

# In the Spirit and Power of Elijah

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> 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.” (Luk 1:13–17)

### Why Another Week on John?

- A. Before I begin, I want to address something that might be rising up in the back of your minds at this point—a question: “Why another week on John the Baptist? If John’s whole life mission was to get us to Jesus, and Jesus has come, why are we still here, concerning ourselves with this man? Let’s get to the Christ already!”
  - 1. The simple answer to that question is: While the redemptive program of God has now advanced beyond John’s historical moment, his Christological mission, in many ways, lives on.
    - a. Do you remember his mission? What was his fundamental message to the world? What was the voice in the wilderness crying out? “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mat 3:2).
      - i. You think that’s still relevant today? Anyone in this room need to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins made available in the Lord’s Christ? You say, “Well, maybe. There might be a few nonbelievers in here who need to repent and receive Jesus. But a lot of us in here have already done that.” To which I respond: “So?!”
- B. All Hallow’s Eve, nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther utterly sickened by what he sees going on in the Roman Catholic church—with its abuse of papal power, its sale of indulgences, its distortion of the gospel—finally decides to do something about it. So he takes a document upon which he’d written 95 indictments against the church, he walks up to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg with a hammer, and a few nails, and he nails those 95 theses to the door. 95 charges he hopes to bring to debate.

1. But I wonder if you know what the first theses was? What was the first note Luther would strike? “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”
  - a. In other words, repentance not only marks the beginning of the Christian life but is a day in day out dynamic that composes the ongoing essence of the Christian life. I am never fully where I ought to be. I am always in need of more of Christ’s mercy and grace. Therefore I am always repenting from my sin and beholding the lamb of God who takes away my sin. Therefore, the Christological mission of John the Baptist is, in many ways, just as relevant for me and you today as it was for Israel at the turn of the ages!
- C. Whether you’re not yet a believer, or you’ve been a follower of Christ longer than you can remember...we are not wasting our time!

### Connecting the Logic

- A. In our text, Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he will have a son. The son’s name is given at the end of v. 13: “John.” Then John’s person and work are described.
  1. This son will bring joy to Zechariah and many, because he will be great before the Lord, in that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and turn many of the children of Israel back to the Lord, in whose presence is fullness of Joy.
- B. This ministry of turning from v. 16 is fleshed out more fully for us in v. 17, and it’s this verse that will be our focus this morning:

“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.”

1. In this verse we have one dominant verb in the Greek: “go before.” And then we are told both what he will go before the Lord to do, and how he will do it.
  - a. The what is found in the purpose statements that follow:
    - i. “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and (implied: to turn the hearts of) the disobedient to the wisdom of the just”—so John will come to turn (which makes sense given what we just said about his call to repent).
    - ii. But we are given a second purpose statement in the last part of our verse: “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” To turn, to make ready. That’s what John is going before the Lord to do.
  - b. But how will he do it? We are given this right out of the gate: “and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah.” How will he go before the Lord to turn people to the Lord and to make ready people for the Lord? “In the spirit and power of Elijah.”

- C. He's going to look like Elijah here. But you say: "Who's Elijah?" I'm glad you asked. That, in essence, is this week's message. What does Elijah have to do with John and how does that help us understand his ministry of going before the Christ?
1. We will follow Elijah through three distinct layers of Biblical sediment, if you will:
    - a. Elijah in Historical Memory ([Kings](#)).
    - b. Elijah in Prophetic Hope ([Malachi](#)).
    - c. Elijah in Johannine Ministry ([Luke/Gospels](#)).

## (1) Elijah in Historical Memory (Kings)

- A. The reference to Elijah in Luke is a clear allusion to and even a direct quotation at points of prophetic words in Malachi. But these words in Malachi, written long after Elijah was dead and gone, won't mean nearly so much to us if we don't know who the historical Elijah actually was.
1. So Elijah in Historical Memory is our starting point. Who was he? And what does he have to do with John? I'll give a brief historical account here and draw some of the connections forward for us.

### (1) Description

- A. Consider first the mere description of Elijah. "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist" (2 Kin 1:8). Sounds a bit odd. And then in [Mat 3:4a](#) we read this about John: "Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist." Why would Matthew record such a seemingly silly little detail? To connect John with Elijah of old!

