



# Sermon & Small Group Study Guide



## Faith in the Fire A Great Cloud of Witnesses

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**Welcome** to this new study guide for the summer teaching series.

This term we are exploring theme *'Faith in the Fire'*, looking at the lives of some of the great characters of the Old Testament. How did their faith affect their circumstances and vice versa? In particular, how did their faith fare in times of fiery trouble and what does God want to teach us through their imperfect yet inspiring examples?

You may be holding this study guide because you are a member of a small group at St James. That's fantastic! Small groups are key to our strategy for nurture and discipleship, so we are delighted that you are in one. We hope you enjoy using this guide to prepare for your group meetings and then to explore the material together. Being in a small group is by far the best way to learn and grow as a disciple of Christ.

You may be holding this study guide as a member of St James who, for whatever reason, is *not* in a small group. You can find out more about small groups by reading the Small Group Purpose Statement on page 3 of this study guide. If you would like to join one, then please speak to Rob or Johan. If you can't manage that, then we don't want you to miss out on the benefits of the studies. Why not work through the studies yourself after each sermon or, better still, arrange to do them with a friend over a coffee.

The study guide is also available on the church web site – [www.stjames-streatham.org](http://www.stjames-streatham.org)

We continue to have positive feedback on the feature of blank pages for sermon notes, so we have included them again in this guide. Why not bring your study guide to church on Sunday morning (when we can eventually meet together in church again!) or use it when you watch the service at home for as long as we are online and take notes during the sermon. And, if you miss a sermon, you can always catch up by visiting the church web site where all sermons are posted soon after being preached.

So, fasten your seat belts, here we go!

## Small Group Purpose Statement

Small Groups at St James are small, Christ-centred communities meeting regularly for Bible study, fellowship, prayer, worship and service, fun, mutual support, accountability, and mission. Group members will encourage each other to grow as active disciples, rather than passive spectators, encourage others to join a group and support those who wish to grow in leadership.

### **Our expectation is that:**

Group members will come to know the saving love of God in their lives more deeply as they pray and study the Bible together.

They will be mutually encouraged to become more like Jesus in every part of their lives.

Group members will support each other in prayer and keep all prayer requests confidential. They will come to trust each other and be accountable to each other for those things the Holy Spirit is prompting them to change in their lives.

Group members will share each other's practical needs and seek to provide what they can to meet them.

They will be encouraged to grow as active disciples rather than passive spectators.

Group members will encourage others to lead and join a group.



# Introduction to the Series

George Michael famously sang: *'You've got to have faith!'* and he was right, but the Bible speaks of a different kind of faith to the one George was singing about, a kind of faith in God which is both a gift and a requirement for us all. In the New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews declares that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11 v 6), so that elevates faith onto a whole different level in terms of its seriousness and significance.

So, what is faith?

Well, again the writer to the Hebrews is helpful here. *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."* (Hebrews 11 v 1). He then goes on to list a number of characters from the Old Testament who exemplified this kind of faith. Chapter 11 of Hebrews is like the Westminster Abbey of faith heroes. You know what it is like walking round the famous old Abbey and seeing plaque after plaque commemorating the great and the good from the past. Well Hebrews 11 is a bit like that. The writer calls them a 'great cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12 v 1) who can inspire us to keep running the race God has marked out for us. In this study guide we will be exploring the stories of a series of Old Testament characters, some of whom made it into the Hebrews 11 Hall of Fame and some of who didn't. There is much to learn from them.

Now, the course of faith is never straight and smooth. It isn't for us and it wasn't for them. Jesus' disciples once asked him to increase their faith and he replied by telling them that they only needed mustard seed-sized faith to move a mountain! I think his point is to encourage us to be less anxious about how big our faith is (or isn't!) and be more focused on the One in whom we have faith. **So, size does indeed matter, but not so much the size of our faith in God, but the size of the God in whom we have faith.** Nevertheless, maybe we sometimes find ourselves echoing the words of the father who brought his son to Jesus to be healed in Matthew 9 v 24 who responded to Jesus' declaration that everything is possible for the one who believes by saying: *'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'*

The truth is that our faith is never more needed than when we are going through difficult times, when we are 'in the fire', as it were. Faith is like a muscle, it only really gets stronger when it is exercised, and a time of fiery trial is like a spiritual gym, an environment to work out our faith and strengthen it (1 Peter 1 v 6-7). My hope and prayer is that this series will give us some pointers as to how to make the most of being 'in the fire', of being in the gym, so that God's promise in Romans 8 v 28 will be fulfilled in us, that He works all things together for good for those who love Him, to conform us to the likeness of Christ, to make us more like our beautiful Saviour Jesus.

So, fasten your seat belts, here we go!

# Study 1: Rahab & the Spies

## Joshua 2 v 1-21

### Context:

Forty years had passed since Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. They could have been in the Promised Land of Canaan within a fortnight of crossing the Red Sea, but due to their stubborn hearts and lack of faith in the power and goodness of God, they had been wandering in the desert for a generation, going nowhere and doing nothing. Now Moses is dead and the reins of leadership have passed to his long-time assistant Joshua who has assembled the Hebrews on the east side of the River Jordan, ready to cross over into the Promised Land. There is one major obstacle in the way – there are already people living there who won't react too kindly to the Israelites arrival en masse. It will take a fight to settle in the land and the first city they will come to is the ancient fortress of Jericho.

### Observation:

1. Who did Joshua send into the land and what were his instructions (v 1)?
2. Where did they stay (v 1)?
3. Who was told about the spies' arrival and what was his response (v 2-3)?
4. What did Rahab do with the spies (v 4a & v 6) and what did she say to the soldiers (v 4b-5)?
5. What did the soldiers do in response to Rahab's words (v 7)?
6. What does Rahab say a) about the people of Israel, and b) about the LORD in v 9-11?
7. What request does she make in v 12-13 and what is the reply of the spies in v 14?
8. What does she do and say in v 15-16?
9. What instructions did the spies give Rahab before they left in v 17-20?
10. What did she do after they left (v 21)?

