a time when idolatry was not just _____, and not just _____, but was actually legislated.

Elijah means: _____ is _____.

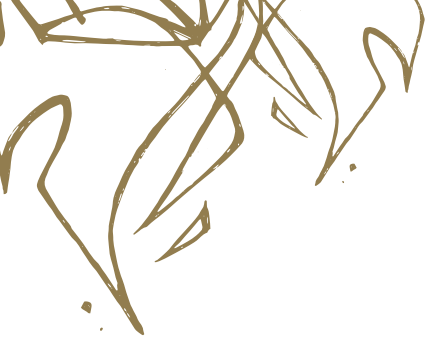
He didn't just say Yahweh is God; he said _____ is _____.

Then he said to King Ahab, Yahweh _____.

Here's how God was going to remind Ahab that He alone is alive: "There shall be neither _____ nor rain these years, except by my _____."

Not only was the drought a judgment against the people's _____, but it was also a specific indictment against the _____ of Baal.

We can have the courage to rise up in the _____ of Elijah, and to make sure we are God's mouthpiece in this _____.



DAY ONE

THE REAL DEAL

“After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

1 PETER 5:10

I was scrolling mindlessly through my Instagram® feed one day when a particular image snagged my attention. Startled me. Sort of grossed me out, to tell you the truth, peeking out from underneath my paused thumb. You know how you can see something that’s a little disturbing to you, a little provocative, and even though you really want to turn away, you somehow can’t seem to stop looking? It was kind of like that.

Half of the image showed a beautifully poised, perfectly arched ballerina’s foot. Smooth, elegant, and dainty. Her cream-colored slipper fit like a satin glove, along with a silk ribbon woven meticulously up her ankle, completing the classic look. It was everything you’d expect. Like a piece of fine art. So pretty. So precise.

But then—the *other* side.

And this other side told a much different story. The real story.

Directly next to the dancer’s lovely, shapely right foot was her *other* foot. Her *bare* foot. Without its slipper. And the contrast was visibly striking. Whole nails were missing. Several of the knuckles, swollen red, were bandaged, blistered, or bleeding. Fragments of old, stained gauze remained stuck to oozing sores. Knobs of contorted, misshapen bones bulged grotesquely beneath the skin.

And along with the picture ran the following caption, or words similar to this effect:

EVERYONE WANTS THE GLORY, BUT FEW ARE WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE REQUIRED TO GET IT.

Well, ain't that the truth.

We want the highlight reel, not the practice session. Not the years of hard work. Not the consistent pattern of sacrifice. Not the going over and over again of the same, repeated steps and movements. The stretching. The soreness. The getting out of bed on cold, sleepy mornings. The slow, slow walk of patience, whatever it takes to get it right.

Truth be told, when we scroll through our social media feeds, we only want to see the ballerina slipper. It's prettier and more palatable. The worn parts, the beat-up parts, douse the wildfire of our romantic imagination. Reality is too much for us to deal with. A close look at the hours of preparation, the years of hard work, and the grueling cost required to get there are not what we came to see. So we conveniently ignore that part.

If we're honest with ourselves and each other, that's how we tend to read the Bible too.

When you think of these Old Testament personalities, what highlights immediately come to mind? Write your thoughts below.

NOAH	
ABRAHAM	
MOSES	
SAMUEL	
ESTHER	

“No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

HEBREWS 12:11, CSB

Now think of someone who's living today, even if it's someone you may not know personally, whose life you admire from afar. What are some of the character highlights you've seen in him or her that impress you the most?

Several years ago I took on the task of reading the Bible through in a year. Frankly, I found it a bit overwhelming. (Wrangling three small children at the time probably had a little something to do with it.) Maybe I needed the two-year plan, where I could take it more slowly and digest things a little more fully that way. Yet I distinctly remember, when I came to Elijah's narrative in 1 Kings that year, how I felt completely consumed by the startling boldness of his faith, especially the one big highlight that stands out from his story: *Mount Carmel*.

Go ahead and turn to 1 Kings 18:19-39. (It's a pretty sizable portion of Scripture. But exciting. Lots of action. You'll love it.) As you're reading, list here all the elements from this holy encounter that demonstrate the prophet's faith, courage, commitment, and prayer.

- Now look back through the things you wrote down. Which of them clearly demonstrate his *faith* at work? (Put an “F” beside those.)
- His *courage* against opposition? (Mark those with a “C.”)
- The *boldness* of his witness? (“B” of course)
- His keen ability to *pray*? (“P”)

With all this in mind, imagine if Elijah were sitting beside you right now. What are the top three questions you’d like to ask him about his memories from that day?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

As I think through the conversation I’d like to have with Elijah, I try to picture how he might interact with me. While I’d be all zeroed in on the spectacular moments of the story, I wonder if he’d intentionally point to other things—simpler, more foundational things, even difficult things that made up the underbelly of his journey with God. I wonder if he’d accentuate those quieter happenings from earlier in his life, in passages preceding 1 Kings 18, verses that are filled with refining and pruning.

These encounters leading up to Mount Carmel were precisely where the Holy Spirit seemed to shine a spotlight for me as I was reading. They captured me. They tell us Elijah didn’t just show up out of thin air knowing exactly what to do and exactly how to do it. All that faith, all that courage, all that boldness and confidence in prayer—all that *fire!*—didn’t just happen. Each of these impressive strengths we see in him had been fortified by earlier struggles, during earlier challenges, through earlier forays into trust and obedience.

This moment of biblical proportions, high atop Mount Carmel, followed a much less public process that God had begun in him years before—a process that is already happening in you as well, which your loving Father will continue to develop throughout this study—a progression of development that I hope you’ll begin to recognize and value more than ever before.

I'm assuming you're here with me in these pages because we both want what Elijah had.

We want:

- faith, courage, and boldness,
- a prayer life that pushes back the darkness,
- character that possesses an unflinching backbone,
- a holy conviction that doesn't bow to popular opinion.

