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The Servant of Jehovah I Kings 17:1-16

Intro: The Prophet Elijah is a rather unique character in the Bible in that he figures prominently in both the OT and the NT. We will look at his ministry over the next few chapters, a ministry marked by miracles as well as conflict. But Elijah is also an important figure in the NT. John the Baptist is said to have come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk 1:17) and some people in his day even believed he was the promised Elijah (Jn 1:21; Mt 17:10). Elijah appeared with Moses along side Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:3) and there are some compelling clues that indicate that he may very well be one of the two witnesses mentioned in Rev 11. In the OT, Elijah was the dominant spiritual force in the northern kingdom of Israel during the dark days of Ahab's apostasy.

As we will discover, Elijah wasn't a polished preacher like Isaiah or Jeremiah; he's more of a rough-edged reformer who wasn't afraid to confront the idolatrous Israelites with the truth and challenged them to abandon their idols and return to their Lord Jehovah, the Covenant God of Israel. His name means "the Lord is my God" which is an apt name for someone who called people back to the worship of Jehovah. He was also bold enough to confront King Ahab personally and rebuke him for his sins and also challenge all the priests of Baal to a public contest to see whose God could come through for His people when they really needed Him to. Elijah didn't only work miracles; he also experience miracles in his own life and we will look at a few of them today.

1 – From its inception, Israel had always been an agrarian society, growing crops to not only provide themselves with food but supplying food to some of the surrounding kingdoms as well. So, the Israelites depended heavily on the seasonal rains for the success of their crops. If the Lord didn't send the early rains in October and November and the latter rains in March and April, there would be a famine in the land. But this blessing of the rains depended on the people obeying the Lord's covenant (Deut 11). God warned Israel that their disobedience would turn the heavens into bronze and the earth into iron (Deut 28:23). The land belonged to the Lord and if the people defiled the land with their sinful idols, the Lord would not bless them.

It's probable that Elijah appeared before King Ahab in October, about the time the early rains should have begun. It hadn't rained for the 6 months between April and October and Elijah just announced that there would be no more rain for the next 3 years! Israel was following Baal, not Jehovah, and the Lord couldn't send the promised rain and still be faithful to His covenant. God always keeps His covenant – whether it's to bless His people for their obedience or to discipline them for their sins. God held back the rains because of the fervent prayers of Elijah and He would send the rains again in response to His servant's faithful intercession. So, for the next 3 years, the word of Elijah would control the weather in Israel. This extensive drought would prepare Israel for the dramatic contest that would take place on top of Mount Carmel between the priests of Baal and the prophet of the Lord.

2-7 – After Elijah left the king's presence, it's likely that Jezebel began her campaign to eliminate the prophets of the Lord (**18:4**). As the drought continued and famine began to insert itself into every area of Israelite life, Ahab began to search for Elijah, the man he believed was responsible for all the trouble (**18:17**). In a way, Elijah caused the drought but it was the sins of the king and queen that led the nation into disobeying God's covenant and inviting His rebuke. The Lord had prepared a special hiding place for Elijah by a brook to the east of the Jordan River. It was there that the Lord would sustain Elijah through the use of some special servants lined up to feed him (Door Dash).

This presents an interesting question – why was it necessary for Elijah to “hide.” Most expositors believe the answer is pretty obvious. If the queen is butchering Yahweh's prophets and if Ahab has an international search warrant out for Elijah, why even ask such a question? Clearly, this is God's version of the Witness Protection Program designed to preserve Elijah from Ahab and Jezebel's evil intentions. But still, we've seen over and over again that it's nothing for God to provide miraculous protection, deliverance or rescue for His servants so why does Elijah need to hide? The royal threat may be a partial reason but it's not necessarily the most important reason for this hiding.

As you may have noticed through our reading of the text, the main theme of the ch17 is the word of Yahweh. Elijah hints at this in v1 when he warns of no dew or rain...except at my word. But since he stands before Yahweh,

Elijah's word can surely be nothing other than Yahweh's word. Yahweh's word directs Elijah's itinerary and he obediently conforms to this word. Under changed circumstances, Yahweh's word orders Elijah's next move and provides the reassurance that will encourage a hopeless widow to gamble her entire livelihood. The word of Yahweh is the theme that pervades and binds the chapter together and Elijah's role in the chapter is that of the bearer of Yahweh's Word.

Thus, royal rage cannot fully explain Elijah's disappearance. In truth, it has a darker, more severe purpose. When Elijah vacates the premises at God's direction, it's not the same as some Tom, Diddimus or Haggai is disappearing. Instead, the bringer and bearer and of the Lord's Word is withdrawing from the people of the Lord. By leaving his public ministry, Elijah created a second drought in the land - the absence of the word of God from the life of Israel. God's word was to His people like the rain from heaven ([Deut 32:2](#); [Isa 55:10-11](#)). The word of God was essential to their spiritual lives; it was refreshing and only the Lord could give it. The silence of God's servant was a more severe judgment upon Israel than the crippling drought.