### (2) Mission

- A. Consider next the mission of Elijah. A helpful mnemonic at this point is simply to note that his name summarizes his mission and lasting legacy. Elijah: "My God is YHWH." His mission therefore was to call Israel back from idolatry to YHWH. Elijah is the great champion of monotheism: "Get back to the One true God!" And as the particulars of his mission unfold, we begin see the parallels between him and John.
1. Both are called to be prophets of the LORD.
  2. Both begin their ministries in the wilderness.
  3. Both Elijah and John faced hostile political power. For Elijah it was King Ahab in Israel. For John, it was King Herod, the Edomite.
  4. But even more, it was the unlawful wives of these kings that were particularly abrasive. Against Elijah it was the Phoenician Jezebel, who, after Elijah had slaughtered the prophets of her false god Baal, threatened him: "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (1 Kin 19:2). Against John, it was Herodias, who, because he

opposed Herod's marriage to her as the wife of his brother Philip, asked for his head to be brought to her on a platter (Mat 14:8).

- B. And beyond all of this conflict with hostile political power was an even greater conflict between false gods and the one true God, YHWH. Both prophets would spend their lives engaged against the idols of the land in attempt to bring the people back to YHWH.
1. Ahab, because of his unlawful marriage to the foreigner Jezebel, is the king notorious for officially introducing Baal worship into Israel. 1 Kin 18 records probably the most famous account from Elijah's life: his confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal on mount Carmel. It is quite possible that this climactic moment in his ministry serves as the paradigm that is taken up later by both Malachi and Luke. So we would be wise to linger for a moment.
    - a. Israel had been in a drought for three and half years now. Remember Baal was a storm god, a god of fertility. He should be able to make it rain. So because of Ahab's and Israel's sin, God had stopped up the clouds, trying to get their attention. And then, "the word of the Lord came to Elijah...saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth'" (v. 1). God was calling his one prophet to do combat with the hundreds of prophets of Baal. It would take place before "all Israel" (v. 19) on Mount Carmel. Two bulls were given. One for Elijah, one for the prophets of Baal. The challenge: prepare the offering, put it on the altar, but don't add the fire. Each will call upon their God and the one who answers with fire from heaven is the true God.
    - b. The prophets of Baal go first. And, from morning to afternoon, they call and they limp and they rave and they even cut themselves trying to move their deity to action: "but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention" (v. 29).
    - c. And then it's Elijah and YHWH's turn. And Elijah gets the bull ready and even dumps water all over the offering just to make it even more improbable for fire to come and consume it. And then we read this: "<sup>36</sup> At the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.<sup>37</sup> Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.'<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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. 36-39).
      - i. It was the time of the evening sacrifice. The goal of the whole combat was to "turn their hearts back" so that "my God is YHWH" became our God is YHWH! And a little cloud emerged on the horizon, "and there was a great rain" (v. 45).

2. And what, now, might I ask, was John's ministry? Well, at the time of the evening sacrifice, Gabriel appears to Zechariah to announce his coming son and describe his mission, which we read in vv. 16-17: "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..." Does that have a little more color for you now?

### (3) Succession

- A. But if John's ministry of turning is part of His going before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah," going before the Christ, to whom he is pointing everyone to, did the historical Elijah go before anyone? Actually yes: Elisha.
  1. Elijah before his time of departure takes Elisha to the Jordan river, which seems to serve as the anointing God called for back in [1 Kin 19:16](#). They cross to the wilderness where Elijah is taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and a double portion of his spirit is then put upon Elisha ([2 Kin 2:9](#)), who would go on to do even greater works than Elijah and would bring to completion the mission of Elijah by completely eradicating both the entire house of Ahab and the worship of Baal in Israel.
  2. We see in the transition between the two a foreshadowing of the movement from John to Jesus. For John too would anoint His successor in the Jordan river, at which time the Holy Spirit that filled John from the womb came to rest in an unprecedented way upon Jesus. Jesus would bring to completion all that John set out to accomplish in fully and finally doing away with sin and turning people back to the Lord their God.