We want to be:

- brimming over with the fullness of God's Spirit and power,
- brave enough to speak truth to authority with love and grace,
- singularly focused, inspiring others' allegiance to the one true God,
- people who leave behind a lasting impact on future generations.

These are incredibly noble aspirations. But the question for us remains:

ARE WE WILLING TO DO WHAT ELIJAH DID TO GET WHAT ELIJAH GOT?

What excites you the most as you contemplate that question?

What scares you the most about it? What do you find the most challenging about it?

You have no idea how I wish I could lean into your Bible study book right now and see how you've prayerfully responded. Then I'd move out of the way and let you peer into mine. Because right here is where the battle is about to be waged—on the thin edge that exists between our eager anticipation about the next level where God is calling us and the prickling fear we sometimes feel about what it will cost us to get there.

In a sentence or two, summarize what each of the following passages declares as being the potential cost of building your . . .

FAITH (Heb. 11:13-16)	
COURAGE (1 Cor. 2:1-5)	
BOLD WITNESS (Luke 21:12-19)	
PRAYER POWER (Matt. 6:5-6)	

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

JAMES 1:12

In Hebrews 11, I see faith heroes who didn't make comfort their primary life ambition.

How might this refocusing away from comfort and toward calling be part of your process?

In 1 Corinthians 2, I see a man who was unmotivated by cultural acceptance, indifferent to the approval of his peers, uninterested in impressing others with his own ability.

How might being less concerned with public perception be part of your process?

In Luke 21, I see Jesus' disciples being challenged not to avoid persecution but be prepared to face it—and be testimonies of God's glory in the middle of it.

How might learning to endure opposition be part of your process?

In Matthew 6, I see crowds of religious people being instructed by Jesus to dismantle the veneer of pious tradition, exchanging it for real, authentic, fervent relationship with Him.

How might developing a deeper purity and fervency in prayer be part of your process?

Hear me, sister, and hear me good. The process of working toward these goals will not be easy. In fact, I can assure you, it will step on your toes now and again. But still, it will all be worth it. It's the pattern I've detected in the men and women of God whom I most admire. People who live in passionate relationship with Him. People who stand strong in the midst of adversity. People who experience Him in a real and living way. People whose prayers pulsate with power. People who hear God's voice and see His activity. People who are unapologetic about their faith.



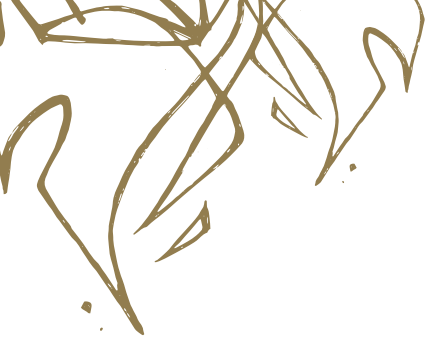
Let me tell you what they've been doing all these years while everybody else was lacing up their ballerina slippers and adjusting the lighting for their staged social images. They've been in the darkroom of development:

- **dedicating** time in the presence of God;
- **devoting** their talents and treasures for His use and purposes;
- **prioritizing** what the world mocks and minimizes;
- **sacrificing** their own selfish desires and ambitions;
- **feeling** frequently marginalized and excluded;
- **breaking** off any unhealthy relationships;
- **upholding** their daily spiritual disciplines;
- **daring** to risk bold allegiance to His Word;
- **resisting** a lifestyle of legalistic, condemning perfectionism;
- **receiving** each day a continuous stream of God's grace;
- **refusing** political correctness over righteousness;
- **reaching** out to the weak and disenfranchised;
- **believing** God for more and more; and
- **praying** the bold prayers to prove it.

They've committed themselves to the things God's people do in order to receive what only God can give. It's taken patience and practice, waiting and endurance. It's taken time. They've got the bumps, bruises, scars, and injuries to show for it. But only those willing to investigate more deeply—like you? like me?—will get a chance to see and learn from the processes they've endured.

That's what we're going to do with Elijah over the next few weeks.





DAY TWO

JUST LIKE ME

“Friends, why are you doing this?
We too are only human, like you.”

ACTS 14:15a, NIV

Legendary. Larger than life. A “colossus amongst ordinary men”¹ is how Elijah is described by many scholars who have written about his place in biblical history.

The Bible sets him beside Moses as the primary prophetic figure of the Old Testament and uses him as a point of spiritual reference throughout the New Testament, centuries after he lived. He seems almost super-human, right? An exception to the rule instead of an example to which we can aspire.

Yet before we even let that doubt begin to blossom in our minds, the writer of the Book of James tells us something we all need to remember.

James wrote to a community of Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith and as a result had been “scattered abroad” (1:1, NKJV) out of Jerusalem. They were enduring intense external persecution along with internal battles of the flesh—anger, vengeance, and the temptation to sin.

Turn to James 5:17 in your own Bible. In the space below, write just the opening phrase of it—the part up through the first comma or so.

Consider the context of James’s writing. Why do you think, when writing about the power of prayer, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to include this comment to his original audience, people who held Elijah in such high esteem?

Why is this point important to readers like us today?

As I mentioned, I tend to put other people on a pedestal—people who appear to experience God and exercise their faith at a level that seems beyond my reach, people for whom He appears to be present, active, and available in ways that apparently don't apply to the rest of us.

I've noticed many reasons why we all tend toward this. I'll mention two of them, then I'll let you personally and prayerfully consider them: (1) *the pedestal creates a safe distance between us*. It makes me think the reason there's such a difference in how they live, versus how I live, is because they're just so different from me to begin with. And so (2) *the pedestal allows me to set a lower bar for myself*. Since living like them is so far above me, I feel like I can afford to placate my own laziness, my complacency, my lack of spiritual sacrifice and diligence. After all, who am I? I'm not even in their league. They're in a whole other category.