### Meaning:

1. What past event might Joshua have been recalling in v 1 leading him to send only *two* spies into Jericho (see Numbers 13 v 1-2, 26-33, 14 v 26-38)?
2. Why do you think Rahab hid the spies and why did she lie to the soldiers (v 4-7)?
3. The ninth commandment says we should not lie (Exodus 20 v 16). So, did Rahab do the right thing by lying to the soldiers or was she breaking God's law?
4. Can you think of any other occasion in the Bible (or Christian history or experience) where someone has lied and God has blessed it (see Exodus 1 v 15-21)? What can we learn from these stories about how to judge when, if ever, it is acceptable to lie?
5. What was at stake for Rahab in lying to the soldiers? What would you have done?
6. How does Rahab express her faith in v 8-11?
7. The word 'Jericho' means 'City of the Moon' and the residents, including Rahab and her family, would have been moon worshippers. What, therefore, is the significance of Rahab's words at the end of v 11?
8. How is she told to demonstrate her faith in v 17-20?
9. What do you think is the symbolic significance of tying a scarlet cord in the window (v 18 & 21)? – see Exodus 12 v 21-23.
10. Joshua 6 v 22-25 tells us that the spies kept their word and saved Rahab and her family when the Israelites invaded and, at the time the Book of Joshua was written, she was still

alive and living among the Israelites. She became the mother of Boaz (Matthew 1 v 5) and the great great grandmother of King David whose family tree eventually leads to Jesus!  
What does this tell us about the value of faith?

### **Application:**

1. How can you balance the different values and principles of God's word when they seem to conflict (e.g. telling the truth vs saving life)? Can you think of any examples of conflicting values in addition to the ones seen in our study today and how you might work them out?
2. What might we do to strengthen our faith so that we might respond like Rahab if we ever need to?
3. How do we see the scarlet cord reflected in the cross of Jesus and what are the connections between the Passover, the scarlet cord and the cross? What does this mean for our relationship with God today?

### **Pray:**

- For God's wisdom to make right judgements when faced with competing values, such as the value of protecting life versus the value of telling the truth.
- For faith like Rahab to stake our lives on God and his love & power.
- Thank God for the scarlet cord of the cross by which God's wrath passes over us and by which we are saved!

### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 2: Joshua & the Walls of Jericho

## Joshua 5 v 13 – 6 v 20

### Context:

In our previous study we met Rahab, a woman of great faith and courage, who made a deal with the Israelite spies to save herself and her family when Jericho would fall to the Israelites. Some days have passed since then as we come to today's study and a lot has happened. The Israelites have crossed the River Jordan by a miracle of God, reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea forty years earlier. Joshua has circumcised all the males who were born during the period in the wilderness, and the whole company of God's people has celebrated the Passover in memory of their deliverance from Egypt. The stage is now set for the assault on Jericho, but this will require great faith on the part of Joshua and the people.

### Observation:

1. What did Joshua see as he neared Jericho (5 v 13a)?
2. What did Joshua ask him (5 v 13b)?
3. What was his reply in 5 v 14 and what was Joshua's response?
4. What did he tell Joshua to do (5 v 15)?
5. What was the security situation in Jericho in 6 v 1?
6. What good news did Joshua receive in 6 v 2?
7. What were the details of the battle plan delivered to Joshua in 6 v 3-5?
8. How did Joshua respond to the plan he received (6 v 6-7)?
9. What did the people do in response to Joshua's orders (6 v 8-14)?
10. What special instructions did Joshua give on the seventh day (6 v 15-19)?
11. What was the outcome (6 v 20)?

### Meaning:

1. What or who do you think the 'commander of the army of the LORD' is (5 v 14)? What hints as to his identity do you find in the text (see Joshua's response in 5 v 14b, the commander's instructions in 5 v 15, and the designation of the words spoken in 6 v 2)?
2. Why has the mysterious visitor come – what was the purpose of his visit to Joshua (see Joshua's question in 5 v 14b, and the LORD's words in 6 v 2-5)?
3. How can the LORD say He has delivered Jericho into Joshua's hands when the battle hasn't yet been fought (6 v 2)?
4. What does this tell us about the sovereignty of God and the way He works in the world?
5. Although the LORD has decreed victory over Jericho, Joshua must still follow His instructions and the battle must still be fought (6 v 3-5). What does this tell us about the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the actions of human beings in accomplishing the purposes of God?
6. What do you think of the battle plan? How would you have reacted to such a plan if you were Joshua?
7. How did Joshua demonstrate faith in the way he responded to the LORD's orders? What was at stake for Joshua in putting his faith in the LORD's battle plan?
8. How did Joshua demonstrate faithfulness to the promise made in the previous study to Rahab (6 v 17, see also 6 v 22-25)?

**Application:**

1. How does God reveal His will to us today? In what ways does He give us guidance or instructions, either generally or specifically? Can you share any personal examples from your own life or that of other Christians?
2. How is the Bible's teaching about the partnership between God's sovereignty and our actions both an encouragement and a challenge to us?
3. In what ways is faith both required and tested when we are called to follow God's guidance or instructions?
4. How does the outcome of the Jericho story encourage your faith?

**Pray:**

- For God's grace to 'hear' his guidance and instructions.
- For faith to take risks to follow God's plans.
- For God's grace to keep our promises, as Joshua did to Rahab.

**Sermon Notes:**

# Study 3: Deborah & Jael

## Judges 4 v 1-24

### Context:

In the first study in this series we were introduced to a great female hero of faith, Rahab, and today we meet two more women of faith, Deborah and Jael. They lived in a dangerous and violent period in Israel's history. God had brought his people out of slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses and had led them into the promised land of Canaan under Joshua. He had placed them at the crossroads of the world with a mission to live in such a way as to show the nations what life is like when God is your king. The story of the Old Testament is, by and large, the tragic tale of how they consistently failed in this mission until they were eventually kicked out of the land again. The Book of Judges marks a particular low point in this history as the nation sinks into a destructive downward spiral: they rebel against God, God allows them to suffer at the hands of their enemies, they cry out to God for help, God in His great mercy delivers them under the leadership of a 'nagid' (literally a 'judge' in English), but then the next generation repeats the cycle and so it goes on over and over again. In this study we meet a 'nagid' by the name of Deborah and another courageous heroine called Jael. To say they outshine the men of their day would be an understatement.

