

Restoration and Repentance

The Past and Future Ministry of Elijah

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of a talk given by David Gooding at Laganvale Gospel Hall, Belfast (N. Ireland) in 1979.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

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Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: kgs.004/bh

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*1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 2:11; Malachi 4:1–6
Matthew 11:11–15; 17:9–13; Luke 1:16–17;
Romans 11:1–12; James 5:17–20*

Thank you, Mr Chairman, sir, for your kind remarks and your welcome. It is indeed a pleasure to be back here with you in Laganvale, and I bring you the greetings of some of your fellow believers in Czechoslovakia. I recently returned from Brno, where I am pleased to report that, before the breaking of bread on the Lord's Day morning, they baptized twenty-eight people, adding them to their number, which is getting on for up to two hundred.

They were rejoicing, of course, as all the believers are in Czechoslovakia, in their newfound freedom to do and say whatever they please without any government interference. They will need to learn how to take advantage of it. When it's something that you haven't had for forty years, and you suddenly have it, it's quite a thing to know how to explore it to the full. They're going ahead with publication work as best they can, and in all kinds of ways to get the gospel out to the nation at large.

God has recently been blessing them in Brno. Some of the twenty-eight converted people who were baptized that Lord's Day would have been in their fifties, but the majority were in their early twenties and thirties. They all send you their greetings. Likewise, in Cesky Tesin, Abijov, and Ostrava, they asked me to convey their love in the Lord to the believers here in Ulster, and that I do willingly.

I would like this evening to conduct with you a meditation on the life and ministry of Elijah; in particular, his role in past history and his role in the future that is to come. So, for that purpose, let's read a number of Scriptures, first from the Old Testament, and then from the New. To begin with, the last book in the Old Testament and its last chapter.

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, *I will send you Elijah* the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Mal 4:1–6)

Then, turning to the New Testament, some verses from Matthew 17.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.' And the disciples asked him, 'Then why do the scribes say that first *Elijah must come?*' He answered, '*Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.*' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (vv. 9–13)

Now turn back to chapter 11, where our Lord is talking to the crowd, his contemporaries, about John the Baptist.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, *he is Elijah who is to come.* He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (vv. 11–15).

Then, in the Epistle by Paul to the Romans chapter 11.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of *Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?* 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.' But what is God's reply to him? '*I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.*' So too at the present time *there is a remnant, chosen by grace.* But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.' And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs for ever.' So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and *if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!* (vv. 1–12)

Finally, from the Epistle by James, and his last chapter.

*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that *whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.* (5:17–20)*

God give us powers of concentration and bless this study of his word to us this evening.

There will be two comings of the Messiah

It is almost incredible when you first hear it, that, throughout his life on earth, the early apostles of the Lord Jesus found it difficult to accept that there were going to be two comings of the Messiah. As Christians we take it for granted these days, without thinking about it. We talk about his first coming, when he was born of the Virgin Mary, according to the glorious prophecy of Isaiah 7. And then we talk easily about his second coming. 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him' (Rev 1:7). Those very words are the fulfilment of prophecies from the Old Testament.

behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14).

We're thinking of prophecies like Zechariah that say, 'when [Israel] look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn' (12:10). We are very used to the idea that there had to be a first coming and then a second coming in order for the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah to be fulfilled. But while our Lord Jesus still lived among them, the apostles found this concept of two comings almost incomprehensible, and I suppose we ought to have mercy on them.

There are some people who still confuse the two comings, and they expect our Lord to have fulfilled things by his first coming that he will not fulfil until he comes again. Some will tell you that our Lord bound Satan at his first coming, so that Satan is no longer active; whereas the New Testament is quite clear that Satan will not finally be bound until our Lord comes in power and great glory (see Rev 19:20). So, there is confusion on the difference between what those two different comings were meant to do. The Old Testament itself nowhere talks about his *first coming* and his *second coming*, so how would the apostles ever have known?

You may say, if they had read their Old Testament carefully, they would have come to the conclusion that there would have to be more than one coming. For instance, we think of passages like Psalm 2: 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel' (vv. 8-9). On the other hand, 'he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people' (Isa 53:8). How could you reconcile these and suppose they all happened at one single coming?