## (2) Elijah in Prophetic Hope (Malachi)

- A. With the historical Elijah now fresh in our minds, we are ready to examine the other most significant place in the Old Testament where he is mentioned: Malachi, the last prophet and book in the OT. At this point we start to tread on the fringes of our text in Luke, for, as already mentioned, Gabriel is largely referencing Malachi in his description of John's ministry.
- B. Malachi was a post-exilic prophet. The return to YHWH brought in by Elijah and Elisha proved to be a temporary one.
  1. The whole history of Israel bears a striking resemblance to lawn care. If you want to get rid of the weeds you can't just mow over them each week. They will grow back and they will continue to seed and spread. So where Baal worship was mowed over, the worship of other idols cropped up in its place. The heart of the problem, quite literally, had not been dealt with. Israel had yet to be reformed at the level of the heart. Though God pursues and pursues and pursues, they reject and rebel at every point. So they go into exile.

2. But God still pursues them even there. And He brings them back. They rebuild the temple, but by Malachi's day, disillusionment had already set in thick. Even after return from land things don't seem to line up with all the prophets had led them to expect. You read Malachi and you see economic issues, drought, pestilence, they're under foreign rule even in their own land, and they're still dealing with enemy opposition. And worst of all, their hearts seem to be no better! Malachi is full of rebuke for their sin. They're back in the land and their still doing the things that got them expelled in the first place!
- C. But this book, largely full of rebuke, holds out one massive promise in its last verses: "<sup>5</sup> Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.<sup>6</sup> 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).
1. "Though we are still dealing with the same issues, I will not give up on you! Behold, I will send you Elijah, and he will turn you back ultimately to Me." And the OT just ends there, with this promise left hanging in the air, for over 400 years!

### (3) Elijah in Johannine Ministry (Luke/Gospels)

- A. Until Gabriel takes its words upon his lips to describe the ministry of John: "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."
1. It is no coincidence, then, that this last promise, this oracle from Malachi of a coming Elijah, is the very first promise picked up in Luke's gospel!
- B. God is on the move again! And He's bringing His people home! As I read this verse over and over, and pondered the basic trajectory of its words, I think we can sum up what God has been after with the historical Elijah and now with John the Baptist in a single word: reconciliation.
1. Broken things are coming back together in this verse. The picture is of fathers turning towards their children, the disobedient turning towards the righteous, but all of this is pointing towards the most glorious mending of all: a sinful people are being turned towards and reconciled with their holy God.
  2. The whole history from Elijah to John emphasizes one preeminent point: Though you persist in sin I will yet persist in grace! "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20). Because I want you with Me!
    - a. John came to call for repentance, yes, but that was not his final aim. Repentance has as its goal reunion, reconciliation with God. We are not just turning from sin but towards God.

- C. If Elijah stands for anything, then, it is this: the persistent love of YHWH for a sinful and rebellious people and His relentless pursuit of reconciliation with them.

## A Descending Conversation

- A. So, as this ministry of reconciliation reaches its final phase in the person and work of the new Elijah, John the Baptist, how is God going to do it? To answer this, I want to move forward to the mount of transfiguration. For here another layer of sediment is added to our text.
- B. The transfiguration scene forges another important link with Malachi's final oracle, for where both Moses and Elijah feature in the last three vv. of his book (4:4-6), so too both Moses and Elijah appear with Christ on the mount!
  - 1. Now, this scene is recorded for us in Luke's gospel (9:28-36), but there's a conversation that takes place as Jesus and the three are coming down that's not in Luke but is in Matthew. This conversation is of particular importance for us here, because it marks the point where Jesus' disciples finally understood John the Baptist to be the Elijah as prophesied by Malachi, and it shows more fully the connection between John and Jesus in their reconciling and restoring ministry.