### Observation:

1. Who had died and what was the Israelites attitude toward God after his death (v 1)?
2. How did God respond (v 2)?
3. What did King Jabin and Commander Sisera do to Israel and for how long (v 3a)?
4. What did the Israelites eventually do in response (v 3b)?
5. Who was leading (judging) Israel at the time (v 4)?
6. Where was her HQ and what did she do for the people (v 5)?
7. Who did she send for in v 6 and what did she tell him in v 6-7?
8. How did Barak reply in v 8?
9. What was her reply (v 9)?
10. How strong was Israel's army and where did they muster (v 9-10)?
11. Who told Sisera the movements of Barak and his troops (v 11) and what did Sisera do in response (v 12-13)?
12. What was Deborah's rallying cry to Barak in v 14a?
13. What did Barak do and what was the effect (v 14b-16)?
14. Where did Sisera flee to (v 17)?
15. What did Jael say and do in v 18?
16. What two things did Sisera request in v 19-20?
17. What did Jael do in v 21 and who did she show in v 22?
18. What was the final outcome of this conflict (v 23-24)?

### Meaning:

1. What do you think it means that 'The LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin' (v 2)?
2. What do you think God's reason and purpose were in doing this?
3. What do you think it would have been like for the Israelites living for 20 years under the cruel hand of Jabin (see 5 v 6)?
4. What picture do we get of Deborah as we are introduced to her in v 4-6?

5. Looking at v 3, why would Deborah's statement to Barak in v 6-7 have taken such great faith?
6. How does Deborah's faith contrast with that of Barak (v 8)?
7. How would her words to Barak in v 9 shame him and how were these prophetic words fulfilled as the story unfolds?
8. What do v 6-7 and v 14-15 tell us about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human actions?
9. Mount Tabor is located near Nazareth in Galilee and overlooks the Jezreel Valley, opposite Megiddo, through which the River Kishon flows. The Israelite troops charged down Mount Tabor into the valley to meet Sisera & Jabin's men by the Kishon. But how did God actually win the battle for the Israelites? – see 5 v 4-5 and 19-22.
10. What do you think about Jael's actions in v 18-22?
11. Did you think God approved of what she did? – see 4 v 23-24 and 5 v 24-31.

### Application:

1. In Romans 1 v 18-28 Paul speaks of God giving people over to the logical consequences of their sin (see especially v 24, 26 and 28). This is an expression of God's wrath against idolatry (see v 18-23). In what ways is this 'giving over' similar to God's 'selling' the Israelites into the hands of Jabin in Judges 4 v 1-2? How do these verses challenge us and what encouragement can we take from the way God responded to the Israelites cry for help (v 3b)?
2. This is the second example of a *woman* of faith in our series so far. What other examples of women of faith can you share from the Bible, Christian history or your own experience?
3. How can we be encouraged by this study's portrayal of the dynamic relationship between God's sovereignty and our actions? What difference does knowing this truth make to the way we pray and live our daily lives?

### Pray:

- For God's forgiveness for our sin & idolatry.
- For faith to trust God even when the odds are stacked against us.
- For eyes to see the sovereignty of God in our daily lives and the grace to act accordingly.

### Sermon Notes:

# Study 4: Gideon & the Midianites

## Judges 6 v 1-24

### Context:

In our previous study we travelled back to the period in Israel's history when they had got themselves caught in a destructive, downward spiral. There we met two great women of faith, Deborah and Jael, who showed up their male counterparts with their courage and trust in God, and by their hands God brought about a great deliverance for His people after 20 years under the oppressive rule of King Jabin and his commander Sisera. Tragically, we are going to see in today's study that the rebellious Israelites learned nothing from their experience and simply repeated the cycle to their own harm. BUT God is gracious and merciful yet again.

### Observation:

1. What did the Israelites do yet again (v 1a) and what was God's response yet again (v 1b)?
2. Describe the situation in the nation in v 2-5.
3. What was Israel's response in v 6?
4. How did God initially respond in v 7-8a?
5. What does God remind the people of in v 8-10 and what does he accuse them of at the end of v 10?
6. Who came to the oak tree in Ophrah belonging to Joash the Abiezrite (v 11) and what was Gideon doing and why?
7. What were the first words spoken by the visitor to Gideon (v 12)?
8. What was Gideon's reply (v 13)?
9. How did God respond in v 14 and what was Gideon's reply in v 15?
10. What words of encouragement did God give him in v 16?
11. What does Gideon ask for in v 17-18 and how does God respond?
12. What did Gideon bring out to the oak tree (v 19)?
13. What did the visitor then do (v 20-21) and how did Gideon respond (v 22)?
14. What words of comfort did God speak in v 23 and what did Gideon do in response in v 24?

### Meaning:

1. Remind yourself of what we learned in the previous study about what it meant for God to 'give' the people into the hands of their enemies and why he did it.
2. Can you imagine living under such oppression? What would it have been like? How do you think you would have coped?
3. Why do you think it is sometimes only when we hit the bottom that we cry to God for help (see v 6)?
4. Why do you think God's initial response to their cry for help was to send them a prophet (see v 7-10)?
5. What clues do we see in the passage to help us identify the visitor? – see v 11, 12, 14, 16, 18b, 20, 21, 22, 23. (Remind yourself of something similar in Study 2 on page 7 when Joshua met the commander of the LORD's army. Is this the same visitor?).
6. What was unusual about the way Gideon was threshing the wheat (v 11)? Do you think this was a sign of Gideon's fear or his cleverness?
7. In what ways does God's greeting in v 12 seem to contradict the reality?

8. How would God's words in v 14 be both a challenge and an encouragement to Gideon?
9. How do Gideon's words in v 15 demonstrate his lack of faith at this point?
10. After more encouraging words from God in v 16, how is Gideon's faith still struggling and what does he do about it?
11. Why would Gideon have feared death in v 22-23?
12. From what you know of the rest of the story, is this the last time Gideon struggles with his faith and how does the story pan out?

### **Application:**

1. This is the first character in our series so far who seems to have struggled somewhat with their faith. How can Gideon's story encourage and help you in your own faith struggles?
2. Gideon told God he was the least of the least (v 15) and yet God addressed him as 'Mighty Warrior' (v 12). How can we find encouragement in this seeming contradiction?
3. God seems to make a habit in the Bible of choosing the least likely people to serve him and accomplish his purposes. Can you think of any other biblical characters like this? Why does God work this way?
4. Have you ever 'tested' God like Gideon did (twice)? Do you think it is okay to do so?