There are Scriptures in the Old Testament that say the Messiah would come riding on a literal donkey down the streets of Jerusalem: 'Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zech 9:9). But, as we saw earlier, there are others that say he would come as the Son of Man with the very clouds of heaven (Dan 7:13). The clouds being indicative of the Shekinah glory

of God and the deity of Messiah himself. How would you reconcile the two? He could scarcely come on a donkey and on the clouds of heaven at one and the same time, surely?

Why couldn't the apostles see that there would have to be two different comings?

One answer to that question is that it had never entered their heads. Another answer would be that they were a little bit like us. When they read the Old Testament, they took out the bits they thought were good, which interested them, and left out the bits they didn't think were so good. That's one way of reading the Bible, isn't it?

Therefore, when they read that the Messiah would put down evil and restore the kingdom to Israel, they were delighted. He would drive out the Romans and their empire, deliver Israel, and bring in a veritable paradise of peace. The nations would disarm themselves completely, the Messiah would exalt Israel, and the mountain of the Lord's house in Jerusalem would be higher than all the kingdoms of the earth (see Mic 4). That was what they were looking for the Lord Jesus to do when he came; he would reign from shore to shore as the Messiah.

They didn't understand the bits in the Old Testament that talked about Messiah suffering, so they conveniently neglected them, as you gather from our Lord's words to the two on the road to Emmaus.

And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to *believe all that the prophets have spoken!* Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

Not just *some* of what the prophets have spoken, but *all*; you cannot pick and choose. To understand it correctly, you must take the whole of that revelation together.

Peter was ready to confess that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, but when our Lord announced that he was going to suffer, Peter objected fiercely. 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you' (Matt 16:22). That wasn't in Peter's programme for the Messiah. How could he be rejected and crucified at Jerusalem without destroying the whole programme of his great coming reign?

On the Mount of Transfiguration

To help them understand it, our blessed Lord took three of them up the mountain of transfiguration, and gave them a spectacular vision of the Son of Man coming in his glory, with Moses and Elijah as his glorified attendants (see Matt 17:2-3). He was about to be rejected by the scribes and Pharisees and crucified, but he would rise again. They saw him, not as he was here on earth, but as he shall be when he comes in the glory of his kingdom with great power. His face shone as the sun. Oh, my brothers and sisters, we shall see it in reality one of these days.

So, when the apostles came down the mountain, they were all the more confirmed in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. But I have to tell you that they still hadn't grasped that this was a vision of his *second* coming in glory. According to Mark 9, when the Lord Jesus said that they were to 'tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead . .

. they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean' (vv. 9–10). They didn't dare tell him what they thought, but they couldn't make sense of it. They hadn't understood the business of his death and his resurrection, and they were still hoping that in his lifetime he would come in glory. They were bound to be disappointed, as subsequently they were.

What does it mean: 'first Elijah must come'?

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that they had another question in their heads as they came down from the mountain. No doubt they were still stirred by this vision of the Lord coming in glory, which they expected to see in their lifetime, and also because they had seen Elijah. So they plucked up courage, 'Lord, tell us, why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?' — that is, before the Messiah comes (see Matt 17:10). The scribes, of course, were basing themselves on that chapter of Malachi that we read,

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Mal 4:5–6)

Through the prophet, God was saying that there will come this great and terrible day of judgment, the day of the Lord, that will consume sinners from the face of the earth, and lead to the establishment of the Messiah's millennial reign. But before that happens, God will send Elijah. And so the scribes were perfectly correct in their interpretation.

But then in Malachi it was talking about the coming in power and great glory, so the scribes and Pharisees would have argued with the early apostles, 'You're telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, and therefore the Messiah has come? That's nonsense, according to the Bible.'

And Peter would say, 'How can it be nonsense?'

'Well,' said the scribes, 'Malachi distinctly says that, before the Messiah comes, God is going to send Elijah. Where's Elijah, and how can your Jesus be the Messiah?'

That posed a problem for the disciples. After the Lord had exhibited himself on the Transfiguration Mount, they had no doubt that he was the Messiah. There was Elijah, and Moses with him, but that only provoked the question still further, until they blurted it out.

'If you are really the Messiah, and this is a picture of your glory, why do the scribes say that Elijah must first come?'

