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## **A Series of Showdowns**

### **I Kings 17:17-24**

**Intro:** I wanted to review the entire chapter again to not only remind us of where we are and how we got here but also to point out how the whole chapter is a unified narrative that flows from one crisis and divine solution to another. There are some scholars that declare that **vs17-24** have nothing to do with the previous passage (despite **17a, 20**). They hold that it is an independent narrative that was added and edited later by some mysterious, unknown scribe to enhance the story or pad the reputation of Yahweh. The implication of their literary assessment is that since this passage was added at a later date, it is therefore unreliable and unnecessary and to cling to it as original is the height of naïveté.

I don't normally spend much time on the opinions of higher critics. I have learned over the years that too many times, higher criticism stems directly from lower motives and I just don't have the time or the patience to put a lot of effort into disputing the nonsense. There are those who are far wiser than I who do have the time and I greatly appreciate the work they put into defending the canon of Scripture as it has been handed down to us. There's a very nefarious reason why they attempt to discredit this passage, as we will see, but the chapter provides a plain and simple literary reason why the higher critics are completely off base.

**17** – So, every morning since Elijah had arrived at her home, old Mother Hubbard would go to the cupboard and, low and behold, there was just enough flour and a little oil for the daily miracle life, showing her that the God of Israel wills that she and her household live for another day. Maybe some days she quietly hummed the old hymn that says, “morning by morning, new mercies I see” as she peeked into the pantry and opened the bin and the jar. This morning was no exception, but something was wrong. The flour and the oil were still there but her son had become sick and this illness moved quickly and the boy died! The tokens of life sat on her shelf but the reality of death lay in her arms.

I doubt any of us can say that we have been in this exact same position but I would venture to say we have all been in similar predicaments. We have

all experienced the miraculous blessings of God on our lives, only to be quickly reminded that we still live in a fallen world that is stained and cursed by sin. We resonate with this passage because it feels so familiar. I hear the confusion in the widow's plea to Elijah and can honestly say that I've been in that same spot. "What gives?" is a phrase I have uttered many times in my own Christian life and ministry. But **ch17** is a chapter long explanation of a spiritual principle that helps to answer that nagging question in our hearts.

First, let's look at the literary structure of the chapter and see if we can't pick out some patterns. **V1** establishes the crisis that serves as the background for the next few chapters. This is a crisis provided by Yahweh in response to the gross idolatry of Israel and the nose-diving social morality that accompanied it. **V1** sets the stage but **vs2** is where the patterns begin to develop. Yahweh's word (**2**) brings direction (**3**) and explanation (**4**); Elijah obeys (**5**); Yahweh's word is fulfilled (**6**); then there's an inadequacy – a change in circumstances (**7**).

The inadequacy of **v7** prompts another appearance of Yahweh's word (**8**) that brings direction (**9a**) and explanation (**9b**); Elijah obeys (**10a**) Yahweh's word is fulfilled (**10b**) but there's another inadequacy (**10c-12** widow is destitute)! Not to worry, Yahweh's word brings direction (**13**) and explanation (**14**); now the widow obeys (**15**) and Yahweh's word is fulfilled (**16**) but again, here comes the inadequacy – the change in circumstances (**17**) – her son dies! When presented in this format, it's easy to see the symmetrical development of the text and why **17-24** is an inseparable part of this chapter.

We see that Yahweh is at work preserving life and yet at every turn some frustration, some obstacle, some unnamed antagonist arises that threatens to prevent His work: the creek dries up (**7**), the channel of provision is destitute (**12**) or death takes a life that had so far been preserved by God (**17**). Remove **v17-24** from the rest of the chapter and you destroy what apparently is a deliberate, unified literary pattern. In **v17**, death itself seems to attack Yahweh's reputation as life-giver and this difficulty (as untouchable as it is) must be dealt with and resolves just as the previous obstacles were. Clearly, **17-24** are interlocked with **2-16** and cannot be *honestly* separated from them. To do so robs God's people of His comforting word; a word that's comforting because it understands us and our circumstances.

**18** – We've established the cohesiveness of the text; now let's look at its teaching. Right away, we can hear the utter perplexity in the widow's remarks to Elijah. Of course, it sounds more like an accusation than a plea for help. What jumps out to me in this passage is the complete change of attitude of the widow from **v12** to **v18**. In **v12** she had resigned herself and her son to a slow death of starvation. There were no tears, no accusations that was just the way it was in her ancient, pagan society. All the adoration and faithful obedience to Baal had carried her to the point of death and she was ready to go. Now, she is shocked, even offended at the appearance of death in her home and rightly so. Death is inevitable for all but she's no longer ready to go on the next truckload. What brought this change?

It was nothing other than her introduction to the Covenant God of Israel. Before she met Elijah and Elijah's God, all she knew was capricious whims of Baal, the god of the Sidonians. Her knowledge of and commitment to Baal had brought her to the point of hopeless destitution. It had brought her to the place where death, though not desirable, would at least be different than the slow drip of starvation. Since there was nothing to hope for, why cling to hope?

But then she met Yahweh and through His promise and His power she rediscovered hope for herself and her son. She now had a reason to live because she met the source of all life! Jesus still brings that same hope today!