I'm just an ordinary person.

But the results of the pedestal can be devastating, both for them and for me.

For them, because the pedestal ascribes unrealistic standards to them. By idolizing someone, I run the risk of crippling them. I contribute to the pressure they feel for maintaining perfect performance. I make it harder for them to freely explore the far reaches of their faith, out where they risk exposing their frailty by leaning on the grace and goodness of God rather than their own awesomeness.

For me, because the pedestal leaves me open to being hurt and disillusioned. People are going to make mistakes, I don't care who they are or how admirable their relationship with the Lord. Even heroes will falter and stumble along the way, which we'll see in Elijah toward the end of our study. I do a disservice to them, as well as to myself, when I hold them to a level of perfection that belongs only to Christ,

who alone is the Perfect One. I need to let everyone else off the hook for not being Him, because there's a good reason why they're not. They're just ordinary people.

I asked you yesterday to think about the character highlights you admire in others. Consider whether you've inadvertently put any of those people on a pedestal. Today I want you to list just their names. Do any other people come to mind as well? List their names here too.

How would you describe the self-perceived *distance* between you and them?

How does the high standard you've imposed on them translate to a *lower standard* for yourself?

How are you being *unrealistic* in the performance you expect of them?

How have you been *hurt* or *disappointed* by them because of your own unrealistic expectations for how they should live?

We get ourselves (and others) into so much needless trouble when we insist on building these pedestals for people who, underneath it all, are *Just. Like. Us.*

Just like Elijah.

I don't know if what I'm about to say will come as a surprise, and I don't want to spoil some of the lessons we'll study down the line. But as a bit of a preview for what the Bible is going to show us about the things Elijah faced in life and how he dealt with them, prepare for these realities:

- We're going to see Elijah hungry, tired, and irritable.
- We're going to see Elijah discouraged and despondent.
- We're going to see Elijah doubtful and insecure.

In other words, we are going to see Elijah as human.

→ The original Greek word used in James 5:17 to describe Elijah is ***anthropos*** [AHN-thro-pahs], which refers to all beings participating within the human race.

Yes, the great prophet Elijah had his emotional tailspins. *We'll see them.* The great prophet Elijah was an expert at wallowing in self-pity. *We'll see it.* The great prophet Elijah failed and flailed and needed God the same way we fail and flail and need God ourselves. *Get ready to see that too.* Even after the adrenaline rush of watching God's fire fall from heaven at Mount Carmel, and then actively participating in bringing his enemies to a fitting end, Elijah crashed into an abyss of exhaustion and fatigue. And fear. And paranoia. He ran. He was done.

So while Elijah is an example for us, he is not an exception to us. We must resist our tendency to venerate him and other biblical heroes like him. None of the biblical heroes were intended to be an exception; they are all meant to be examples to us of what happens when an ordinary life intersects with an extraordinary God.

Biblical heroes are examples of what happens when an ordinary life intersects with an extraordinary God.
#ElijahBibleStudy

Prepare yourself to look at Elijah this way, and then see what the Holy Spirit reveals to you in the process.

Based on some of the “coming attractions” that I told you we can expect to see in Elijah’s life, let me ask you to be introspective for a moment. In what specific ways do you deal with:

- Insecurity?
- Irritability?
- Discouragement?
- Loss of perspective?

How does it encourage you to realize someone as epic as Elijah could feel and exhibit and battle with some of these same things?

Here’s how it helps me. It tells me Elijah’s limitations, weaknesses, and emotional quirks didn’t scare God off or disqualify him from serving God in a mighty way. God *knew* all these tendencies in Elijah. He factored all of them into the unique plan He’d designed for Elijah’s life. He didn’t ignore His prophet’s needs and neuroses. He worked with them; He made use of them in showing His care for Elijah, as well as showing what He can accomplish in each of us despite our human imperfections.

Looking at the previous paragraph, underline the portions that encourage you to free yourself from feelings of self-condemnation or uselessness.

Let's make a couple of commitments right here, based on the premise of James 5:17.

First, let's quit trying to hide our humanity—from God, from others, even from ourselves. Elijah's humanity—his *anthropos*—was not a liability to God's purposes. Neither is yours. Being human never prevented God from using yielded servants, like you and I can be, to do what He's called us to accomplish.

In what clever ways do you attempt to paint a veneer that masks your human limitations, your private outbursts, the realness of your own struggles with living by faith?

Why do you think you place such importance, if you do, on keeping up a façade that impresses others or somehow garners God's approval?

Second, let's quit treating other people as superhuman. And if learning it from an Old Testament prophet is not enough, let's seal today's lesson in our hearts with a quick look at a New Testament apostle.

Paul and Barnabas were preaching in a certain city one day where a crippled man was in the audience, someone who'd been "lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked" (Acts 14:8). Paul recognized the man's plight and perceived he had faith that God could make him well. "Stand upright on your feet," Paul shouted to him across the way in a loud, commanding voice. The Bible says the man "leaped up and began to walk" (v. 10).

"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months."

JAMES 5:17

Turn to Acts 14:11. What did the crowd start saying about Paul and Barnabas when they saw the evidence of this miracle?

Read verse 12. What two names did they ascribe to them?

Read verse 13. How did the priest of Zeus want to honor them?

Read verse 14. How did Paul and Barnabas rightly react to all this?

Read verse 15. What phrase in here sounds a whole lot like James 5:17?

There it is again—*anthropos*. Like Paul. Like Elijah.

Like us.

Flip back a few pages to that list of names you wrote down earlier. As you reflect on these individuals and how they've influenced your life, do something for me. Thank the Lord for them. Thank Him for working through each of these people, through their humanness (which you know is underneath all that impressiveness), and for using their lives as such moving examples of His grace and power. Ask the Lord to sustain them as they seek to honor Him.