The Lord Jesus answered their question explicitly and very carefully, and we shall have to be careful to understand his answer, which is in two parts:

Part 1: 'Elijah does come, and he will restore all things' (Matt 17:11).

Part 2: 'But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased' (v. 12).

So let's take the two parts, and look at them separately and carefully.

1. The first part says, 'Elijah does come.' In other words, our Lord Jesus is saying, 'Yes, what the scribes say is absolutely right. They are quoting Malachi, where God says that Elijah is going to come before that great and awesome day of the Lord.'

At this late hour of the night permit me to give you a little lesson in grammar that you will know so well. ‘Elijah comes’ — that’s a present tense, but in Greek, as in modern English, very frequently the present tense carries a future meaning.

For instance, somebody asks you, ‘What about Christmas? Is Aunt Agatha coming for Christmas? She said last year that she would come. Well, is she coming?’

We use a present tense in English, though it refers to this coming 25 December, of course. It’s not here yet, and Aunt Agatha isn’t here yet. But she says that she is coming, so we use a present tense to refer to the future.

And so it is here with our Lord Jesus. Malachi said that God would send Elijah, and the Lord Jesus said, ‘Yes, that’s right. Elijah indeed is coming, as Malachi said he would.’

And then our Lord added, ‘and he will restore all things.’ Notice that verb: ‘will restore’ is a future verb beyond all doubt. It’s put in the future in Greek, and comes into English as ‘he will restore all things.’

That is important, because our Lord is standing here on earth at his *first* coming. When he talks about Elijah restoring all things, he doesn’t use a past tense, and say, ‘Elijah came and restored all things,’ for at that point all things hadn’t been restored—far from it. He said, ‘Elijah is coming, just like Malachi said, and *will restore*,’ not ‘*has restored*.’ As our Lord Jesus stood there talking to his apostles, that great restoration was still in the future, and had to be referred to by a future tense, ‘He comes and shall restore, just exactly like Malachi said he would.’

When shall it happen?

It shall happen just before the *second* coming of Christ, for that is what Malachi was talking about: ‘the great and awesome day of the Lord,’ when Messiah shall come and execute the wrath of God on this ungodly world. Just before that, God will send Elijah to do his gracious work of preparing God’s people, and restoring them. That lies in the future.

2. But then our Lord indicates that this prophecy of Malachi also had a *partial* fulfilment earlier. Notice what he says, ‘But I tell you that Elijah *has already come*, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. . . . Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist’ (Matt 17:12–13). So there was a first, a partial fulfilment of that promise in Malachi. Elijah would come; but there was a sense in which it was partly fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist, just before our Lord’s first coming.

In what sense was it fulfilled in John the Baptist?

That’s a big question, isn’t it? Was John the Baptist literally Elijah, then? No, he certainly wasn’t. How do we know that? Because John 1 tells us. ‘Are you literally Elijah?’ they said. John said, ‘I am not,’ (see v. 21). ‘They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”’ (v. 25). So John the Baptist wasn’t the complete fulfilment of Malachi, which did promise that Elijah would be sent.

If he wasn’t literally Elijah, in what sense did John the Baptist fulfil that promise and could be regarded as Elijah? You’ll find the answer in Luke 1.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and *he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (vv. 16–17)

The angel is talking to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, about John and his ministry. Commenting on Malachi 4:5, ‘Behold, I will send you Elijah,’ he tells John the Baptist’s father that John will go before the Lord Jesus ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah.’ That is, he won’t be Elijah, but he will have a ministry marked by the same spirit and the same power as the great and famous Elijah.

Elijah’s past ministry of restoration

As we’re now about to see, both in the Old Testament and in the coming day before the second coming of Christ, the ministry of Elijah was and will be marked by this wonderful work of restoring the people of God.

Before our Lord came the first time, John the Baptist was sent to ‘go before the Lord to prepare his ways’ (Luke 1:76), to restore the people by bringing them to repentance. Repentance as to their misbehaviour among themselves, of their wrong attitude to God, and to prepare them for the coming of Messiah, so that when he came he could grant them forgiveness, reconciliation and peace with God. So, before he comes again, in power and great glory, Elijah shall come to do this tremendous work of restoration and preparation of the people of God for his coming.

If that is the thing that links Elijah in the past and Elijah in the future, then let us think about that great ministry of restoration that marked Elijah in the past and compare it with the future.

