

1 Kings 17
February 9, 2025

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Have you ever been approached by someone asking you for money or food or any sort of provision – when you didn't have much of it yourself?! And if the answer is, "Not really," how would you go about deciding whether you would help that person or not? [Let people engage]

Transition: In today's culture, most of us have been blessed to always have food on the table, clothes on our body, and a roof over our heads. So the scenario I offered doesn't feel particularly realistic, unless it was a family member needing help or friend you know well. But to be approached by a stranger is quite different. My guess is that most of us would be guarded without realizing the possibility that God sent them to us!

In today's text, God is introducing us to Elijah the prophet who will be pronouncing a prophesy to Ahab. You will recall that Ahab was the worst king yet in the Northern Kingdom, and he encouraged Baal-worship. So God is getting ready to apply consequences for Ahab's sin. HOW God goes about implementing His consequences makes for a very interesting storyline that involves several theological themes: God's provision, His faithfulness, and the importance of obedience. Let's read the story, and then we'll process it.

BOOK:

Elijah Fed by Ravens

17 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

² Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: ³ "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. ⁴ You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there."

⁵ So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. ⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

The Widow at Zarephath

⁷ Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ⁹ "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

¹²“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’ ”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

¹⁷ Sometime later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

¹⁹ “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”

²² The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”

²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

One of the main teachings of this section of the Bible is that God punishes sin, though he loves sinners, and that he takes care of those who trust in him. The brook provided water until it dried up because there was no rain. God had a poor widow ready to help. Someone has said that Elijah became a foreign missionary. Zerephath was in Sidon. What a blessing he was to her and her family.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (1 Kings 17)*. Victor Books.

Whenever the nation fell into sin and idolatry, God sent prophets to call it back to the true faith. The prophet was not simply a “foreteller”; he was also a “forth-teller” who announced God’s judgment and exposed the sins of the people. Such a prophet was Elijah the Tishbite (native of the town Tishbite), a “man subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17), yet a man with great courage and faith. In these two chapters we see Elijah obeying two commandments from the Lord: “Go hide yourself,” and “Go show yourself.”

I. His Private Ministry: “Go Hide Yourself” (17)

Luke 4:25 tells us that the drought lasted for three years, but in 1 Kings 18:1 we find the contest on Mt. Carmel taking place “in the third year.” Apparently, the drought had begun six months before Elijah suddenly appeared in Ahab’s court to proclaim that the drought would last another three years. Lack of rain was often a punishment for the sins of the people (Deut. 11:13–17; see 2 Chron. 7:12–15). Ahab and his wicked heathen wife Jezebel had led the people into Baal worship, a religion so vile we dare not describe it. The extra three years of drought was an answer to Elijah’s prayer (James 5:17). Having delivered his message, the prophet retired from public ministry for three years, and during this time, the Lord graciously cared for him. The obedient servant can always depend on his master’s faithful care. Note the three disciplines Elijah experienced:

A. The dry brook (vv. 2–7).

God told Elijah exactly where to go and what to do. See Prov. 3:5–6 and Ps. 37:3–6. God withdrew Elijah’s ministry from Israel as another punishment for their sins (Ps. 74:7–9). The Lord permitted Elijah to drink of the brook, and He provided bread and meat daily, delivered to the prophet by ravens. The raven is the first bird named in the Bible (Gen. 8:7); it was an unclean bird, yet God used it to help His servant. Note that while Elijah was enjoying bread, water, and meat in the place of God’s appointment, the 100 prophets hiding in the cave (18:4) had to settle for only bread and water. But there came a day when the brook dried up. Did this mean Elijah had sinned, or that he was out of God’s will? No! It simply meant that God had another place for him, and it was a reminder for Elijah to trust the Lord and not the brook.

B. The depleted barrel (vv. 8–16).

God’s Word always leads God’s servant in the time of testing. But what strange commandments: “Go to Gentile territory where a widow will feed you.” See Luke 4:22–26. “Zarephath” means “refining”; and God was certainly putting his servant through the furnace. Imagine Elijah’s feelings when he discovered how poor the widow was, and that she was about to prepare her last meal. But God’s commands are never wrong; for when the widow put God first (by obeying Elijah’s commands), God provided for her, her son, and her guest. Note in v. 14 that Elijah honored the Lord God of Israel before this Gentile woman. All God asks is that we give Him what we have, and He will take care of the rest. He can feed thousands with only a few loaves and fishes.

C. The dead boy (vv. 17–24).

The dry brook was Elijah's test; the dead boy was the widow's test. Great blessings are usually followed by great testings. It is unfortunate that the widow's faith should fail as indicated in v. 18; see Ps. 119:75 and 1 Sam. 3:18 for the right way to react to disappointments and trials. "Give me the boy" is Elijah's answer, for he knew God could raise the dead boy to life again. This is the first recorded instance of resurrection in the Bible. The prophet took the corpse up to his private guestroom (an upper chamber on the roof) and there prayed to God for the boy's life. Notice that he agonized for the boy and even stretched his own body upon the dead body of the lad. What an example for us today who would seek to "raise the dead" spiritually. The miracle brought forth a testimony of faith from the woman.