And then thank the Lord for something else. Say it something like this:

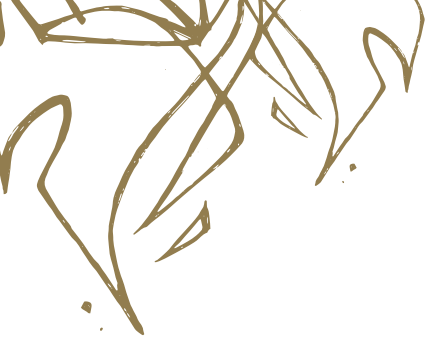
*Thank You, Lord, that because they are human beings,
just as I am:*

- *I, too, can experience that kind of intimacy with You;*
- *I, too, can hear Your voice clearly and obey courageously;*
- *I, too, can share my faith without sugarcoating it or being ashamed;*
- *I, too, can stand alone, knowing You're with me when my trust is in You;*
- *I, too, can serve the needs of others, even when my own needs are unmet;*
- *I, too, can pray with forgiven confidence in You and Your promises;*
- *I, too, can be used by You to turn people's hearts back to faith;*
- *I, too, can stare into uncertainty and know You'll never fail.*

Amen.

And do you know what I see, as you sit there, or kneel there, praying like that?

I see a lot of Elijah in you.



DAY THREE

THESE ARE THE DAYS OF ELIJAH

“You have observed the statutes of Omri and all the practices of Ahab’s house; you have followed their traditions. Therefore I will give you over to ruin and your people to derision; you will bear the scorn of nations.”

MICAH 6:16, NIV

My nephew Kamden is a five-year-old ball of human fire, filled with more energy and precocious mischievousness than maybe any kid I’ve ever met. The fourth of five children, he is constantly trying to press the limits, to push past the boundaries. If not for the watchful oversight of his parents—my brother Jonathan and his wife, Kanika—there’d be no barrier between himself and the dangers of, say, a swimming pool, a crowded intersection, a threatening animal. You get the picture? This is the reason why one of Kamden’s frequent locations is right smack-dab in the middle of his father’s lap, being lovingly and securely held down for his own protection.

Sometimes, though, I’ve watched Jonathan let him go—not because he didn’t want to protect his son, but because he decided in the moment that Kamden would learn better through painful experience.

On one occasion when Kamden was about two, Jonathan was helping him down a flight of stairs, holding tightly to his hand. But Kamden was squirming, fighting to free himself, insisting on making it to the bottom without help. When they finally got to the last step, Jonathan gave Kamden what he wanted. He let go of his hand, despite what everyone else besides Kamden knew for sure would happen next. His little two-year-old legs weren’t long enough to steady his weight from one riser to the next, so he took a little spill. Not enough to injure him, but enough to teach him this valuable lesson: *My father knows best.*

Our relationship with our heavenly Father is much the same. Many times, in order to keep us protected, He holds us close. He hems us in.

But at other times, still motivated by that same great love, He releases us to our own demands. He lets go. And we learn the harder way.

Read the two passages below. One speaks of God holding us close, and the other speaks of God letting us go. Beside each, write the key phrases that point to these realities and minister to you personally.

- Isaiah 41:8-13

- Psalm 81:8-14

Recall a time when you experienced God's care in either form:

- By how He did *not* release you to go your own way.

- By how He *did* release you to go your own way.

Looking back, how did you see God's love reflected in each case?

How have you found each dynamic necessary (or at least effective) in reminding you to remain surrendered and submitted to your Father's leadership?

Now let's connect all of this to our study. In 1 Kings 17, as Elijah first comes into view, the sense we get from Scripture is that God had released the nation to the consequences of their duplicitous choices. Sort of like my nephew Kamden, the Israelites had stiffened their necks against God's protective authority. Progressively over a number of decades, they'd refused a posture of surrender toward His divine care and guidance. Even worse, they'd turned their backs on Him, had refused His loving advances, and had chased the wicked lifestyles and allegiances encouraged by their rebellious, godless leaders.

It was now somewhere around 870 BC—significant because it had been no more than a hundred years since King Solomon had led the people in a national dedication of their newly completed temple. The contrast between the two time periods—which was a conceivable human lifetime—could not be more striking. A quick glimpse can give us an eye-opening view of how severely the moral compass had shifted.

“All the sons of Israel, seeing the fire come down and the glory of the LORD upon the house, bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave praise to the LORD, saying, “Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting.””

2 CHRONICLES 7:3

Open your Bible to 2 Chronicles 7:1-3, where King Solomon had just completed his powerful prayer at the dedication ceremony. What does this moment tell you about:

- The spiritual leadership of Israel during this time?
- The blessing and favor of their God upon them?
- The spiritual posture of the people in relationship to God?

Think about the decline of cultural norms during your own lifetime. Or talk with someone you know whose lifetime already spans eighty years or more. Between the two of you, what are some of the distinctive moral and spiritual differences you've seen in the cultural climate between then and now?

There were likely people still alive in Elijah’s day who’d been present at Solomon’s grand dedication of the temple, even if just as little kids. Many could remember going up to Jerusalem to worship during Israel’s annual feasts. They knew what it meant to be led well, to live in a culture where honoring God was the norm, where they were surrounded by others who agreed with them that marginalizing Yahweh was not in their best interest. They knew how it looked when God dispensed His blessing, grace, and glory to them in unmistakable ways. They knew what being held closely by Him felt like.

But over the course of eight decades in Israel, spanning the reigns of six different kings, the God-honoring families who once esteemed Him had incrementally relaxed their commitments. They’d departed from the singular worship of Yahweh. They’d welcomed idolatrous activity into their lives as an accepted practice.

Look up the following passages from 1 Kings, summarizing the reigns of the six kings of Israel—the **Northern Kingdom**—following Solomon’s reign. Fill in the blanks with either the king’s name or a brief description of his leadership.