### **Pray:**

- For faith to see ourselves as God sees us.
- For humility to acknowledge that only by God's power can great things be accomplished.
- For God's assurance in any dilemma or decision we are currently facing.

### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 5: Hannah

## 1 Samuel 1 v 1-20

### Context:

So, we have met Rahab, Deborah and Jael, and now yet another great female hero of the Bible - Hannah. The fiery circumstances in which we are called upon to exercise faith are many and varied. For Hannah it was the emotional, social and spiritual pain of childlessness, a pain that is familiar to many women today. So, what can we learn from her experience and her faith?

### Observation:

1. What details are we told about Elkanah in v 1?
2. What are we told about his two wives in v 2?
3. What did Elkanah do once a year (v 3)?
4. What did he do with the sacrificial meat (v 4)?
5. Why did he give extra to Hannah (v 5)?
6. What explanation is given in v 5-6 for Hannah's childlessness?
7. What was Peninnah's attitude toward Hannah (v 6-7)?
8. What was Elkanah's response (v 8)?
9. What did Hannah do in v 9-10 and how was she feeling?
10. What was the content of her prayer in v 11?
11. Who was watching her as she prayed (v 12)?
12. What mistaken assumption did Eli jump to and why (v 13-14)?
13. How did Hannah respond to Eli's accusation (v 15-16)?
14. What was Eli's reply (v 17)?
15. How did Hannah's disposition change after she had prayed (v 18)?
16. What happened after she returned home (v 19) and what was the outcome (v 20)?

### Meaning:

Note: Although God's design at creation was for marriage to be between one man and woman intended for life (Genesis 2 v 24), God seems to accommodate the practice of polygamy for a period in the Old Testament (as is the case here in v 2). However, in the New Testament Jesus takes us back to God's original design and multiple marriage partners is no longer an option (Matt 19 v 4-6).

1. Describe the impact of childlessness on Hannah? How did it affect her emotionally, spiritually and socially?
2. This is an incredibly sensitive issue, but do you know of anyone who has faced or is currently facing this fiery circumstance of childlessness? How has it impacted them?
3. How do we understand the sovereignty of God in the giving or withholding of life, as stated in v 5-6, and does this help or hinder our faith?
4. What we say to those who are experiencing this kind of pain can be either helpful or hurtful. Into which category would you put Elkanah's words in v 8? Would you have phrased your words differently and, if so, how?
5. How do Hannah's actions in v 9-10 show that she hadn't lost her faith?
6. What was Hannah referring to in her promise at the end of v 11 (see Numbers 6 v 1-8)? Can you think of any other such people in the Bible (see Judges 13 v 2-5, Luke 1 v 13-17)?

7. Why was this promise costly for Hannah?
8. Do you think Hannah was trying to bargain with God in v 11? If so, was she right or wrong to do so?
9. Why do think Hannah's disposition changed in v 18?
10. The story has a happy ending as God heard Hannah's prayer and gave her a son. How might that have affected her faith (see her song in 2 v 1-10 for clues)?

#### **Application:**

1. How might we sensitively help and support those who are struggling with childlessness?
2. How can we embrace the sovereign will of God and not lose our faith if he doesn't answer our prayers in the way we would wish?
3. Have you ever tried to bargain with God? What happened?
4. What can we learn about prayer from the manner in which Hannah prayed in this story, both her words and actions?

#### **Pray:**

- For those who are struggling with the pain of childlessness.
- For those whose prayers haven't been answered in the way they would wish.
- For God's grace to be sensitive in our help and support of those in any kind of need.

#### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 6: Abigail

## 1 Samuel 25 v 1-38

### Context:

In today's study we are introduced to yet another great heroine of the Bible, following in the footsteps of Rahab, Deborah, Jael and Hannah. Her name is Abigail. She is included in the story of Scripture and in our series because she demonstrated great faith and wisdom in the face of a fiery challenge. At the time, David, secretly anointed by Hannah's son, Samuel, to be the next king of Israel, is being hunted down by the current king, Saul, who is insanely jealous of him. David and his men are constantly on the move seeking to stay one step ahead of his great rival and they are often dependant on the kindness and goodwill of others to feed and help them. This is where Abigail comes into the story.

### Observation:

1. What sad event happened in v 1 and how did David react?
2. What details do we learn in v 2-3 about two of the main characters in our story?
3. What did David hear in v 4, what did he do in v 5 and what message did he send in v 6-8?
4. What was Nabal's reply in v 10-11?
5. What was David's reaction when he received Nabal's response (v 12-13)?
6. What message did one of the servants give to Abigail in v 14-17?
7. What *did* she do in v 18-19 and what *didn't* she do?
8. What had David been saying to his men just before they met Abigail (v 20-22)?
9. What does she do and say to David in v 23-27?
10. What does Abigail predict for David (v 28), what blessing does she pronounce on him (v 29), and what does her wisdom stop David from doing and how will this benefit him in the future (v 30-31)?
11. What is David's response to Abigail (v 32-34)?
12. What does he finally do and say in v 35?
13. How does the story end in v 36-38?

### Meaning:

1. Looking at 1 Samuel 16 and also thinking of the ongoing manhunt being conducted by King Saul against David, how do you think David would have been feeling in v 1?
2. How do the descriptions of Nabal and Abigail contrast at the beginning of the story (v 2-3)?
3. In OT days, sheep shearing was always a festive occasion when communities came together to indulge in eating, drinking and celebrating. So, what do you think David was hoping for in v 4-8 and on what basis?
4. Why was Nabal's response to David so inappropriate (v 10-11)?
5. Was David's reaction on hearing of Nabal's response appropriate or not (v 12-13)?
6. What does it tell us about Abigail's character that the servant went to seek *her* help in v 14-17?
7. How do Abigail's words and actions in v 18-31 demonstrate both her faith and her wisdom?
8. What risks was she taking in acting in this way?
9. How do her words and actions benefit both David and Nabal?

10. Abigail is not known as a prophet, but what prophetic words does she pronounce in v 28-31 and how were they fulfilled later in David's life?