Scripture always treats the withdrawal of God's word and the silence of His voice as an agonizing judgment. Western Christianity seldom feels this way. After all, we're not dependent on a limited or restricted number of copies of the Bible or on the presence of an actual prophet. We are the post-Gutenberg church that literally has the Scriptures at our fingertips! How could the Word of God ever be absent from us? The shocking truth is – you can have the Bible in your hand and still suffer the absence of God's Word. You can hold it over your head and publicly declare your allegiance to it and everything it says but if you never check to see what it says or if you regularly fail to allow it to alter your character and thought processes then, for all it's availability, the word of the Lord has withdrawn from you. It's a dangerous position to be in – especially if you're not even aware of it.

It was drought with a vengeance in Israel but look at the creative means by which Yahweh sustains His obedient servant. A kosher Israelite might cringe a bit at this because ravens (crows) were unclean – banned from the Jewish menu but God didn't send them to Elijah for him to eat them, they brought the food he was supposed to eat. Now, from my observation of crows, I'm not too sure I would want to eat what they would bring me. All I've ever seen

them do is pull up a possum pancake off the middle of the road. They are scavengers and they brought food to Elijah twice a day. What kind of meat did they bring? Don't ask, just grill it well done and eat up! I doubt the Lord would send them with road kill for Elisha but without a doubt, the Lord provided the meat and the crows provided the delivery!

The birds were consistent but the creek played out. As the drought grew worse, the brook dried up, leaving Elijah without water. No worries – Yahweh's word was adequate for this new development. Elijah is directed to Zarephath where God has commanded a widow woman to provide for his needs. But notice, as desperate as his circumstances were, Elijah didn't make a move until the word of the Lord came to tell him what to do. Yahweh didn't give Elijah a 3 year plan; He led him one step at a time. He didn't tell Elijah to go to Cherith until after he delivered the message to Ahab. He didn't tell him to go to Zarephath until after the brook dried up. God led Elijah one step at a time and Elijah follow by faith. Believe me; this next step would definitely require some faith!

Widows in the ancient world were notorious for their abject poverty. A widow in Iron Age Israel didn't attend night classes, acquire computer skills and then land a job on the office staff of the local medical clinic. She didn't open up her own Daycare center for the children of working mothers. Widowhood was usually a dead end street, an existence of dirt under the fingernails from scratching out the barest of livings. Widows were generally the neediest people in the land and since the drought made everyone needy, her situation was even more desperate. If given the choice, ravens sounded more reliable than a widow. It probably made more sense to just wait by a dry creek bed.

But isn't this just vintage Yahweh? Who else would design a plan to use the unclean (raven) and the unlikely (widow) to sustain His prophet? Who am I to object if the Lord delights to use dirty birds and hopeless women? We should, however, take special note of the creativity of a God who brings help to His people through channels they would never expect. Also note that Elijah not only had to trust in Yahweh to provide, he also had do for himself some. The ravens didn't bring doggie bags or clamshells full of lunch plate specials. They brought the meat, Elijah had to prepare it. This wasn't a vacation in the Hamptons. But it should be encouraging to see that God is not above using the most unlikely agents to sustain His people.

8-16 – What about this widow? Did you notice her mailing address? Zarephath stood about 8 miles south of Sidon and about 13 miles north of Tyre (80 ml N of Samaria). Do you recall who else was from Sidon? Old Jezebel herself! This was her old stomping grounds and was still the domain of her wicked father Ethbaal. Elijah is headed straight for Baalsville in Gentileland. Elijah was visiting enemy territory and would reveal the power of God in a region where Baal was worshipped exclusively, yet ineffectively, in this drought. Here, one of Baal's subjects will trust in Yahweh's word and find that Yahweh sustains her daily, while Baal had left her in a pit of despair and on the verge of death.

Yahweh will press her into His service for the benefit of His prophet and in the process He'll give the widow far more than He demands from her. Here's a gentile widow drenched in the wideness of God's mercy; here is grace that moves beyond the boundaries of the covenant people and embraces one of Baal's most hopeless pawns. We know her address but not her name and yet, this nameless widow joins the likes of Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth and Naaman as one of those standing within the circle of Yahweh's grace long before that wonderful day when Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in Cornelius' house and the Holy Spirit fell on all those gentiles! What happened in Zarephath was just a foregleam of the day when God would grant even to the Gentiles repentance leading to life.