Israel was at a spiritually low ebb

Elijah exercised his famous ministry at a time when Israel’s spiritual history was at its deepest depth. Jeroboam in Israel was bad enough, and Israel never recovered from the sin of Jeroboam, ‘which he sinned and made Israel to sin’ (1 Kgs 14:16). But if Jeroboam’s sin was bad, Ahab and Jezebel’s was infinitely worse. Jeroboam introduced idolatry into Israel; the people worshipped Jehovah, but under the idolatrous form of golden calves (12:28). When Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, came along, they didn’t even pretend to worship Jehovah, they substituted the worship of Baal among the ten tribes of Israel (16:29–31). It was an exceedingly deep abyss of apostasy that Israel entered under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel.

False gods

Who was Baal? Baal was a number of things. He was worshipped amongst the Phoenicians where Jezebel came from. He was the storm god. When the pagans watched the Mediterranean waves pounding on the beach, and saw its tremendous power, they were afraid that one day the sea might come right over and flood their land. They thought there was a sea god, and they worshipped the god of the storm.

He was also the fertility god. That's why he's sometimes represented as a bull. Ancient farmers saw that their very livelihood depended on the fertility of their bulls and their cows, and their wives. When Israel lost their faith in the one true Creator God, they went off into crude idolatry, and deified what we call 'the processes of fertility'. They deified them, and worshipped Baal as the god of fertility.

You say, 'How could they have been so stupid?' for Romans 1 reminds us that all mankind had once known the true and living God (v. 19). Yes, but 'they did not see fit to acknowledge God' (v. 28). They found it too inconvenient to acknowledge a God to whom they were personally responsible and upon whom they must depend, so they abandoned the knowledge of him. But when people give up faith in the true God, they find it impossible to believe in nothing. It's a very difficult art, believing in nothing, and when people lose faith in the living God you will find that, without exception, they go on to believe in some form of idolatry.

You see, we humans don't ultimately control our life on this planet, do we? We didn't create ourselves; the Bible says that God created us. But if we get rid of that, what does control us? You've got to believe that something controls us. What controlled our coming into this world, and what will control our going from it? What controls human destiny? What fixes the meaning and the purpose of life? Obviously, we humans don't do it, do we? So, if we lose grip on faith of the living, true God, we will substitute some form of idolatry.

So the Jews at this time worshipped Baal, the storm god and the god of fertility. It was false, of course, and Elijah was sent to restore God's people to faith in the true God (see 1 Kgs 17).

How did Elijah restore their faith?

First, he was given especially miraculous powers. He prayed, and the heavens withheld their rain for three years and more, until Israel was brought to the brink of disaster under the ensuing drought. Here was a servant of the living God, with supernatural powers at his disposal to stop the rain and demonstrate to Israel the true God who controlled the harvest. It wasn't Baal; it was the true God whom they had rejected.

If it had depended on that kind of sign and wonder, Israel would have never been restored. When Elijah had shut up the heavens for three years, you don't read that all the Israelites repented, and said, 'We see our mistake, let's seek the Lord.' No, indeed not. That wonderful miracle didn't convert anybody much. The thing that brought them to repentance was different, wasn't it?

Whose God will answer?

Elijah summoned the priests of Baal, and he put the proposition to them.

Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.' And all the people answered, 'It is well spoken.' (1 Kgs 18:23-24)

And they all agreed that's what they would do. The priests of Baal came in the beautiful clothes that they wore at their ceremonies, they put the meat on the altar, and called upon their god. The Hebrew historian poignantly records, '[they] called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered' (v. 26).

'Pray louder!' said Elijah, as he taunted them. 'Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' So they cut themselves with swords and lances, which was their custom, 'but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention' (see vv. 27–29). What a poignant moment in history. Here were people, following impersonal false gods, deifying the storm and the processes of fertility, but they're not God.

If you come in the day of your trouble, a bereavement, when you're asking yourself the basic questions—what is life about, what is its purpose, why do I suffer like this—where will you find the answer? Where can you find some meaning in life?

