

## **“ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Text for the Sermon: I Kings 17:8-16**

### **Introduction:**

Remember where we are and what is going on. Israel is under the Baal worshipping King and Queen, Ahab and Jezebel. The politics of the nation has been corrupted to the core.

“Truth is on the scaffold, Wrong is on the throne.”

**Psalm 11:3** “When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do?” God raised up Elijah to be a prophet in the most desperately wicked time of Israel’s history.

On an earthly level Israel is in the midst of a serious drought and famine. Elijah declared there would be no dew or rain in the land. But nothing ever happens in our world at just an earthly level. There is always more going on behind the scenes, that doesn’t meet the eye.

I have urged you before to cultivate the spiritual discipline of seeing the hand of God in everything that is happening in the world and in everything that is happening in our own lives. God is never absent, He is always present and active and doing His will for His glory.

On a spiritual level Israel is in the middle of a God-war, a battle of cosmic proportions and implications. Yahweh has intentionally picked a fight with Baal.

Baal is the storm god, god of clouds and rain and floods, the god of fertility and fruitfulness. He is the agriculture god, the god of all things related to crops and harvests. If Whatcom county was back in those days, there is no question we would be worshipping Baal and his goddess wife Asherah. Our very livelihood would depend on us keeping Baal happy, even at the cost of a firstborn son or a daughter or two.

God suddenly stops the dew and the rain, and now He waits for Baal’s counter move. The brook Cherith runs dry and He still waits for Baal’s counter move.

Now the drama deepens, the tension builds, things go from bad to worse to terrible. The story moves from Cherith ravine east of the Jordan, to a hundred miles west to Zarephath.

**Zarephath of Sidon** is a coastal Mediterranean town between Tyre and Sidon in the territory ruled by Jezebel's father, Ethbaal. This is the home country of Baal, right in the heart of the worst idolatry, unholy sacrifices and wicked temple prostitution that had spread to Israel.

This is Baalsville. In this God-war, Elijah is sent behind the lines into the heart of enemy territory. Yahweh's shows His sovereign power over all the territory of Baal and beyond.

### **The widow at Zarephath.**

God sends Elijah to find the most unlikely provision in the most unlikely of places from the most unlikely of persons.

This widow is not like our widows. She is miserable and destitute. She has suffered so long all her resources have run out, all her stored up goods, any hording she might have been smart enough to horde, it's all gone. She has been watching it all slowly drain away. Even her best efforts at rationing are all for nothing. She is now down to her last meal, death is eminent.

**What do Elijah and the widow have in common?** God has brought both of them to the very end of their resources.

Cherith and now Zarephath are purposeful places for God to refine, test, teach, train, and correct. Zarephath means crucible or furnace, a place of refining, of trial and testing.

#### ***How Firm a Foundation***

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

This is personal. On a personal level both Elijah and this widow are being tested and schooled, there are many lessons to be learned, faith will be deepened. God often takes us from one test to another to another.

***For Elijah*** God is preparing and equipping him for the mission God has for him.

God could have miraculously kept the brook flowing, but He didn't. God has His reasons. We all must face drying brooks: age, health, work, success, home, friendships, unwelcome changes.

We must learn to patiently wait upon the Lord and rest entirely upon His word.

We must learn that His promises are true and everlasting.

We must learn not to presume we know best what God should do and how He should do it.

***For the widow***, she is a pagan Baal worshiper. Her idol god must be exposed for the worthless impotent god he really is.

All idols and gods are just as impotent as Baal was in his own country to help this poor widow who called on him every day to help her. The only hope for a Baal worshipper is death.

**Notice**, when God does battle with our gods, we will end up miserable. If we are trusting in anything besides the one true God, if we have put our faith in someone or something else besides Jesus, we will at some point come to the end of our worthless god and find ourselves just as unhappy as this widow.

***Do not put your trust even in the things God Himself provides.*** Trust God alone. Trust the giver, not the gifts.

Having first promised to feed him by ravens, God now promises to feed him by a heathen woman, a widow no less, the poorest member of society.

**I Kings 17:9** Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.

A widow in a drought has poverty written all over it. A poor, poverty stricken widow will sustain you. Talk about an oxymoron. It might as well say a leper will cleanse you or a blind man will lead you.

Being fed by ravens made more sense than this. We have gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. From unclean ravens to a hopeless woman. **Notice** God didn't send him to provide for the widow, but for the widow to provide for him. God opposes common sense.

She represents a challenge to his faith, she has nothing and is preparing to die, he needs food and she has none.

He represents a challenge to her faith, a stranger, foreigner asking for hospitality she can't give, he asks her for her very last meal. This is a huge risk.

God is never limited in how and when He might meet our needs and provide for us.