But Zarephath is not completely good news to everyone. In fact, Jesus got Himself into some nearly fatal trouble just by bringing it up in the synagogue one Sabbath day (**Lk 4:25-30**). Why did this OT reference throw the hometown people into such a rage? They clearly understood Jesus' point. There were plenty of widows in Israel that qualified as valid home mission projects in Elijah's day but God didn't send him to any of them. Instead, He sent Elijah to ease the burden of a desperate widow in Heathentown. In doing so, Yahweh was bypassing Israel! By conferring His favor on this gentile widow, He was removing His favor from Israel. Thus, Elijah's trip to Zarephath was an act of judgment on Israel. The Nazarenes were sharp enough to follow Jesus' logic and sensitive enough to take offense!

The principle involved here is easy enough to grasp: a privilege rejected is a privilege extended...elsewhere. This is a serious matter. Yahweh's grace is being extended through Elijah beyond Israel's borders because that grace

has been ignored within Israel. That was the spiritual principle the Nazarene mob was not willing to receive. This should also be a sobering personal word too. If you continue to despise God's word, He may withdraw His light and allow you to walk in the very darkness that you seem to prefer. God's grace is a gift that should not be lightly ignored or rejected because it will not be long refused without consequence.

Let's consider the challenge of Yahweh's demand. To have a stranger ask for a cup of water is one thing but to hear him claim first crack at your only and last pancake is quite another. She takes an oath, by Elijah's God no less, to assure him that she has little food and scant material for baking her last meal. She is at the end of her resources – this is the last supper. Elijah almost cruelly intensifies her trouble by asking for the first helping of that last supper.

Elijah's demand is not as harsh as it seems because he softens it with Yahweh's favorite preface: do not fear! Elijah tells her, "Don't be afraid" (13) but then goes on to tell her why she shouldn't be afraid. For thus says the Lord God of Israel (14). Here's the basis for the obedience Elijah calls for; here's the reason why the woman needn't be afraid to take a major risk; here is the encouragement to gamble everything: the word of God. So, she went and did as Elijah had asked (15). Can there be a clearer picture of what faith essentially is? Faith is staking everything on Yahweh's sheer word; wagering all on the veracity of God and His ability to do as He has said.

Don't forget, there was something continuous about this miracle. It's not like there were suddenly a dozen 25 lbs bags of meal stacked up in her pantry and a 55 gal barrel of oil sitting on the car porch. No, this was a quiet daily drama of the jar and the jug. When she went to the cupboard on Monday morning, there was just enough meal in the jar and still some oil in the jug for that day. And so it went on through the weeks and months. Every morning was a fresh episode of the faithfulness of Yahweh to His promise. God never said the jar of meal would overflow; just that it would never come to an end. The word of Yahweh that brings drought can, at the same time, sustain whomever He wills. I'll bet pancakes for breakfast everyday never tasted so good as they did in that humble home.

This woman had the barest amount of Yahweh's word, just a few sentences.

And yet, as modern believers with the entire Word of God and centuries of deep and accurate exposition of that Word at our disposal, we'll never become more sophisticated than this poor Phoenician widow. Some of us may know more apologetics or philosophy or theology than she ever did, but when you get down to brass tacks, we find that faith consists in leaning all of our weight upon the mere Word of God. For all the additional light we may have, we will still step over the edge of this life onto the brink of eternity with nothing to support us except some words like those found in [John 6:37](#).

There are others and yes, they are just words; but oh what wonderful words they are! These are not just the words of men; they are the words of men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit of God to transcribe them for our benefit and for our faith. So whether we are living in luxury or facing our last meal, faith has nothing else to sustain it but the simple and reliable word of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Is God's special provision for Elijah a promise that He will do likewise for us? Not necessarily. Yes, it's easy to principlize the text: Elijah was a believer, I'm a believer; or Elijah was the Lord's servant and I'm the Lord's servant, thus, He will miraculously provide for me as well. But, why do I identify with Elijah and not with the believing remnant in Israel who were still clinging to Yahweh despite the government's pro-Baal policy. Why don't I identify with those who suffered under the drought with the rest of Israel, who never met a raven bearing food or a widow offering hospitality? What gives me the right to identify with God's special agent rather than with the common people of God?

God's prophet receives special care but God's people suffer the ravages and deprivation of God's judgment just as every Baal-kissing apostate did. Our text offers us not promise of deliverance from starvation, or relief from sky-rocketing inflation or complete protection from hurricane damage or perfect health for the extent of your life or any other disaster. No where does God's Word ever promise to shield us from tribulation; it only tells us that the Lord will provide grace in the midst of our troubles. We are called to go on worshipping our Lord and Savior even though we may never meet ravens bearing gifts.

If you're jealous of the widow's daily exposure to God's miraculous provision then you are blind to the miraculous provision of God in your own life today.

You only have what you have because God has worked in and through you and others to provide for you what you currently have and will eventually receive. He's still a miracle working God! 😊