Constable, C.L. (1985). *1 Kings*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 522-525) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

2. AHAB'S PUNISHMENT (CHAPS. 17-18)

Because of his wickedness Ahab was disciplined by God, who used the Prophet Elijah in a remarkable way to bring Israel back to Himself.

Elijah's announcement of drought (17:1-6)

17:1. Elijah had been and was being prepared by the Lord to demonstrate to all Israel that Yahweh, not Baal, is still the only true God. Even Elijah's name, which means "Yahweh is my God," conveyed that fact! Elijah lived in Gilead east of the Jordan River near a community called Tishbe. Perhaps as Elijah heard reports of Jezebel's increasing maneuverings to replace the worship of the Lord with Baal worship his godly heart was stirred up. God gave him a mission. Armed with God's promise he walked westward to Samaria. Bursting into the palace, he hurled his ultimatum at King Ahab. He claimed that the Lord is the God of Israel, that He is alive (cf. v. 12; 18:10), and that he, Elijah, was God's servant. (On the words "As the Lord ... lives" see comments on 1:29.) Elijah could confidently declare that there would be neither dew nor rain because God had promised to withhold these from the land if His people turned from Him to other gods (Lev. 26:18-19; Deut. 11:16-17; 28:23-24). God had apparently revealed to Elijah that He would honor that promise in Elijah's day. This would have struck at the heart of Baalism, for Baal-worshippers believed that their god was the god of rain! The drought, brought on by the true God, showed that He, not Baal, controls the weather. This was a remarkable demonstration of God's superiority and of the total inadequacy and falsehood of Baal worship.

17:2-4. Having made his dramatic announcement, Elijah was told by the Lord to leave Samaria, return eastward, and hide in a ravine by the wadi Kerith, east of the Jordan River. Elijah had to hide because he would soon be hunted by the king (cf. 18:10). The exact location of this seasonal brook is not known; it was one of many streams that flowed during the rainy season but dried up when the weather turned hot. God promised to provide food and drink for His servant at this unlikely spot.

17:5-6. Elijah obeyed the Lord, who miraculously provided for him as He had promised. God directed ravens, birds that normally neglect their own young (cf. Job 38:41), to bring bread and meat faithfully to Elijah every morning and evening. And he drank water from the brook. The

Hebrew word for “bread” (leh.em) means food in general, possibly including berries, fruit, nuts, eggs, etc. Perhaps they were brought from a distance where the drought had not yet affected the vegetation. Through this unusual manner of nourishing His prophet physically, God was also nourishing Elijah’s faith for later feats of spiritual strength (see the list “God’s Miracles through Elijah and Elisha,” near 2 Kings 2:13–14).

b. Elijah’s ministry at Zarephath (17:7–24)

17:7. How long Elijah stayed at the brook is not revealed. Some time later it dried up because of the drought which lasted three and one-half years in all (Luke 4:25; James 5:17). Elijah had learned that God would miraculously provide for him, but now he would learn that God could do the same for others—even Gentiles—as well. God was preparing His servant for a great showdown on Mount Carmel.

17:8–11. Elijah was directed to Zarephath, a town on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, the homeland of Jezebel (cf. 16:31) and the heart of Baal-Melqart territory (see the map “Elijah’s Travels”). Zarephath was 80–90 miles from Kerith. God told Elijah that a widow would feed him (cf. Luke 4:25–26). Widows were usually poor people; normally they ran out of food first in a famine. This famine had been created by the drought. Therefore, going to a widow for food was a strange directive. God was again using an unusual source to feed His prophet.

Obediently Elijah made his way to Zarephath. When he entered the town, he tested the first widow he saw by asking her for a drink. Her favorable response led him to request a piece of bread.

17:12–16. The widow recognized Elijah as an Israelite and appealed to Yahweh in affirming that she had no bread; she had only a little flour and oil, enough for a last meal for her son and herself. Here was a Gentile woman in Phoenicia who believed in the Lord; she said she believed He is alive (As surely as the Lord your God lives; cf. v. 1; 18:10).

Elijah calmed her fears of himself, her hunger, and her imminent death. He asked her to feed him first ... and then use what was left to feed herself and her son. Then he gave her a promise on the authority of the word of God: she would have food until the drought ended.

Her obedient response demonstrated her faith in the word of the Lord. The Lord honored her faith by fulfilling His promise miraculously. This miracle of God’s continually supplying flour and olive oil was another polemic (protest) against Baal, just as was the drought. Baal-worshippers believed he was a fertility god, giving rain to make crops grow. But he could not overcome the drought to make wheat and olive trees grow. Only the true God could provide flour and oil in a drought!