Remember, the nation split in two after Solomon’s death. The two tribes of the Southern Kingdom were known as Judah; the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were known as Israel.

VERSE	KING	DESCRIPTION
12:28-32	Jeroboam	
15:25-26		“did evil . . . walked in the way of his father”
15:33-34		“walked in the way of Jeroboam . . . made Israel sin”
16:8-10	Elah	
16:15-19		“reigned seven days . . . evil in the sight of the LORD”
16:23-25	Omri	

Now we come to Ahab, who was the king of Israel when Elijah emerged onto the scene. Ahab, the Bible says, “walked in all the way of Jeroboam” (1 Kings 16:26). This comment compels us to discover what former King Jeroboam did.

After the nation split, the people of Israel continued making the long trek to the temple in Jerusalem for worship. But since the temple was now technically located in another kingdom, Jeroboam decided to compromise on God’s laws, presumably to make worship more convenient for his subjects, to save them that lengthy trip. He hoped by this policy of practicality to keep his people close to home, cementing their loyalty to him instead of to their brothers in Judah.

After discussions with his advisors, what did Jeroboam set up in the northern cities (1 Kings 12:28-29)?

Whom did he install as religious leaders there (1 Kings 12:31)?

Jeroboam’s actions were a flagrant example of ***syncretism*** (SINK-re-tism), the practice of absorbing conflicting religious views into one cosmopolitan belief system, until all roads lead to God, and nothing really means anything.

Jeroboam combined the worship of Yahweh with idolatry. He didn’t yet make Israel’s allegiance to God *defunct*, but he made it *divided*. And whenever loyalties are divided, that’s where *decline* always begins.

Ruling in this way—in “the way of Jeroboam”—was a common descriptor for *all* the kings of Israel. But for Ahab, it was just the beginning. He considered what the previous kings had done in dishonoring God “a trivial thing” (1 Kings 16:31). Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (v. 30).

For instance, he erected an altar to Baal for the Israelites to worship—not in *addition* to God, but in *place* of God (v. 32). He added to this blasphemy by making an image of Asherah, the goddess mother of Baal (v. 33). Then in complete disregard for the law of God, he married a pagan wife, Jezebel, daughter of a pagan king. She insisted the worship of Baal become the sum total of Israel’s religious life, effectively

criminalizing the worship of Yahweh. Israelite culture was no longer *divided* but now *demonic* and *degenerate*.

In another snapshot of Ahab's disregard for God's Word, compare the activity described in 1 Kings 16:34 with the prohibition laid out in Joshua 6:26. In your study, consider these questions:

- What tragedies befell Jericho's new developer?

- What should this have brought to Ahab's mind?

- What should he have done about it?

The spiritual indifference and negligence of all the kings of Israel since Solomon had been offensive to God. Year after year. Decade after decade. But the sharpness of Ahab's departure from worship of the one true God grieved the Lord even more. And at this low ebb of the declining arc, God did what fathers sometimes have to do.

He let go.

And like it or not, God does so even now. The sad reality is that our current culture is experiencing some of the same effects of this divine relinquishing.

“You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you.”

DEUTERONOMY 7:3-4

Read Romans 1:18-32. I know it's a tough passage, and a lengthy one. But the gravity of it is too critical to shortcut. As you read, underline in your Bible anything that stands out as being particularly convicting to you.

How is it hauntingly descriptive of the culture in Elijah's day? In our day?

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them” (v. 24).

“For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions” (v. 26a).

“And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind” (v. 28a).

Even in this hard reading, don't overlook God's desire to comfort, to *hold us close*. In verse 20, we see a loving God taking the initiative to make known His invisible presence, to establish relationship with people. He doesn't want to be hidden and unknown. He has revealed Himself in creation so clearly that even those who aren't seeking Him or wanting Him can be captivated by His majesty and power, His beauty and tenderness, as seen in the world around them. In fact, the evidence is so conspicuous that those who don't believe are held responsible for ignoring it because in self-deceit they have willingly suppressed the mountain of evidence.

But we are simultaneously confronted. We see Him *let us go*. When people foolishly declare there is no God, or when they dishonor Him by refusing to acknowledge Him or give Him due reverence, He eventually lets go. When people hate the things God has called good, or love the things He's called evil, He finally just lets them have what they want, as well as the consequences that come with it.

← **Zero in on the verses from Romans 1 reprinted in the margin. Underline each place where it says “God gave them over.”**



What do these verses specify as the results of God's divine relinquishing? What did they experience after He gave them over?

- Dishonored _____
- Degrading _____
- Depraved _____

As children of God—saved, redeemed, and forgiven—the status of our relationship with Him never changes, just as Kamden's relationship to his daddy never changes. But it doesn't mean our *experience* with Him won't change if we persist in refusing to honor Him. He will sometimes choose tough, letting-go love as the best option for reminding us that the ingredients we're mixing into our lives are a recipe for disaster.

These were the days of Elijah. Days of experiencing God's letting go. But just when Israel was spiraling downward, God was stirring up a representative in the rugged mountains of Gilead who would call His people back.

Elijah was coming.



DAY FOUR

THE PROCESS OF PREPARATION

“Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead . . .”

1 KINGS 17:1a

Shawna is one of my dearest friends, a beautiful ray of sunlight in my life. She’s honest; she’s cheerful; she’s generous. She’s real. Whenever I see her, I can’t help smiling from ear to ear. As a licensed counselor, she’s the kind of person who can minister to people from all walks of life about a myriad of issues and concerns.

We’ve known each other a long time and have basically raised our children together, offering advice back and forth to one another through their toddler and teenage years. Her oldest, Joshua, is now a cadet at West Point. Her middle child, daughter Elyana, graduated as valedictorian of her high school class. And her youngest, Noah, is a bright, handsome, soft-spoken middle schooler whose smile, I promise, would light up your whole life.