I'll tell you what to do. Go to the top of Slemish,¹ if you like, and call to the storm god. Call to the atom, or electromagnetism, basic energy, or the law of gravity, and you'll find what the priests of Baal found—no voice, and no one to answer. What can the blind, impersonal forces of nature say to you? They haven't even begun to plumb the depths of your human heart. They don't know what you feel like; your sorrows, your hopes and aspirations. They haven't any sense of purpose, like you have. You ask what life is about, where is it going, what is the meaning of suffering? What's the good of calling on electromagnetism, or the weak atomic force, or the strong atomic force? They are impersonal things, and self-evidently less than you are. They don't have these problems with the purpose of life.

If modern atheism is true, what a terrible thing it is to find ourselves in the middle of life, wanting to know its purpose. We human beings have a purpose for ourselves. We can look forward to the future. When we suffer we will want to know why. If you don't know the true and living God who made you, and all you have are the forces of nature ultimately controlling life, then you are lost indeed. There's no voice, and no one to answer. So, how may I know who the true God is?

How did the people know who the true God is?

You say, 'Here's your chance, Elijah. Do some spectacular miracles.'

Would that have brought the people's heart back? What Elijah did was to take his sacrifice and put it on the altar. Then he doused the sacrifice and the altar with barrels of water and called upon the living God to vindicate himself and speak to the people.

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.' (vv. 38–39)

¹ Slemish is a small mountain in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. Tradition holds that Saint Patrick tended sheep in this area, and during this time he found God.

God validated the sacrifice by sending fire from heaven to show he had accepted it, and then the floodgates opened and the rain came down from heaven to make the harvest possible (v. 45).

John the Baptist's ministry of restoration

He preached a message of repentance

Let's think now of John the Baptist. He came to Israel at a time when their spirituality was at a low ebb once more. How was he to prepare them to come back? Well, first he preached repentance. John did no miracle, actually (John 10:41), but he did preach repentance, didn't he? And then he said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (1:29).

How will you know who the true God is?

How shall I ever know for certain who the true God is amidst all the babel of religion? The old religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, or the new ones like the New Age movement, which is but a collocation of the old dressed up in modern style? There is one place on earth where you'll know him, and where you'll hear his voice answering your deepest problem. That place is the place of sacrifice; it is Calvary, where Christ died as our sacrifice for sin. God validated the sacrifice, not by sending fire from heaven to show he had accepted it, but by raising the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day. And the significance of the resurrection was first this: it was the resurrection of the Jesus *who had died for our sin*.

Do you remember the famous story about Solomon knowing who the real mother of the child was? (See 1 Kings 3.) Two prostitutes came before Solomon, and they were disputing about a child. One said, 'That's my child,' and the other said, 'No, it isn't, it's my child.' When Solomon couldn't get them to agree, he called an officer, and said, 'Take a sword and divide the baby in two. I'll give half to one, and half to the other. That'll be fair, won't it?'

One woman said, 'Yes, do that.'

And the other woman said, 'Don't do that. Give her the living child; by no means put him to death' (see v. 26).

And Solomon said, 'That's the mother.'

Anything rather than the child should die. How would you know who your creator is? He's the one who not only made you, but loves you. He'd do anything so that you should not perish. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). What stands as the most potent voice that God Almighty is the true God? *He gave his Son to die*.

False gods

I personally don't have a lot of difficulties in seeing that it is true. When I was last in Japan, a Buddhist woman asked me, 'Why do you Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God? I like Jesus myself, but why do you say he's the only way? Why can't we have Buddha as another way?'

I said, 'I'll tell you why I think Jesus is the only Saviour. I don't have any difficulty myself, because I'm a sinner. All religions tell me to be good, but I already knew that I ought to be good. What can the Buddha do for me? Buddhism does not believe in forgiveness. It says that there's no such thing as forgiveness. All it believes in is the inevitable law of cause and effect, sin and karma, and that's that. It doesn't profess to give you forgiveness, and that's my major problem. I don't need you to tell me to be good; I've sinned and broken God's law. If his law matters, then I'm in trouble. Jesus is the only one who says, "I'm your creator; I made you. You've sinned, but I love you, and I died for you."'

Ladies and gentlemen, there's no-one else in the running. Is there anyone in competition with him at that level? Did you ever hear of any other who died for your sin so that you might be forgiven?

After Elijah's great sacrifice the floodgates opened and the rain came down from heaven to make harvest possible. When the Lord Jesus died for our sins and rose again, then, on the fiftieth day, there came the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, the beginnings of an enormous harvest. So that's how we know who the true God is.