17:17–18. Sometime later (cf. v. 7)—again the exact time is not given—tragedy befell Elijah’s hostess. The woman who owned the house was the widow. Her young son fell ill and finally stopped breathing. Some Bible critics say the boy was only unconscious, not dead, and that his restoration was therefore not a miracle. However, verses 18, 20, 22–23 make it clear that he had actually died.

The woman had a guilty conscience and immediately concluded that God was punishing her for her sin by killing her son. This is a common reaction among many people who do not know God’s

ways well when personal tragedy enters their lives (cf. John 9:2–3). What sin she was referring to is not stated.

17:19–21. The boy was small enough to be carried in his mother’s arms. Many homes in Palestine at that time had guest rooms built on their roofs. It was in one such upper room that Elijah was staying. Elijah’s first prayer (v. 20) simply expressed his compassion for the woman who, in addition to the trials of the famine, now also had to bear this tragedy. Implicit in the prayer was the desire that God relieve her of this added burden. Often in cases of miraculous restoration and healing, God’s servant placed his hand on the afflicted one to indicate that the power of God in him was passing to the needy individual (e.g., Matt. 8:3). In this instance Elijah out of heartfelt concern stretched himself out placing the whole body of the lad in contact with his own. Three times Elijah did this, praying each time that God would restore the boy’s life. Persistence in prayer is a fundamental requisite for obtaining one’s petitions (cf. Matt. 7:7–8; Luke 11:5–13). It proved effective in this case.

17:22–24. God miraculously restored the boy’s life. This is the first recorded instance in Scripture of restoration to life of one who had died. Elijah ... carried the lad downstairs (the boy was apparently weak) and presented him to his mother. This miracle proved to the woman that Elijah was indeed a man of God and that the word of the Lord that Elijah claimed to speak was indeed the truth.

This incident showed the widow and others that the power of the Lord as the true God contrasted greatly with the impotency of Baal.

Mathews, K. A. (1998). The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 142). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Trouble for Ahab (17:1–24). Elijah the Tishbite is introduced in the book suddenly as an envoy from the Lord. He proclaimed to Ahab a great drought which would end only when Elijah gave the word (see Jas. 5:17–18). The drought was a refutation of Ahab’s Baalism because Baal was reputed to be the god of rain and vegetation. This showed that the Lord was the true Lord of nature.

During the three-year drought, Elijah dwelt with a widow and her son in Zarephath of Phoenicia, the native land of Jezebel, where Baal was worshiped. The drought had spread to Phoenicia, and the Lord used the prophet to provide food to this family. When the woman’s son became ill and stopped breathing, Elijah prayed three times, and the Lord answered by raising up the boy. Because God did these miracles in Phoenicia, this showed that the Lord was the God of all nations and that Baal did not exist.

Tatum, S. L. (1972). 1 Kings. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher’s Bible Commentary (p. 202). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Elijah’s Earlier Miracles (1 Kings 17:1–24)

The passage—This is a chapter filled with miracles. If we believe in God, we must recognize his limitless power. How these things were done, we do not know. If we could understand them and explain them in terms of the ordinary, they would not be miracles. God was proving his power in the worst of times. For a nation with a bad king God sent a good prophet—Elijah.

Elijah stood boldly before Ahab and predicted that it would not rain for three years except by his word. God told him to hide by the brook Cherith. He commanded the ravens to bring him food. When the brook dried up God sent him to Zeraphath where a widow fed him. Her meal and oil were miraculously replenished as she shared with God's prophet. When the woman's son became ill and there was no breath in him, Elijah took him up to his room on the roof and prayed that God would restore him to life. God raised him from the dead!

Special points—Some have asked if the ravens were really merchants or Arabians. We are face to face with a series of miracles and an attempt to explain one of them away would still leave us a number of others even more amazing. It is better to accept them by faith in an all-powerful God.

The upper chamber was built on the roof of the flat-top house and could be reached by an outside stairway. Elijah may have attempted artificial respiration on the lad. It is consistent with prayer to carry out all we know to do ourselves and trust God to use our efforts or go beyond them.

Truth for today—The book of James in the New Testament is a good commentary on the prayer life of Elijah. It tells us he was a man of like passions with us. He prayed earnestly that it not rain. According to his prayers the heavens were shut up. He prayed again and it rained according to his request. When we pray within God's will there is no limit to the power of prayer.

Truth for today—One of the main teachings of this section of the Bible is that God punishes sin, though he loves sinners, and that he takes care of those who trust in him. The brook provided water until it dried up because there was no rain. God had a poor widow ready to help. Someone has said that Elijah became a foreign missionary. Zerephath was in Sidon. What a blessing he was to her and her family. Centuries later Jesus came to those same coasts and blessed another poor woman by healing her daughter.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (1 Kings 17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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