

THE PROPHET ELIAS

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When King Solomon died, his kingdom was divided up. His son was recognized as king only by the tribes of Juda and of Benjamin. He lived on David's Mount in Jerusalem and called his kingdom Juda. Here stood the Temple of God. The priests of the tribe of Levi went to live in Jerusalem, and many others also who remained faithful to the true God.

The other tribes in the north of the country chose a strange king who named his kingdom Israel. In order that his people should not go down to the Temple in Jerusalem, he set up golden calves and said: "Look, here are your gods, who led you out of Egypt!" Things became still worse when the godless Achab came to the throne of Israel. He took as wife Jezabel, the daughter of the heathen king of Phoenicia, who adored the heathen god Baal. And he erected a temple to Baal in Samaria itself, and dedicated to that heathen god a grove with many trees. He bowed his knee before the pagan idol and all the people had to follow his example. Jezabel appointed four hundred and fifty priests for the worship of Baal, but she had the priests of the true God murdered.

At this time the word of God came to Elias, who lived in the hill country of the north. In obedience to God he came down into Samaria. There he confronted King Achab and addressed him as God inspired him to do. "As the Lord I serve is a living God," he said, "neither dew nor rain shall fail until he commands it to fall at my word."

The king was furious, and wanted to kill Elias. But God said to Elias: "Flee over the Jordan and hide in the caves by the brook Kerith. The brook shall give you drink, and the ravens, at my command, shall feed you."

So Elias fled to the caves by the brook Kerith. Every morning and evening the ravens came and brought him bread and meat, and he drank the water of the brook. But after a short time the brook dried up, for as God had announced, no more rain fell.

Then God said to Elias: "Stand up and go to Sarephta in the country of the Phoenicians. I have commanded a widow there to support you during this time of famine." So Elias rose up and made his way as far as the seashore, into the land of the heathen Phoenicians. And as he stood at the gate of Sarephta he saw a woman gathering firewood. "Please get me a little water in your jug," he asked her. As she turned to get it he called after her: "And bring me a mouthful of bread too!" But the woman replied: "As truly as the Lord your God is a living God, I have no more bread, I have only a handful of meal in the kneading trough, and a little oil in a jug. Look, I have just been gathering firewood, and now I will go in and make a fire, and bake a cake for myself and my little boy. When that is all gone, we must die."

But Elias the prophet said: "Do not be frightened. Go home and do as you said. First bake a little cake and bring it to me. Then make one for yourself and your son. For the Lord says: `The trough of flour shall not diminish, neither shall the oil in the jug, until I send rain again upon the earth.'"

The woman obeyed, and it all turned out just as the Lord had foretold through the words of Elias. The flour did not come to an end, nor did the oil in the jug diminish, and they had enough to eat for a long time.

Then God allowed the boy to fall ill. He was so bad that there was no cure for him, and he died. Everyone could see that he had stopped breathing. But the mother said to Elias: "I am a sinful creature. God has taken my child to make me acknowledge my sins." "Give me the child," said Elias. And he took the little boy from her lap, and carried him upstairs to the room in which he slept, and laid him on the bed. Then he began praying: "O Lord! You sent me to this woman that she might save my life. Why do you now send her this sorrow of losing her son?" Then, laying himself three times full length over the child's dead body, he called aloud: "O Lord, my God, I beseech you to send back the soul of this boy into his body!" And God heard his loud cries, and he let the soul return, and the boy breathed again.

Then Elias took him in his arms and carried him downstairs, and laid him in his mother's lap, saying: "Look, your son is alive!" "You are indeed a prophet of the true God," cried the woman, "and the word of God in your mouth is holy truth!"

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God's kingdom on earth had its spiritual crises: Israel was forever neglecting its part of the Covenant. As a light in the gathering darkness appeared Elias. His name means "Yahweh is God," indicating that he was a champion of the true religion of Israel's fathers. In Hebrew tradition, Elias was always remembered as a boast of the race, and his return was hoped for in times of crisis. He did indeed return to bear witness to another and greater champion—to our Lord, the Father's champion even unto death: "And as he prayed . . . his raiment became a radiant white. And behold, two men were talking with him. And these were Moses and Elias, who, appearing in glory, spoke of his death, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:29.).