But before these three came along, Shawna and her husband endured the tormenting grief of having to bury their first two children. With each pregnancy, the doctor prescribed long stints of bed rest in order to keep the baby protected in her womb. Yet each time she delivered them both early. They were too small, too weak, to survive on their own. So she held them and wept over them, watching them take their first (and last) staccato breaths. First it was Grace, and then it was Caleb. It was never anything but heartbreaking.

Why would the Lord allow this? *I don’t know.*

But I can tell you this: whenever I see Shawna speaking to a young woman whose heart has been broken by the loss of a child—when I see her folding that woman’s trembling hands inside her own—that’s when I see her living in the sweet spot of her ministry and effectiveness. Does it negate the pain, grief, and hardship that she and her husband faced? Would they want to live through it again or wish it on anyone

else? Absolutely not. But seeing God redeem it this way—funneling it into heartfelt, compassionate ministry to others—does reframe their losses and give their grief purpose.

My friend has been *prepared* for these kinds of ministry moments. Prepared by what she's been through. Prepared by where she's come from.

This same sense of purpose and process is one of the undercurrents of Elijah's example.

Let's dig into 1 Kings 17. This is the first mention of the prophet in Scripture. And while we don't learn a lot about his background from the opening verse, we at least learn this:

- Elijah was a _____.
- His hometown was in an area called _____.
- And his first allegiance was to _____.

The exact location of *Tishbe*, despite being home to one of the greatest figures in all the Bible, cannot really be identified. Geologists and archaeologists have never been able to pinpoint it with any degree of accuracy. But *Gilead* comes with a bit more documentation. For the first time in our study, I want you to turn to the map I've provided for you on the inside back cover. Take a moment to survey it, making mental note of the places you know about, as well as the ones you're completely unfamiliar with. Now, look specifically at the area known as Gilead, east of the Jordan River. It actually shows up in the Bible on quite a few occasions.

From each of the following references, what interesting fact or happening can you connect with Gilead?

- Genesis 31:17-21
- Genesis 37:23-25
- Deuteronomy 34:1-4

Gilead was hill country, covered with dense forests and wild undergrowth. It was remote and uncivilized. Even its name—*Gilead*—means “rocky” or “rugged.”

That’s where Elijah was from. And that’s who Elijah was. A mountain man. A tough, adventurous, free-ranging spirit. Picture him with callused hands and chipped, grubby fingernails. Picture him in scratchy, burlap-quality clothes. Picture his skin tanned and leathery, a thick and gnarled beard around his chin, his head topped by a matted stack of tousled, unruly hair.

Elijah wasn’t groomed in the sophisticated manners and etiquette of the city. Elijah lacked classical education and social polish. His verbs and nouns didn’t always agree. He wasn’t brought up in echelons of society where he could earn the kinds of credentials and connections that paved his way to success.

Scholars believe he likely tended sheep on the heights of those lonely, uneven hillsides in Gilead.² It’s where he learned to value and endure endless stretches of solitude and silence. It’s where he had time to grow into a muscular, sinewy man with the tenacity it took to stave off predators and provide for his flocks.

Elijah came from a hard place. A rough place. An obscure place. The right place to be prepared for what God had in store for him.

Think back to an earlier season of your life that perhaps was marked by hardship, challenge, loneliness, or obscurity. Record a few key words below that best describe that season for you.

“God is faithful,
through whom you
were called into
fellowship with
His Son, Jesus
Christ our Lord.”

1 CORINTHIANS 1:9

Have you ever questioned why God allowed you to go through that season or to experience that difficulty? How so?

Looking at those experiences now from your current vantage point, how have they helped shape the way you think and feel about Him today?

The various events and circumstances that have contributed to your life up until this point have not been accidental. They've not been wasted parts of your process, even if they were difficult, even if they excluded you from certain privileges that in your estimation could have propelled you forward faster. Even the evil that's been done against you by people who intended you harm has not been a total loss. This doesn't excuse their wrongdoing, of course. It doesn't minimize the real pain they've caused you. But it does add a layer of perspective and hope. As Joseph could say, after being wrongfully treated by his brothers, after being unjustly enslaved and imprisoned in Egypt, "God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result" (Gen. 50:20).

For Elijah, the fact that he was raised in an uncouth environment; the fact that he wasn't brought up around more urbane, cultured tastes and people; the fact that he grew up at a distance from mass civilization; the fact that he had no lineage or pedigree even worth mentioning in the Bible. There was a reason for it.

All of it set the stage for the life God had planned for him.

God used it to give Elijah a clear, objective view of the duplicity that existed in the seat of Israel's power. By virtue of his outback upbringing, Elijah had not been tainted by living up close to the idolatrous influences of the city, nor dulled into spiritual apathy by its pious religious activity. Instead he was able to nurse a growing indignation about the declined moral state because he hadn't been absorbed into its fabric. Being from lowly regarded Gilead, Elijah was naturally unencumbered by the need to impress and please others, which made him an ideal mouthpiece for delivering the righteous message God wanted him to convey.

Everything was coming together. Just the way God wanted it. For Elijah.

And for you. In Gilead.

“It is good for me
that I was afflicted,
that I may learn
Your statutes. The
law of Your mouth
is better to me than
thousands of gold
and silver pieces.
Your hands made
me and fashioned
me; give me
understanding, that
I may learn Your
commandments.”

PSALM 119:71-73

Thinking back again to some of those situations and experiences God has taken you through, how would you be less committed today, have less clarity on your purpose, or be less assured in adversity if those occurrences had not been part of your past, of your preparation, of your process? What would you lack if you hadn't experienced them?

During Elijah's unrecorded years in Gilead, he somehow came to know, to *really* know, Yahweh. Maybe it was his father or mother who taught him the record of God's faithfulness to Israel. Maybe some of the older shepherds he worked around were in the habit of pointing out God's living, active, moving presence among them in Gilead. Maybe it was in the quietness of performing his everyday shepherding tasks that Elijah sensed God supernaturally revealing Himself to His soon-to-be representative.