<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"<sup>11</sup> He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (Mat 17:9-13)

- C. When Jesus mentions His being raised from the dead, the disciples probably immediately think of Dan 12:2 which refers to the great resurrection from the dead that will happen at the very end of history. But Jesus makes it sound like the resurrection is soon at hand. So, being good students of the OT, having read Malachi, they ask: "Then where is Elijah? Ya we just saw him up on the mountain there, but was that it? Wasn't he supposed to come to Israel for everyone to see and turn fathers to children and children to fathers? Isn't he supposed to come in some significant way 'before the great and awesome day of the Lord' and restore Israel to God. I'm confused? If the resurrection and restoration is coming, where is Elijah?"
  - 1. But what's Jesus' response? He validates the scribal interpretation: "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things." But this validation quickly turns to reproach: "But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased"—John ends up wasting away in prison and dying in utter shame, with his head being brought on a platter to a bloodthirsty adulteress.
    - a. Yes, the Scribes were right in their expectation of Elijah before the restoration at the end, but they missed the supremely important fact: he's

already come! The plan is advancing, only in a way that even the most learned in Israel would not only miss, but reject!

- D. John the Baptist is not the Elijah they expected. And Jesus was not going to be the Christ they expected.
1. Even John was struggling to get it. Do you remember when John is in prison and he sends messengers to Jesus asking: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luk 7:20b). Where’s the man of fire from Luk 3:17? Where’s the day of the Lord? Where’s the restoration of the tribes of Israel?
    - a. But how does Jesus respond? “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.<sup>23</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (vv. 22–23).
      - i. One scholar notes that this list is largely the list of the miracles of Elisha, conflating his miracles with those of the promised Servant (Isa 61:1-3). It’s as if Jesus saying: “Remind John that Elijah didn’t see the victory he labored for before his departure, but Elisha came after with a double portion of his spirit and accomplished it. I am the Elisha to your Elijah. And as ‘they did not recognize [you], but did to [you] whatever they pleased...so also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.’”
  2. He will be bound, struck, spit upon, and crucified. The very One who has come to restore all things will Himself have to be destroyed! But wonder upon wonder, it is His destruction that will be the means of His restoration!
    - a. If He would finally turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, He would Himself have be turned on by His own Father. If He would finally turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, He Himself would have to bear our disobedience and be counted the fool and the sinner.
      - i. He would have to deal with the roots of the abiding issue: our sinful hearts. He’s not just mowing here, He’s uprooting, He’s taking hearts of stone and giving hearts of flesh! He’s reconciling us to God!

“<sup>21</sup> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,<sup>22</sup> he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Col 1:21–22).
- E. All that Elijah and John were laboring for would be finally realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! A sinful people can now be fully and finally reconciled to a holy God!



## Conclusion

A. So let me close with two quick questions of application:

1. Are you RECONCILED? Because of Christ, there is now nothing in the way but yourself.
  - a. Some are still enamored by the idols of this world. It may take time, but at some point I pray you realize what the prophets of Baal did: the only God who will be there for you when the drought comes is YHWH. Your money, your job, your significant other, your health, your good looks, they're going to let you down. O turn and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ!
  - b. Others of us would come if we thought we were worthy. We get why the Reformation began by noting our continual need for repentance. "I'm sinning every day. The same stuff again and again. I would be reconciled but I fear I cannot."
    - i. But the call for repentance that began the Reformation led to the doctrine that's come, in many ways, to define it: justification by faith alone. Because of Christ's work, and Christ's work alone, we who trust in Him are counted righteous before Him! We're not selling indulgences here. We're not doing penance here. We're not anticipating centuries in the flames of purgatory here. May it never be! We may travel many miles from Him in our waywardness but it is always but one step back. All the prodigal son had to do was turn, and his father came running! O turn and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.
2. Are you RECONCILING?
  - a. You know that balance sheet you keep in some of your relationships? "He did this, I did that, back and forth. As long as there's a good give and take we're all right. If you start to take too much from me, it's over!" Then we start selling indulgences, requiring penance, keeping people in purgatory until they pay us back. Some of our hearts are going in that direction with people in our lives right now.
    - i. Jesus says burn the balance sheet. His grace breaks the ledger. If we are reconciled to Him we will also be reconciling with one another. We are not cul-de-sacs of His grace but conduits of it to others. Let it flow through you! He did not die so we could bicker and begrudge. He died so that we could be brought back to God and to one another!