11. How does God demonstrate his attitude toward Nabal at the end of the story in v 37-38?

### **Application:**

1. How might money and power corrupt our character as it did with Nabal? How can we avoid such corruption?
2. How might anger and resentment lead us to take inappropriate action, as it almost did with David? How might we avoid this temptation?
3. In what ways might God call us to speak wisdom into situations and into people's lives, and how might this calling present risks and challenges for us, as it did with Abigail?

### **Pray:**

- For God's grace not to be surly and mean.
- For God's grace not to be angry and resentful.
- For wisdom and faith like Abigail.

### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 7: Elijah on Mount Carmel

## 1 Kings 18 v 16-46

### Context:

The prophet Elijah lived at a time of national crisis in the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab was on the throne, a king described in the Bible as worse than all his predecessors. He was an expert in idol worship, leading people into sacrificing to the fertility god, Baal. Then Ahab married a princess from Sidon named Jezebel who introduced the fertility goddess Asherah into the mix and things got even worse. In judgement God brings a drought upon the land, pronounced by Elijah. Ahab is incensed with the prophet and despite trying to hunt him down he can't find him anywhere. This is because God has kept him safe, away from Israel, for the three years of the drought. But God then commands Elijah to return to the land to meet the king because God is about to end the drought and send rain. Elijah first meets a faithful follower of God, Obadiah, who is a trusted servant of Ahab, and has risked his life to save and hide a hundred of God's prophets so Jezebel can't kill them. Elijah asks Obadiah to tell his master, Ahab, that he wants to meet him. This is where we pick up the story, one of the most famous in the whole of the Old Testament.

### Observation:

1. What were Ahab's first words on meeting Elijah (v 17)?
2. What is Elijah's brave reply in v 18 and what command does he give the king in v 19?
3. What question does Elijah put to the people assembled on Mount Carmel in v 21 and what was their response?
4. What challenge does Elijah propose in v 22-24 and what is the response?
5. What do the prophets of Baal do in v 25-26 and what was the response?
6. What cheeky advice does Elijah give them in v 27?
7. What did they do in response and what was the result (v 28-29)?
8. What did Elijah then do in v 30-35?
9. What does Elijah do in v 36-37 and what was the result in v 38?
10. How did the people then respond to what they had seen (v 39)?
11. What happened next in v 40?
12. What did Elijah tell Ahab to do and why in v 41?
13. What did Elijah do as Ahab went off (v 42)?
14. What did Elijah then ask his servant to do and how many times did he ask him to do it (v 43)?
15. What did he eventually see (v 44) and what did Elijah then tell Ahab to do?
16. What then happened (v 45) and what did both Ahab and Elijah do (v 45-46)?

### Meaning:

1. When you consider that Ahab is the king and holds all the political power, why is it surprising to hear Elijah speak as he does in v 18-19 and where did he find such faith and courage to speak like this?
2. The word 'waver' in v 21 means 'to limp'. How does the word 'limp' help us to understand the situation of the people of Israel as defined by Elijah in v 21?
3. Why do you think the writer of this story emphasises the numbers (contrast v 19 & 25 with v 22)?
4. Is Elijah right in his claim in v 22? (See 18 v 3-4).

5. How does the method of the prophets of Baal & Asherah (v 26 & 28-29) contrast with that of Elijah (v 36-37)? What does the writer want us to conclude from this contrast?
6. What do you think was the significance of the number of stones Elijah used to build his altar (v 31)?
7. What kind of faith and courage would it have taken for Elijah to make such a challenge as this? What was at stake here?
8. How can Elijah hear the sound of a heavy rain when it hasn't yet started to rain (v41)? How is this yet another sign of his faith?
9. What do you think Elijah was actually doing in v 42?
10. What do you think is the significance of the number seven in v 44?
11. What is the outcome of Elijah's actions in v 45?

### **Application:**

1. How might doubt or a lack of clear commitment to God cause us to 'limp'? Can you share any examples from your own experience?
2. Would you ever consider making a challenge like Elijah's to those who doubt that God is truly God? Why/Why not?
3. Yet again we see in this story the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the actions of human beings. God had decreed that he would send rain (v 1) and Elijah could spiritually 'hear' it coming before it actually began to fall (v 41), but it didn't actually come until Elijah had prayed (v 42-45). So, what does this consistent biblical truth teach us about life, the world, history, and how we are meant to live in it?

### **Pray:**

- For faith and courage to call out sin when we see it.
- For God to strengthen our faith so we won't limp.
- For eyes to see and embrace the relationship between God's sovereignty and our actions.

### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 8: Elijah Runs Away

## 1 Kings 19 v 1-18

### Context:

In our previous study we witnessed the spectacular victory of God through the faith of Elijah on top of Mount Carmel. Against all the odds and massively outnumbered, Elijah's faith stood strong and national revival broke out, for a time at least. Yet, how often has it been the case that a glorious triumph is followed by an ignominious defeat, a mountain top experience of God's love and power is followed by a descent into the valley of despair, disillusionment and even depression, a great spiritual high is followed by a deep spiritual low. It is at times like this that our faith is sorely tested and the rubber truly hits the road.

### Observation:

1. Who did King Ahab tell about the events on Mount Carmel (v 1)?
2. What was her response (v 2)?
3. How did Elijah feel and what did he do (v 3a)?
4. Where was the first stop on his journey (v 3b) and what did he do and say in v 4-5a?
5. Who appeared twice and what did he do (v5b-8a)?
6. Where did Elijah then travel on to (v 8b)? How long did it take to get there and what did he do when he arrived (v 8b-9a)?
7. Who spoke to him and what did he say (v 9b)?
8. What was Elijah's reply (v 10)?
9. What was Elijah told to do and why in v 11a?
10. What different phenomena did Elijah witness in v 11b-12?
11. Which of these phenomena signified the presence of God and what did Elijah do when he recognised this (v 12b-13a)?
12. What question was Elijah then asked for a second time (v 13b) and what was his reply (v 14)?
13. What instructions was Elijah then given in v 15-17?
14. What good news did Elijah receive in v 18?