Elijah's future ministry of restoration

Just as John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for the Lord at his first coming, so Malachi's prophecy, as interpreted by our Lord, says that one day Elijah shall come: 'Elijah does come first to restore all things' (Mark 9:12).

Let's see how far the ancient history will serve us as a thought model. When Elijah staged the sacrifice at Carmel, brought Israel's heart back to the true God, and the rain came, multitudes of ordinary people in Israel were doubtless converted back to the living God. That was good, but the nation wasn't officially converted. Jezebel had no intention of getting converted; and if she didn't, Ahab didn't dare. It happens like that sometimes in families.

Officially, Israel still rejected the message of God

In fear of his life, Elijah ran off and came to Horeb, that great mountain range where Sinai is, and where the law was given. It was a very different mountain from Carmel, where Elijah's sacrifice had been accepted. This was the mountain of the law. It wasn't Horeb first, and then Carmel; it was Carmel first, and then Horeb when the people officially rejected it. So Elijah stood on Mount Horeb, and according to Romans 11:2, he prayed now, not *for* Israel, but *against* them. Whatever will happen to a nation that has had the gospel preached to them, the great sacrifice explained and demonstrated before their eyes, if they reject the message, and rely on their own efforts to keep God's law?

God's answer was two-fold

1. The first part was certainly a gentle rebuke to Elijah.

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He said, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down

your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.' (1 Kgs 19:9–10)

'Now calm down,' said God, 'that isn't true, Elijah. I will reserve myself seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Baal' (see v. 18). 'My cause isn't lost. There is a remnant, and if there's a remnant now it's the guarantee that one day I shall restore the whole nation.'

That's the purpose of having a remnant, and Paul takes this up in Romans 11. He's been mourning over the fact that John the Baptist came and prepared a way for Messiah, but they executed him, and then they crucified the Messiah himself. Now the gospel is being preached to them by the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, and still they reject that blessed 'rain'. What is happening to them?

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.' But what is God's reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' (vv. 1–4)

'So too at the present time,' says Paul, 'there is a remnant, chosen by grace' (v. 5). It might be small, but there is a remnant of the nation of Israel. 'I *am* one of them,' says Paul. 'For I myself am an Israelite' (v. 1). Not, 'I was', but 'I *am*'. A saved Israelite, part of the remnant that God has saved. The very fact that he has saved a remnant is God's announcement that one day he will save the whole of the nation. They've fallen, certainly, but they shall not be completely abandoned. One day they will be restored. So the first part of the message was a gentle rebuke to Elijah.

2. The second part is much misunderstood.

And he said, 'Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (1 Kgs 19:11–13)

God wasn't in the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire: they were but the outriders coming in front of the divine procession. 'After the fire the sound of a low whisper' (v. 12), a still small voice (KJV).

'Ah,' says somebody, 'that's what I like to hear. Not all this talk of judgment, but the still, small voice of calm.'

It certainly was a still small voice, but it didn't announce any calm. It announced the most sweeping judgment that had ever been executed on Israel. 'And the one who escapes from the

sword of Hazeel shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death' (v. 17). It wasn't God losing his temper, but, you see, if he has provided a sacrifice and given the rain, if Israel rejects it and Elijah stands on Mount Horeb and appeals to God against them, what do you suppose will happen?

Judgment is inevitable

If Israel has rejected the Lord Jesus as well as John the Baptist, and outraged the Spirit of grace who came at Pentecost (Heb 10:29), what do you suppose can happen?

You say, 'There will be inevitable judgment.'

Of course there will. It's already begun to take shape. In AD 70 some of it came, and more in AD 133 when the Gentiles from Latin Jerusalem built it as a Gentile city. But, according to their prophets, greater judgments are yet to come, when 'all the nations [shall] come against Jerusalem'; 'And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation' (see Zech 12:9; Dan 12:1). Parts of Jerusalem shall fall, and then the Lord shall come.

Intervals of grace

It happened, didn't it? Through Elijah, God announced the coming judgment, but it wasn't carried out immediately. After a few years it was executed upon Ahab, but not on the whole house of Israel until there had been this interval of grace. Elisha went about his delightful ministry of grace and salvation, and when his ministry was finished, the judgment came and the royal house of Israel was wiped out.

