

Aim of lesson

To see that God is in control and is working out his purpose in times of disaster and suffering as well as in times of abundance and peace.

Bible background

1 Kings 17.

Outline of lesson

A time of suffering

You may like to begin the lesson by looking at the first section in the workbook. The headlines look like some of the things that happen today, but they are also things which form part of today's lesson of the beginning of the work of the prophet Elijah, things which happened nearly 3,000 years ago. Sometimes people today ask if God is in control when they see suffering and injustice in the world. We can learn from the life of Elijah that God is very much in control. He works out his purpose through hard times as well as those that are easy.

Ahab – King of Israel

The last lesson looked at a good king who reigned in Judah. This lesson tells us something of a very bad king who ruled in Israel at the same time that Jehoshaphat was ruling in the south. Ahab's father, Omri, had been a bad king leading Israel into idolatry, but of Ahab it is recorded that he did more evil than any before him, 1 Kings 16:30-33.

Not only was Ahab a bad king but he married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. She was a worshipper of Baal and Ashteroth and she brought 900 prophets of these gods with her. She set out to destroy the worship of the true God and slaughtered his prophets (1 Kings 18:13). The people of the land were suffering under a king and a queen who rules with injustice, murder, idolatry and fear. The people no longer worshipped God. They worshipped Baal. It might have seemed safer to follow Jezebel's gods!

Elijah announces a drought

Elijah, as a prophet of God, would be living with the same threat to his life that faced all God's prophets at this time. He announces to the king, that God is sending a drought (1 Kings 17:1). James 5:17 tells us that Elijah had prayed for this. Ask the class how they might feel if they were people in the land already suffering from the cruel government of the king and queen. Undoubtedly, some would feel that Elijah's announcement of a drought only made their lives worse. In the workbook the class can write down some of the thoughts of the people of the land, and of the prophets of the Lord, hiding in a cave. They might be able to see that a drought could remind the king and the people where the real source of their life lay. It would show them that God is the one who gives the blessing of rain, and the life that it brings, and that all their worship of Baal and Ashteroth was not having any good effect on the weather!

Does God bring suffering?

God did not bring the drought because he wanted the people to suffer, but because he wanted to rescue them from what was really destroying them – sin. This did involve suffering, but God, like Elijah, shared their sufferings (Isaiah 63:9). Elijah had to flee for his life and live in the wild (1 Kings 17:2-7). Later, he was fed by a widow who, with her son, was facing starvation herself (1 Kings 17:8-16). Perhaps she had been the wife of one of the prophets that Jezebel had killed. Read these sections with the class asking them to image how the suffering that the people experienced must have affected Elijah.

Why do the innocent suffer?

It is possible that Elijah is thinking about this problem of all the people suffering because of the sin of some, when the widow's son dies (1 Kings 17:17-24). Certainly, Elijah must have been aware of the prophets of God who risked their lives. Obadiah who was a faithful servant of God, the widows and children of the slaughtered prophets and others like himself who clung to their faith in God – all these suffered in the drought, as well as those who had deserted God. Perhaps the death of the widow's son brought it sharply into focus for Elijah. He prays for the boy and God restores his life. God had even greater compassion on his people – his son Israel – than Elijah had for the boy. Just as at the time of Elijah, suffering at the present time may not be understood or resolved until the resurrection. James 5:17 tells us that Elijah prayed for the drought, and then later he prayed for the rain. Three years of hardship for all, but what effect did it have?

The effects of the drought

The drought did not bring about a change of heart in the king or queen, or many of the people. This may have disappointed Elijah. Ask the class to think about what Elijah and the widow learned through this experience. They both learned of God's love, mercy and power. They learned of his compassion for his people, and his control over life and death. Many others in Israel may have learned the same lesson. Ask the class what they have learned.

Digging deeper

What is a prophet?

This section investigates what a prophet is and does.

Relevance to our lives

It is easy for us to lose a feeling of compassion for those who suffer, as we see so much news of disaster and suffering. You may like to ask the class to consider how God feels about some of the news they see or read of this week.

Prayer

The class may like to write or say a prayer for someone who is suffering.

Other suggestions for activities

- The class could write a play with the scene set in one of the caves that hid the prophets. They could discuss news of Elijah's activities.
- They could begin newspaper of the time of Elijah. This could run for the next five weeks.
- The students might like to find pictures from newspapers or magazines of areas of drought or countries where atrocities occur and use them to help them write a poem or piece of prose thanking God for rain and/or a country where we can worship in freedom.
- They could find out as much as they can about faithful Obadiah. What can they admire in his character? (it should be noted that he is unlikely to be the same person as the prophet Obadiah.)