One way or another, while doing his tedious, mundane, lonesome work, while facing hardships we'll never know, Elijah had been exposed to influences that convinced him Jehovah wasn't just one deity among many other options. He'd developed a deep knowledge, reverence, and understanding for Yahweh's covenant with His people, a holy perspective that would form the basis for his first prophetic declaration in Scripture. This God, Israel's God, was a jealous God who had no intention of sharing His glory with man-made idols.

That's what Elijah learned in Gilead.



- *In Gilead*, where he was from.
- *In Gilead*, where his heart was formed.
- *In Gilead*, where his own personal set of trials and difficulties became the start of a process, a process of living and thinking and navigating his journey by faith.

The backside of that raw, rugged desert was God's way of bringing Elijah around to know Him in a way he would never have experienced Him otherwise. Now he was ready to declare God's word with boldness and authority.

Elijah's whole life was about to become a clear, bold declaration of God's power and provision.

And so is yours. Where you have come from. What you have been through.

All of it has been preparing you for the purpose He's planned next for you.

As you close today's lesson, take a few moments to thank the Lord for your journey this far. Ask Him to give you the courage to trust that He is using every part of it—even the difficult or despairing parts—to form you into His image, to focus your passions and pursuits, and to funnel you into the stream of His purposes for this generation, for future generations.



DAY FIVE

ELIJAH CALLING

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

JEREMIAH 1:5

There’s a beautiful woman who works in our ministry office whose first name is hardly a common one. In fact, she’s spent her whole life having to both spell it and pronounce it for people, because it actually sounds nothing like the way you’d expect.

Her name is Abisha (pronounced, ah-BAH-sha). I know, right? Who’d ever guess?

Nobody, that’s who.

Abisha’s parents didn’t give her that name just because they liked the ring of it. They wanted their daughter to be called by a name that spoke to her identity and the character they hoped she would pattern her life after. The Hebrew meaning of *Abisha* is “The Lord is my Father.” It’s like a banner stretched across her lifelong commitment and confession, declaring “who she is” and “who she belongs to.”

I love names like that.

Because names matter.

In biblical days, names were quite often synonymous with a person’s calling and character. They weren’t simply nomenclature. They signified one’s reputation. The syllables of Hebrew names, like a puzzle meticulously fitted together, built layer upon layer of insight into who this person really was or was meant to be. So when Elijah first arrived in town, anyone in the vicinity would have known where his allegiance stood, simply by hearing his name.

- *El*, meaning, “God”
- *I*, meaning, “my”
- *Jah*, meaning, “Yahweh”

People who knew Elijah knew where he stood, even before they really knew him.

Consider each component of Elijah’s name. Below, write what you would’ve inferred about his reputation and allegiance if you’d been in King Ahab’s court on the day Elijah arrived there.

Yahweh is the name God calls Himself. In Hebrew tradition, His name was considered too holy even to speak aloud. So in the Old Testament, where this name appears more than six thousand times, it was changed to the word *Adonai*, which in English versions is printed as “LORD,” in all capital letters.³

Elijah’s first words to Ahab in 1 Kings 17:1 were sort of a pledge of allegiance, which corresponded with the meaning of his name. Turn to this verse and notice the layers:

- The LORD
- The LORD is _____
- The LORD is God of _____
- The LORD God of Israel _____
- The LORD God of Israel lives, and I have pledged my sole allegiance to Him.

What did Elijah say was God’s impending judgment on the nation of Israel because of her rebellion?

See “Digging Deeper I” article on page 44.

“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.”

JAMES 5:17

Turn to and read Deuteronomy 29, particularly verses 16-29, where God revealed the cost to be paid by those who rejected His covenant.

Remember James 5:17? What had Elijah been doing in the weeks, possibly years leading up to this announcement?

What does this observation tell you about how Elijah viewed:

- God?
- God’s Word?
- The effectiveness of prayer?

Based on what Elijah knew about God’s covenant with His people (Deut. 29, for example), he knew Israel’s duplicity necessitated judgment. But that’s not all he knew. See if this doesn’t blow your mind. Despite the fact that these negative results of the people’s disobedience would adversely affect Elijah too—such as the land being “unsown and unproductive” so that “no grass grows in it” (Deut. 29:23)—he was brave enough and committed to God enough that he still prayed for it. Out there in Gilead, in the remote starting point of Elijah’s ministry—the starting point of his process—he had developed such a commitment to Yahweh that he was willing to pray for His will to be done above all else, even above his own comfort.

And he was willing to speak this unbending truth to the most powerful man in the nation.

To whom did Elijah declare God’s forthcoming judgment?

What in the world gave this uncouth, uncivilized, underdressed man from the dusty backwoods of a small town the idea that he could stand in front of a king? An unkind king, clad in fine purple robes. A jaded king, seated on a bejeweled throne. An evil king, surrounded by armed soldiers who had no respect for Yahweh’s Word.

How did this guy get in here?

The answer to this question is, we don't know. Frustrating, huh? Scholars are unsure how Elijah ever ended up being granted an audience with King Ahab and why his life was spared when he did, especially considering the unwelcome message he came to deliver. Nothing other than the sovereignty of Almighty God could be responsible for arranging this unimaginable appointment.

But we do know this: they understood what this meeting was about, even before the prophet opened his mouth. Elijah's name had become synonymous with his character. His God was Yahweh.

Apparently his whole life had been shaped by the meaning of his name.

Elijah's holy passion hadn't happened overnight. And based on what we know of the spiritual decline around him, it surely hadn't happened by osmosis. But Elijah's allegiance to the Lord had become more secure with each passing day, week, and year. Long before he stood up in front of a king at court, he had spent his quiet, obscure life building the character, establishing the reputation, and securing the allegiance that reflected this reality.