### Meaning:

1. Do you find it surprising that Elijah had shown such courage against over 400 enemies on Mount Carmel but then runs for his life from just one (v 1-3a)? What could account for such a change of attitude in Elijah?
2. How would you describe Elijah's condition - spiritually, physically, emotionally, and mentally in v 4-5a?
3. Why do you think experiencing pressure in one aspect of our being so often has a knock-on effect on the others?
4. Elijah is not the first person to experience the mountain top to valley journey, moving quickly from elation to depression. Looking at the story as a whole, why do you think this happens to him?
5. Why do you think the angel of the LORD attends to his physical needs first (v 6-7) and what does this tell us about God's care for us?

6. Horeb (v 8) is another name for Mount Sinai. What significant event happened there many years previously (Exodus 20) and why do you think Elijah travelled there specifically?
7. What was the significance of Elijah going into the cave in v 9 and the promise God makes in v 11 and their connection with Exodus 33 v 18-23?
8. What is the connection between, on the one hand, Elijah's complaint in v 10 & v 14 and the events that led up to the confrontation on Mount Carmel, and, on the other hand, what happened in Exodus 32 just before Moses' encounter with God as described in Exodus 33 v 18-23? What does God want us to see and understand by making these connections?
9. God sometimes shows up in a mighty wind (Exodus 14 v 21), sometimes in an earthquake (Numbers 16 v 31-34), and sometimes in fire (1 Kings 18 v 38). So, what is the significance of the way God shows up in v 12b-13 – why does God show up in *this* way at *this* moment?
10. Why do you think God won't allow Elijah to keep running away from his problems (v 15)?
11. In what way would God's words in v 15-17 be both a *challenge* and an *encouragement* to Elijah?
12. How do God's words in v 18 contrast with Elijah's perception in v 10 & 14, and how might mental, spiritual, physical and emotional exhaustion affect our grasp of reality?

### Application:

1. Have you ever experienced a time like that of Elijah when you have felt spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically burnt out? What was it like? What helped you during that time and what didn't help you?
2. Have you ever tried to run away from your problems? Why is it not a long-term solution?
3. In what different ways has God made himself known to you (wind, earthquake, fire, gentle whisper etc) and how do we discern when an experience has truly come from God or not?

### Pray:

- For people we know who are struggling with their faith.
- For grace and wisdom to discern when God is truly making himself known to us.

### Sermon Notes:

# Study 9: Elisha & the Arameans

## 2 Kings 6 v 8-23

### Context:

We saw in the previous study that part of God's gracious provision for the downcast Elijah was to recruit an assistant for him who would eventually succeed him as prophet. This was Elisha and we meet him in today's study. At the time, the northern kingdom of Israel was under constant threat from Aram (modern day Syria) and in this study we see that Israel had a secret weapon up their sleeve to assist them in their battles with the Arameans.

### Observation:

1. How were the King of Aram's battle plans being constantly thwarted (v 8-10)?
2. How did the King of Aram feel about this (v 11a)?
3. What question did he ask his officers (v 11b) and what was their reply (v 12)?
4. What command did the King then give (v 13a)?
5. Where was Elisha and what did the King do when he found out (v 13b-14)?
6. What did Elisha's servant (Gehazi) see when he went out next morning and what was his reaction (v 15)?
7. How did Elisha reassure his servant (v 16)?
8. What did Elisha pray and what was the result (v 17)?
9. What did Elisha pray next as the enemy army approached and what was the result (v 18)?
10. What did Elisha say to the enemy and where did he take them (v 19)?
11. What did Elisha pray next on arriving in Samaria and what was the result (v 20)?
12. What question did the King of Israel ask Elisha (v 21)?
13. What was Elisha's reply (v 22)?
14. What did the King of Israel do and what was the final outcome (v 23)?

### Meaning:

1. How do you think Elisha knew, not only the King of Aram's battle plans but even the words he spoke privately in his bedroom (v 8-12)?
2. What does this tell us about God? Do you find this an encouraging or a scary thing?
3. How does Elisha's faith contrast with that of his servant in v 15-16?
4. Why is our natural instinct to react with fear when we are facing overwhelming circumstances, as Gehazi did?
5. How might v 17 encourage our faith when we feel overwhelmed and what might be a good way to pray in such circumstances?
6. How do we see the difference between 'spiritual' sight and 'physical' sight in v 17-20? How does this passage describe God's power over both kinds of sight?
7. What is so amazing about Elisha's instructions to the King of Israel in v 22-23 and how is this an illustration of the Gospel?

### Application:

1. Can you think of any other occasions in the Bible where someone knows something because God has told them rather than finding out through 'natural' means, like Elisha knowing the battle plans of the Arameans?

2. Has God ever 'spoken' to you like this?
3. Can you think of a time you have felt overwhelmed by circumstances? How did you feel/react and how might this story help you the next time you face such a situation?
4. How does it make you think and feel to know that, though we are God's enemies and deserving of his judgement on account of our sin, He spares us in His mercy and invites us to feast with Him at His banquet table?

**Pray:**

- To be able to 'hear' God speaking to you.
- To be able to 'see' with spiritual as well as physical eyes.
- To trust & not be afraid in overwhelming circumstances.
- Thank God for His amazing mercy in saving you & inviting you to His table to eat with Him.

**Sermon Notes:**

# Study 10: King Jehoshaphat

## 2 Chronicles 20 v 1-22

### Context:

In our previous study we saw Elisha and his servant, Gehazi, facing overwhelming odds which presented a clear and present danger to them both. They responded with faith and God came through for them spectacularly. In today's study we see another situation where overwhelming odds are faced, this time by King Jehoshaphat, but on this occasion the threat is to the whole nation not just a couple of individuals. So, the stakes are much higher, and faith will be severely tested.

### Observation:

1. What challenge does Jehoshaphat face in v 1?
2. What report was given to Jehoshaphat in v 2?
3. How did Jehoshaphat feel on hearing the report and what two things did he do (v 3)?
4. How did the people respond and to what extent (v 4 & 13)?
5. Where did Jehoshaphat gather the people together (v 5)?
6. How does Jehoshaphat describe God in his prayer in v 6?
7. What does Jehoshaphat then recall God doing for Israel in the past (v 7)?
8. What had Israel built and for what purpose (v 8-9)?
9. How does Jehoshaphat describe the crisis they are facing (v 10-11)?
10. What humble admission does Jehoshaphat make in v 12 and what request does he make?
11. What then happened to Jahaziel after Jehoshaphat had finished praying (v 14)?
12. What command did Jahaziel then give to the people from God and why (v 15)?
13. What did he then tell *them* to do and what did he tell them *God* would do (v 16-17)?
14. How did Jehoshaphat and the people respond to the words of Jahaziel (v 18-19)?
15. What did Jehoshaphat tell the people as they set out the following morning (v 20)?
16. What did Jehoshaphat then do (v 21)?
17. What was the result (v 22)?

