

The Books of 1 and 2 Kings

Lesson 10: Elijah and the Drought -- 1 Kings 17:1-24

He appears with no introduction. No genealogy, no court credentials, no prologue. One moment Ahab is on the throne of the most spiritually corrupt kingdom in Israel's history, with Baal's prophets eating at Jezebel's table and a full-blown pagan cult running in the heart of God's covenant people. The next moment a man named Elijah is standing in front of the king with a word that sounds like a thunderclap: 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word' (17:1). And then he is gone. The drought has begun. The word has been spoken. God has answered Baal's boast with silence from the sky.

The drought was not incidental. Baal was the Canaanite storm god, the god of thunder and rain and agricultural fertility. His worshipers believed that he controlled whether the crops grew and whether the flocks multiplied. The priests of Baal had persuaded Israel that he was the source of their prosperity. And now the God of Israel, through one solitary prophet, declares that not a drop of moisture will fall except at His command. The contest in chapter 17 is not primarily between Elijah and Ahab. It is between the Lord and Baal. And God fires the opening shot by shutting off the rain.

What follows in chapter 17 is a series of quiet miracles that keep one man alive while a nation suffers the consequences of its idolatry. Ravens bring bread and meat to Elijah twice a day at the Wadi Cherith. When the brook dries up, God sends him north to Zarephath, a Phoenician town in the very heartland of Jezebel's homeland, and there a destitute widow feeds him from flour and oil that never run out. And when that widow's son dies, Elijah stretches himself over the boy and cries out to God, and the boy lives again. Three miracles, increasing in drama: provision for the prophet, provision through the prophet, and life out of death through the prophet.

Every one of these miracles has a purpose beyond the miracle itself. They are not performances for entertainment. They are not signs that God gives routinely to any believer who asks with sufficient faith. They are God's authenticating seal on His prophet and His word in a moment of massive spiritual crisis. When the widow of Zarephath says at the end of the chapter, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth' (17:24), she is naming exactly what the miracles were for. She knows the prophet is real and the word is true because of what God did. That is authentication. And it is the key to understanding everything in this chapter.

Group Discussion: The widow of Zarephath was willing to make the last meal she expected to eat and give it to a stranger who claimed to speak for God. What enabled that kind of radical, costly obedience, and where do you see the same kind of faith called for in your own life today?

Personal Reflection: Elijah was sent to a widow in a pagan region with nothing to offer him except obedience, and God used both of them to sustain each other through crisis. Is there a situation in your life right now where God seems to be calling you to an act of obedience that makes no human sense, and what is holding you back from taking it?

Read 1 Kings 17:1-24

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 17:1. Elijah appears suddenly with no backstory, announces a complete drought, and disappears. The drought is a direct theological challenge to Baal, the supposed Canaanite god of rain and storm. What does God's choice to shut off the rain in a nation that has turned to Baal for agricultural prosperity reveal about His nature as the one true God and His relationship to the false gods of Ahab's court?
2. Elijah was called to stand publicly before a king who had the power to kill him and to speak a word that would bring suffering to an entire nation. Most of us will never face that kind of confrontation, but we do face moments when faithfulness to God requires saying something true in a situation where it costs us. What is one such situation you face right now, and what would it look like to speak the truth with Elijah's kind of confidence in God?
3. Read 1 Kings 17:2-7. God commands Elijah to go to the Wadi Cherith and promises that ravens will feed him there. Ravens were unclean birds under the Mosaic law (Lev 11:15), and yet God uses them as His instruments of provision. What does God's use of unlikely and even ritually unclean instruments tell us about the scope of His sovereignty and His freedom to provide in ways that fall outside our expectations?
4. Elijah went and did exactly what God said, even though hiding by a brook in the wilderness while the nation burned must have felt strange and inactive. Is there a place in your life where you are struggling to obey a clear word from God because the direction seems too quiet, too unlikely, or too far from where the action is?

5. Read 1 Kings 17:8–16. God sends Elijah to Zarephath, a Gentile city in Phoenicia, the very region where Jezebel was raised, and there directs him to a widow who is gathering sticks to cook her last meal before she and her son starve to death. What does God's direction of Elijah to this particular woman in this particular place tell us about His providence over the details of individual lives, and what does His care for a Gentile widow in the middle of a judgment on Israel say about the reach of His mercy?
6. The widow's act of obedience in 17:13–15 is one of the most remarkable in Scripture. She was prepared to cook her last food and die. Elijah asked her to give it to him first, promising that the flour and oil would not run out. She obeyed. Where in your own life is God calling you to give Him the 'first portion,' the thing you feel you cannot afford to give, and what has kept you from taking that step?
7. Read 1 Kings 17:17–24. When the widow's son dies, Elijah takes the boy, carries him upstairs, and stretches himself over the child three times, crying out to God. The Lord hears Elijah's prayer and the child lives. Why does the narrator include this third and climactic miracle when Elijah was already proven as a true prophet through the drought and the provision? What additional truth does the raising of the widow's son establish about the God of Israel and the nature of Elijah's prophetic commission?
8. Elijah took the widow's grief personally. He cried out to God with urgency and emotional intensity: 'O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?' (17:20). His prayer was honest, almost confrontational, yet completely submitted to God's power. How does Elijah's prayer in this moment shape the way you think about the kind of honesty and urgency that are appropriate when you bring heartbreak and confusion to God?

9. Read 1 Kings 17:24 alongside 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and 1 Corinthians 13:8–10. The widow's declaration, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth,' identifies the precise purpose of the miracles in this chapter: they authenticated the prophet and confirmed that his word was from God. What does this teach us about the purpose of miracles in the biblical record, and why does the church not look for or expect the same kinds of sign-miracles today now that the fully confirmed Word of God is complete?

10. Looking back across all of 1 Kings 17, from Elijah's sudden announcement to the widow's final confession, what one truth about God's power and mercy has most struck you, and what one specific step are you taking this week in response to His call on your life as a result of this study?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: James 5:17–18, where the New Testament affirms Elijah's prayer as the cause of the drought and the rain, connecting Old and New Testaments around the power of the righteous person's prayer; Luke 4:25–26, where Jesus Himself references the widow of Zarephath as an example of God's grace going to an unexpected Gentile recipient; 2 Timothy 3:16–17, the completeness and sufficiency of Scripture as the confirmed Word of God; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10, where Paul teaches that miraculous gifts served their purpose and would cease when the perfect (complete revelation) came; Hebrews 1:1–2, God who spoke in many ways through the prophets has now spoken finally and fully in His Son

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