So as 1 Kings 17 opens, Elijah was physically standing before a king. But his real standing—his true allegiance—was before Yahweh.

Compare and contrast these two portions of Scripture:

- Turn to John 12:42-43. How would you describe the allegiance of the Jewish leaders here? Where did they choose to stand?

- Now turn to 1 Thessalonians 2:4. How would you describe the apostle Paul's allegiance? Where did he choose to stand?

Now consider your own stance in light of these two scenarios. In what types of situations have you had your own allegiances put to the test? Where have you chosen to stand?

Here's another way to think about it. You are a citizen of the country in which you live. If you've traveled internationally, you've crossed borders into other nations, possibly into other continents. You've immersed yourself into different traditions and cultures in foreign regions of the world. But even when you've stood on foreign soil, your allegiance was still pledged to your country. No matter where in the world you've been privileged enough to go, your loyalty and citizenship is still secured and settled. You might have been physically standing *there*, but your standing was still *here*.

Frame your whole life like this. You can stand at that office, or attend school at that university, or participate in that organization, or answer to that supervisor, and at the same time keep your ultimate allegiance securely situated in the one true God. In fact, you *must* treat your allegiance like this if you genuinely want to honor Him. You can be standing *there*, but really be standing here, with your hand over your heart before your true Lord and King.

Because when you know your name, even if you're from a nowhere place like Gilead—when you've committed yourself to the process of learning who you are, based on the truth of the One who has called you to serve and follow Him—you can stand and declare His Word in any place, in front of anybody. You can know, like Elijah did, that your God is Yahweh, that you represent the One whom no man or worldly idol can replace, remove, or redact.

As daughter of a King, your name has been imbued with all the rights and privileges that give you access through Christ to your Father's power. Everything God has allowed you to march through in life so far has been intended to mature your faith, fortify your principles, shape your character, and cement your allegiance to Him. It's been preparing you to take your stand in that confidence.

Life is truly a process of growing into your faith, or as Peter said, growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). But your identity as a believer is something you wear today. Right now. *Here* is where you stand.

Turn to 1 Peter 2:9-10 as we prepare to close this week of study. Fill in the blanks with what the Bible asserts to be your identity as a believer in Christ.

- **chosen:** you are “a chosen _____”
- **royal:** you are “a royal _____”
- **holy:** you are “a holy _____”
- **child of God:** you are God’s own “_____”
- **proclaimer:** made to proclaim or declare His
“_____”
- **called:** you’ve been called “out of _____”
- **light:** called into His marvelous, wonderful
“_____”

This is who you are. Each one of these features—and more—is part of your given name. It’s been your name from the moment you put faith in Christ as Savior, and it will be your name for as long as you live.

Knowing your name—knowing who you are—gives you the courage to stand on the bedrock of eternal truth, to stand there in the name of the One who “called you for a righteous purpose” (Isa. 42:6, CSB).

So when Elijah set out from Gilead, tromping out of the hills toward the city, toward the throne room of Ahab, with God’s Word in his mouth and God’s strength pulsating in his heart, he may not have known much. But he did know what his name meant. And there he would take his stand.

Can’t wait to see in the next six weeks where it takes him. And us.

HEAVEN'S RAIN

Centuries before Elijah's prophetic ministry, Yahweh delivered the Hebrew children from brutal slavery in Egypt. As Moses led them toward Canaan, he took great care to point out an interesting contrast between the two locations. Egypt was "where you used to sow your seed and water it . . . But the land into which you are about to cross to possess it" is a land that "drinks water from the rain of heaven" (Deut. 11:10-11).

The distinction between the land of their captivity and the promised land is that the first had been irrigated by hand, but the other would be sustained and watered by the loving and faithful hand of their Deliverer. In other words, an open heaven was a sign of God's favor and blessing on His people as they continued to submit to His authority and worship Him alone.

They were warned, as they contemplated their future in Canaan:

"Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you."

DEUTERONOMY 11:16-17

This is why Elijah's pronouncement of drought to King Ahab and the nation had ramifications that went beyond a simple weather forecast. It signified the judgment of Yahweh upon Israel for their rebellion and their ongoing refusal to submit to His authority. Elijah's declaration was not rooted in his own conjecture. He knew the Word of his God, and he based his message to Ahab on the holy covenant that had been established in the wilderness.

But that's not the only thing Elijah had in mind as he prophesied the coming drought. Baal and his female cohort Asherah were recognized and worshiped as the god and goddess of fertility. It was believed that Baal also had power over rain. Storms, they thought, were in his control. So as idol worship became more widely sanctioned and practiced in Israel, then officially legislated under Ahab and Jezebel's

leadership, God's people essentially rejected Yahweh as their primary source of provision. Israel increasingly believed that these false gods controlled the weather, the change of seasons, and, by extension, their crops' ability to yield a bountiful harvest. They began to believe that their ability to survive rested squarely in Baal's hands. The people appealed endlessly to the gods in hopes of garnering favor, thinking it ensured rain for their crops and continued productivity in their agrarian society.

Each month the sky withheld rain was an unmitigated personal strike against the authority of Baal to control nature. As an impotent idol, he had no control whatsoever over the rain and sun. Each of the one thousand, two hundred-plus days of drought and famine would remind the people that only one God held supreme authority, and their allegiance should be to Him only.

The judgments God exacted on ancient Israel are a reminder to us that any consequences we endure today are never about the consequences alone. They are designed to underscore the impotence of our idols, debunk the myth of their power, and remind us that God alone is worthy of our loyalty and worship. Whenever we anchor our significance unwisely,

putting our trust in health, success, material wealth, or relationships, thereby turning them into illegitimate gods, our Father will cut them off at the knees and remind us of their insufficiency to save.

"Like scarecrows in a cucumber patch, their idols cannot speak. They must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them for they can do no harm—and they cannot do any good. LORD, there is no one like you. You are great; your name is great in power."

JEREMIAH 10:5-6, CSB