### Meaning:

1. Jehoshaphat's first reaction on hearing that his enemies had crossed the Dead Sea and were camped a few miles from Jerusalem in En Gedi was alarm (v 3). Why is fear so often our initial gut reaction to danger and how can we move from fear to seeking God as Jehoshaphat did?
2. What do you think is the connection between inquiring of God and fasting (v 3)?
3. The structure of Jehoshaphat's prayer (v 6-12) is: a) Recall who God is (v 6), b) Recall what God has done in the past (v 7-9), c) Set out the problem being faced (v 10-11), d) Request God's help (v 12a), e) Humbly state your weakness and utter dependence on God (v 12b). Why do you think he uses this particular structure and how can it help *us* to pray when *we* are facing danger or difficulties?
4. God's initial response to Jehoshaphat's prayer is to speak His word to His people (v 14-15). How does God speak to *us* in answer to *our* prayers? What different means does God use to speak to us in times of danger or trouble?
5. What do the words at the end of v 15 say about *any* and *every* problem or difficulty we may face in life?

6. How do the sovereign actions of God and the responsible actions of the people work together in solving the crisis for Israel, and what does this teach us about how God works in our lives today?
7. Do you find Jehoshaphat's instructions in v 21 odd? Why did he make this command and why do you think it had such a powerful effect (v 22)?
8. What might this teach us about the power of praise when *we* face problems or difficulties?

### **Application:**

1. Can you share a situation from your experience when you have moved from fear to faith? What helped you? What didn't help you?
2. How do you tend to pray when facing difficulties? What could you learn from Jehoshaphat's prayer that may help you to pray differently next time you are in a crisis?
3. How can you be more attentive to hear the word of God speaking to you in a crisis? What might help and what might hinder this?
4. How might embracing the biblical teaching about the relationship between God's actions and ours both *encourage* and *challenge* you in your daily life?
5. What role does praise play in your daily life? How might it be possible to praise God even in a time of crisis?

### **Pray:**

- For God's help to move from fear to faith in times of crisis.
- For the ability to hear God speaking to you.
- For God's grace to praise Him even in times of trouble.

### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 11: Queen Esther

## Esther 4 v 1-17

### Context:

Time has moved on since Jehoshaphat was King of Judah. God's people, both the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah, have suffered catastrophic defeat and exile at the hands of their enemies. This has come as God's judgement on their persistent rebellion and sin, their idolatry, immorality and injustice, and their refusal to repent. Judah went into exile in Babylon and, in the course of time, the Babylonians were taken over by the Medes and Persians. By the time we reach the period of the Book of Esther, many of God's people, the Jews, are still living in exile away from the Promised Land, scattered across the Persian empire which stretched from India to Ethiopia. Today's study, set in the Persian citadel of Susa, explores the story of Hadassah, a Jewess, whose Persian name was Esther, and her older cousin Mordecai who brought her up himself after her own parents died. It is a story of great faith which had massive repercussions! Before we pick up the story in chapter 4, the Persian King Xerxes, divorced his wife, Queen Vashti, and Hadassah (aka Esther) won a beauty contest to become his new queen and consort. She kept her background and nationality secret. One of Xerxes officials, Haman, becomes livid with Hadassah's cousin, Mordecai, when he refuses to bow down to him and pay him homage as an important royal official. Haman manages to persuade Xerxes, with the promise of a hefty donation to the king's treasury, to issue an edict for the slaughter of the entire Jewish population throughout the empire. This would spell absolute disaster for the Jews, for everyone knew that the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be changed or revoked! Where would help come from at such a time as this?

### Observation:

1. How did Mordecai react when he heard the news of the king's edict (v 1)?
2. How far did he walk in his mourning and grief (v 2)?
3. What was the reaction among Jews elsewhere in the empire (v 3)?
4. How did Esther react when she heard about Mordecai and what did she do (v 4-5)?
5. What did Mordecai tell Hathak (v 6-7)?
6. What did he give to Hathak and what did he tell him to do (v 8)?
7. What message does Esther send back to Mordecai via Hathak (v 9-11)?
8. What was Mordecai's response (v 12-14)?
9. What plan does Esther make (v 15-16)?
10. What did Mordecai do (v17)?

### Meaning:

1. Why are sackcloth and ashes symbolic of mourning and grief (v1-3)?
2. Haman wanted to annihilate the entire Jewish race (v 7-8). He was not the first to want to do this and neither would he be the last! Why do you think various people in history have wanted to do this to the Jews?
3. Can you sum up the dilemma for Esther in v 10-11? What was at stake and how did this situation call for resolute faith from Esther?
4. What do you think of Mordecai's response to his cousin's dilemma in v 12-14?
5. What do Mordecai's famous words at the end of v 14 tell us about the sovereignty of God over human affairs and the ultimate purpose in Esther becoming queen?

6. Why is fasting often a powerful accompaniment to prayer (v 15-16)?

7. How does Esther express her faith in the final words of v 16?

**Spoiler Alert: Please read the end of the story yourself. In case you don't, it is worth knowing that Esther showed great wisdom in how she dealt with King Xerxes and Haman, and, in the end, she was instrumental in the downfall and death of Haman, and the deliverance of the Jews across the empire. This great salvation is remembered and celebrated in Jewish communities every year at the Feast of Purim.**

#### **Application:**

1. Have you ever experienced a time of challenge and pressure that has brought you to tears? How did you react? What helped and what didn't help?
2. As in the story of Pharaoh killing the Hebrew boys (Exodus 1), if Haman had succeeded in his murderous plan, what would have been the effect on God's big plan of redemption and how might our own salvation have been affected?
3. Sometimes our faith calls for us to take risks, as it did for Esther as she went to see the king without being summoned. Can you share any experience of the risk of faith from your own life or from that of another Christian? How can we become the kind of people who act on our faith and say with Esther: *'And if I perish, I perish'* (v 16b)?
4. How does it make us feel to know that God put Esther in place *'for such a time as this'* and that he is sovereign in our lives too? Can you share any occasion from your own life when you have experienced this kind of thing?