And so shall it be again, for the blessed Lord has gone back to heaven, the nation of Israel has rejected him and judgment has come upon Jerusalem, which shall be under the Gentiles 'until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled' (Luke 21:24). Then what? There has been a time of grace, like in Elisha's ministry, but judgment will come, 'the great day of the Lord' will come.

The final ministry of Elijah

Before the day of the Lord comes, in his supreme mercy God will send Elijah to prepare for the restoration of all things (Mal 4:5). When the Messiah comes, Romans 11 tells us, 'all Israel will be saved' (v. 26). 'They shall look on him whom they pierced' (see Zech 12:10). Elijah will come to minister, like John the Baptist did in an earlier day, and prepare Israel worldwide for their repentance and acceptance of their Messiah. And he shall do it in similar circumstances, shall he not?

You may say that one of the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11 is Elijah, and the other is Enoch. You might even be right, who knows? But the Bible doesn't tell us. What it does tell us is that, at the end time, there shall arise *the man of sin*.

For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. (2 Thess 2:3-4)

He shall claim divine honours from a world that has abandoned belief in the true God of heaven. Elijah shall come with powers to shut up the heaven, as he did in ancient time, and do his spectacular miracles. But he'll do more than that. Shall he not preach to the nation of Israel, scattered around the world, that their true Messiah is the one who died at Calvary? He shall prepare them for his coming by way of repentance, and when they see him there shall be great lamentation, 'mourning as for an only child, as they look upon him whom they pierced' (see Zech 12:10). The nation shall be saved, according to God's gracious prophetic programme.

You say, 'What are we meant to gather about all that? Why have you wearied our sore heads with all that heavy stuff? Do you not know we endured a very difficult day at business, and our heads were sore enough? Why didn't you choose rather to comfort us?'

Well, because I'm a bit perverse! And, secondly, isn't it a comfort? Who shall measure the mercies of God? A people who disowned their Messiah and sold him to the Gentiles shall be given another chance one day to repent and trust the Saviour. Like Saul on the Damascus road, who did his very best to do everything against Christ. But then *the Lord Jesus appeared to him* as literally as he appeared to the other disciples after the resurrection. 'I've seen the Lord,' he said. He hadn't just thought about him; the Lord appeared to him, and in that moment the man who was hitherto an enemy was converted.

At his appearing the nation shall repent

So the Jewish nation will be converted as a whole. Not every person, many shall perish in the judgments; but at his appearing the nation as a whole shall repent and believe. What a marvellous God, marvellous in his mercies.

You say, 'Yes, but that's all theoretic. What has it to do with us? We're not Elijahs.'

No, I think not, but we could imitate him.

Says James, 'Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed, and God heard his prayers.'

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:19-20)

Wouldn't you like to be doing that work? But you're doing it already, aren't you?

How soon the Lord will come, who can tell? How much easier it is now for all the nations of the world to come against Jerusalem. If the Lord doesn't come for another hundred years, it doesn't alter the fact that the face of the world has been changed recently, and what was unthinkable two years ago—that Russia and America would join hands against Israel—becomes a distinct possibility.

We're moving on, aren't we? And some of the men and women that rub shoulders with you may one day stand under the reign of the terrible beast, the man of sin, and say that there's no God. In God's hands, wouldn't you like to be someone who would prepare them for that terrible day, by showing them how they could find the true God, hear his voice, know him,

and be at peace with him? That's the work of someone like Elijah, to convert a sinner from his way and save a soul from death.

So may the Lord bless our meditation, and make us as those who are wise to know what Israel ought to do in these advanced and godless days, for his name's sake.

Shall we pray.

And now, Lord, we bring thee thy word. We have tried, Lord, to love thee with our minds as well as our hearts, and now at the end of a day, with our powers tired, we pray that what we have considered may be used by thy Spirit. Give us more than natural understanding; illumine our minds and help us to perceive thy word and its message. Grant that it may so abide with us, that the Holy Spirit may be able to make it fruitful in coming days, both in our intelligent understanding of what shall be, and its practical implications for us as we go forth to a godless world to preach the glorious message of the true God and the gift of the great sacrifice of his Son. Hear us then, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.