**Notice** that God's grace and mercy often extends beyond the boundaries of our imagination.

She knew of the God of Israel, she was about to meet Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord provides.

This nameless widow joins the ranks of Moses' father-in-law Jethro, Rahab the harlot, Ruth the Moabitess, Naaman from Syria. All of these receive God's grace long before God opened the flood gate when Peter preached to the Gentile Cornelius and the Holy Spirit fell on all of us riff-raff Gentiles.

This foreshadows a day when even the likes of us would be drawn into the circle of grace. God takes great delight in granting grace and repentance to the most undeserving. What grace that God would extend His mercy all the way to her.

**I Kings 17:13-15** "***Do not fear***; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says

the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’” 15 And she went and did as Elijah said.

**Notice** how earth bound our thinking is, how often we don’t take into account God’s grace.

We don’t take risks trusting in God’s commands and promises. We don’t give a full tithing of all our income to the Lord because, well because what if we don’t have enough.

This is the paradox of faith. This is walking by faith, not by sight. This is God saying give me everything you have and I will give you everything you need.

Do you believe that? Are you afraid of that? Are you afraid of a God who says that?

If the rich young man had obeyed Jesus and gave everything to the poor, what do you think would have happened to the rich young man? Do you think God would have blessed him? Instead of giving everything, he lost everything.

Is there any clearer picture of faith, to stake all you have on the Word (promise) of God? Are you a person of faith? Do you confidently trust God to lead or provide or answer?

Isn’t this what faith is? Going all in with God. Wagering everything on Him. Putting all your eggs in the God basket. Isn’t faith staking your life on God? What will you hold back, withhold?

This poor widow woman is a rebuke to all our wavering faith.

Think about a time when our faith is really challenged. Think of all the reasons we could give for not obeying. I don’t have enough. At least let me feed my son first. You can’t expect me to give when I have so little. And what about the future, will I be able to get more? And give it to a stranger, a foreigner. Aren’t we supposed to take care of our own household first? Who is this guy really, a prophet or a homeless vagrant?

But instead, she went and did what he said. Amazing. She obeyed as Elijah had been obeying.

How did the miracle unfold? A Costco palate of flour and a 55 gallon drum of oil?

No, a quiet daily drama, each day just enough for the day.

“Morning by morning new mercies I see.”

**Notice**, Elijah is maintained in the same miraculous fashion, daily bread by a miracle. Do we see our daily provision as a miracle of God’s grace? He supplies, He maintains. God’s providence extends down to the smallest of details, like flour and oil.

**Notice** how God delights to use what is weak and foolish, what is poor and needy, to shame the strong and shame the wise.

**What principles can we take from this text and apply to our lives?**

We need to be careful in our application of this text. Will God always treat us like Elijah? Will God always provide for all our needs sometimes in miraculous ways?

Remember what we talked about last time, and who we line ourselves up with in the text. Are we like Elijah or like the believing remnant suffering in Israel?

Elijah had to be preserved by God because God's purposes for him were not yet accomplished. God provides for His servants what they need to do His work.

But what about all those people in Israel to whom God sent no ravens or widows to help? What about all those common folks who just suffer in the midst of a drought or flood or fire or pandemic? As far as we know Elijah and the widow are the only two supplied by God's miraculous grace.

What about all those who truly suffer in the midst of God's judgment, who suffer loss of crops, loss of sources of income, loss of health, loss of long life?

Hear the words of saints who have gone before us and found themselves in similar situations.

**Job 1:21** The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

**Job 2:10** Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?

**Job 13:15** Though he slay me, I will hope in him.

**Psalms 42:5-6** Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you.

**Habakkuk 3:17-18** Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

This is a different perspective. This is not so much looking for God to meet my needs, as it looking to God for who God is and praising and worshiping Him. This is looking deep into the character and nature of the holy, living God of the universe, and being humble before Him.

So our comfort can be that God is sovereign and He has a purpose and a plan and He will see it through. Whether we are supplied or suffer, we are called to trust and obey, to worship Him whether ravens come or brooks dry up.

Hear again these true and eternal promises of God in His Word:

Seek first the kingdom of God, and He will add unto you everything you need.

**II Corinthians 9:8** God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

**II Corinthians 12:9-10** “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

**Philippians 4:19-20** My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Psalms 37:18-19** The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever; 19 they are not put to shame in evil times; in the days of famine they have abundance.

Father, we thank you that we can look into this story from three thousand years ago and see so much that speaks to us today. We thank you that in the worst moments you are working out your plan, your purpose and your desire for us. Increase our faith that we might walk by faith, we believe, help our unbelief, help us to see you, help us to know how much you really do love us and care for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.