#### **Pray:**

- For God's comfort and encouragement for people facing grief and challenge.
- For the kind of faith that is willing to take risks.
- For God to use me to serve him and others in the place he has put me in right now.

#### **Sermon Notes:**

# Study 12: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

## Daniel 3 v 1-28

### Context:

In our previous study we met Hadassah, who became Queen Esther and who was instrumental in saving the entire Jewish race living in the Persian empire. She was a Jewess living in exile from the Promised Land under the rule of Persian King Xerxes. This exile had begun years earlier when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and took the cream of the Jewish population off to Babylon to live a new life under his rule. Among those early exiles were four young men: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were all given new Babylonian names: Belteshazzar (Daniel), Shadrach (Hananiah), Meshach (Mishael) and Abednego (Azariah), and they were groomed for service in the King's court. We will meet Daniel next time in the final study of this series. Today we meet his three friends and discover what faith in the *literal* fire looks like!

### Observation:

1. What did Nebuchadnezzar make and where did he place it (v 1)?
2. Who did he summon and for what purpose (v 2-3)?
3. What were the assembled crowd told to do and what would be the penalty for anyone who didn't obey (v 4-6)?
4. What was the general response to this command (v 7)?
5. Who came forward and what did they do (v 8-12)?
6. What was Nebuchadnezzar's reaction (v 13)?
7. What did he tell the three friends (v 14-15) and what words of bravado did he say at the end of v 15?
8. How did the three friends respond (v 16-18)?
9. What was Nebuchadnezzar's next move (v 19-21)?
10. How does the writer of the story emphasise the extremity of the situation in v 22-23?
11. What amazing question did Nebuchadnezzar then ask (v 24)?
12. What did he say he could see (v 25)?
13. What action did he then take and how did he address the three friends (v 26)?
14. What did the officials notice on their inspection of the three friends (v 27)?
15. What impact did this have on Nebuchadnezzar (v 28)?

### Meaning:

1. What or who do you think the golden statue represented (see Daniel 2 v 31-38)?
2. Can you think of anyone else in the Bible, in history or even today, who has set themselves up as a god in this way?
3. Back in Daniel chapter 1 the three friends accepted new Babylonian names, a Babylonian education, and a job serving the Babylonian king. Why do you think they drew the line at bowing down to this statue? How do we decide where to draw the line as Christians living in a secular society like ours?
4. How do the three friends demonstrate their faith in v 16-18? Is their faith in God dependent on God protecting them from harm?
5. Who do you think the fourth man in the fiery furnace was? Have we met this mysterious visitor before in this series?
6. Contrast v 22 with v 27. How can such a thing be explained?

7. Contrast the final words of v 15 with v 28. How can miracles play a part in conversion? Are there any other examples you can think of in the Bible or in history of miracles having this converting power?

**Application:**

1. We may not face the threat of physical harm for our faith, but are there other ways we face opposition or danger as Christians today?
2. To what extent is our faith in God dependent on God protecting us or always coming through for us? How can we develop the kind of faith the three friends express in v 18?

**Pray:**

- For our faith to grow stronger.
- For Christians facing persecution for their faith today.
- For wisdom to know where to draw the line for our faith in our secular society.

**Sermon Notes:**

# Study 13: Daniel in the Lions Den

## Daniel 6 v 1-28

### Context:

For the final study in this series we stay in Babylon, where we found ourselves last time. Since Daniel's three faithful friends miraculously survived the fiery furnace, Babylon has fallen to the Medes and Persians and a new king, Darius, is on the throne of the empire. Like his three friends, Daniel serves in the royal court as an advisor to the king and like his three friends he finds himself facing a dilemma which calls for risky faith.

### Observation:

1. Who did Darius appoint in v 1 and to whom were they accountable in v 2?
2. How did Daniel perform and what was the result (v 3)?
3. What action did his colleagues take against him and why were they not successful (v 4)?
4. What was their Plan B (v 5)?
5. What was the specific plan they persuaded Darius to enact (v 6-9)?
6. How did Daniel respond to the new decree (v 10)?
7. Who discovered him and what did they do (v 11-13)?
8. What was the king's initial reaction (v 14)?
9. Why was Darius stuck with the decree he had made (v 15)?
10. What did Darius do and what did he say to Daniel (v 16-17)?
11. How did Darius spend the night (v 18)?
12. What did Darius do first thing the following morning (v 19-20)?
13. What did Daniel say to the king in response to his anxious question (v 21-22)?
14. What did Darius then do (v 23-24)?
15. What was the essence of the letter Darius then wrote to everyone in his empire (v 25-27)?

### Meaning:

1. Many of us find ourselves working in an environment that isn't necessarily friendly to the Christian faith. So, what can we learn from Daniel's example in v 3-4 to help us in our own contexts?
2. As with Daniel's three friends in the previous study, Daniel had accepted a new Babylonian name (Belteshazzar), a Babylonian education, and was serving in the pagan royal court. But where did *he* draw the line and how do *we* decide where to draw the line in our own contexts?
3. In what ways was Daniel's faith risky?
4. Why do you think Darius was so reluctant to harm Daniel and so anxious about his welfare?
5. Daniel tells Darius that an angel came and shut the lions' mouths (v 22). In the NT, Hebrews mentions this miracle as well as the miracle God did for the three friends in the fiery furnace (Hebrews 11 v 33-34). However, a few verses later (Hebrews 11 v 35b-38) we also read of believers who *didn't* experience miraculous deliverance and yet they are still celebrated as people of great faith (v 39). So, how do we develop the kind of faith that is prepared to be faithful to God, whether or not God provides the miracle we need?
6. Whilst we may rejoice in the apparent conversion of Darius, what is nevertheless troubling about his actions and words in v 24-27?

**Application:**

1. Looking back over the series as a whole, which Biblical character has impressed you the most and why?
2. What lessons about faith have you learned?
3. Is there one particular action or change God is calling you to take or make as a result of this study series?

**Pray:**

- For our faith to grow stronger and more resilient in times of crisis.
- For strength to take risks for our faith.

**Sermon Notes:**