But let's put ourselves in the widow's sandals for a moment. Here's a woman who had nothing to act on but the bare word of Yahweh and she found that He was as good as His word. What a treat it must have been for her to enjoy the quiet miracle of Yahweh's provision day after day. Then her son dies! What's going on here? As far as she can tell in her new found faith, Yahweh both provides and perplexes. He seems to be both faithful and fitful. He sustains life and then takes it away. What is this new believer supposed to make of Him?

Of course, in one sense, there's no problem at all. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away (**Job 1:21**). He has a perfect right to take what He has given. If all we have is only by His grace, how can we complain if He decides to take back part or all of it? But there's more of a difficulty here in our text because Yahweh's promise (**14**) and His provision (**15-16**) imply His intention to sustain the widow and her son until the day the Lord sends rain

on the earth. From this perspective, the death of her son seems to contradict God's declared purpose. Why does God act this way? Why does He follow a bottomless bin of flour with the devastating death of a son? Does He bless us only to make our distress more galling? Does He miraculously sustain life only to take the life He sustains?

No wonder the woman is at the end of her rope! She even goes so far as to query if Elijah had only come to expose her sin and her son's death was just the punishment for that sin. How many of us live in that confusion? On good days we remember God's grace and forgiveness but when circumstances turn against us, in our despair tend to dredge up all sorts of guilt that God must be punishing us for. We seem to forget that He has forgotten that which we have confessed and repented of. Many times we are faced with the painful consequences of sins that we persist in but that's on us. God has warned us away, but if we insist on sticking a fork into the wall socket, it's gonna hurt!

Now, we might think we would've been kinder than God. Here's a poor widow recently escaped from the futility of Baal worship, who had only just begun to taste and see that the Lord is good. And He crushes her! Why didn't He wait until she was more mature in her faith? Why shatter a new convert with the mysteries of His unfathomable ways? We can't answer those questions. We only know that this woman learned early on that Yahweh both sustains and bewilders; both delights and devastates. You might not see the relief in that truth but there's a backhanded comfort of sorts in the rugged honesty of the Bible. It hides nothing but clearly warns that God both blesses and baffles His servants.

**19-23** – We can understand the widow's bewilderment but it looks like Elijah is just as baffled as she is! Her accusation in **v18** spurred him into what appears to be decisive action but when he gets the dead boy up into his room, he gets right down to the business of praying and this wasn't a calm, quiet prayer meeting. Twice the text declares that Elijah cried out to the Lord. His prayers are very different, the 1<sup>st</sup> pray sounds very much like the accusation of the widow. In this prayer, Elijah is expressing the very anguish and confusion of the widow. In fact, he picks up the widow's distress of **v18**, turns it into a prayer and pleads to Yahweh from her point of view.

Do we ever pray like that? Do we empathize with someone to the point that

we put ourselves in their shoes and plead their anguish before God for them? Too many times we want to offer advice or find a solution to alleviate the pain or provide a wise explanation to the person in distress. Many times we might avoid people who are hurting specifically because we don't have the advice, solution or explanation. But here's the thing – we don't need to have all the answers to life's problems; we have a throne we can approach in prayer whose Occupant not only has all the answer but can provide every solution. Prayer is God's designated means for meeting the needs of His people. He wants to be involved in meeting our needs but He also wants us to be involved in presenting those needs to Him.

After his 1<sup>st</sup> prayer, Elijah engages in what seems to be a strange prophetic action. He stretches himself over or upon the boy 3 times. This was not some magical incantation; it was a symbolic act that was typical of the prophetic class in Israel at that time. This was an acted out way of saying, "Let his lifeless body be as my lively body." The prayer that follows this act reinforces that symbol. Elijah simply asks Yahweh to restore the life of the boy. Then we read the miracle words on which the entire story hangs: the Lord heard Elijah's prayer and just like that, the boy was alive!

Notice, Elijah didn't have a special robe that he used to swat people with or a special prayer to say over a dead body. This was all uncharted territory for him and the double reference to his crying out to God is very significant. Elijah, great prophet that he was, doesn't work any holy hocus pocus. He doesn't have some easy, convenient gift to get him out of this jam. He's no religious magician strutting around the widow's distress flashing some instant razzle-dazzle that is always at his disposal. He's no candidate for super-prophet; he's just a servant who can do nothing but plead with Yahweh over the affliction of this recent convert. Yahweh has reduced His servant to utter weakness.

Yahweh's treatment of Elijah wasn't necessarily special, it's actually typical. He brings Elijah up to the helplessness of prayer. Thus, all Elijah can do is plead with Yahweh in prayer. Prayer is God's appointed means for dispensing grace for our difficulties ([Jam 5:13](#)). Prayer is the path we must follow to get through the maze of this life. Even God's veteran servants must learn this truth again and again.

**24** – Elijah had carried a lifeless corpse up to his room and now he brings



down a living boy. He had taken him from his grieving mother's lap and now returns him to her joyful embrace. His abrupt, Give me your son (19a) is now followed by an equally brief, See, your son lives (23b)! We are right back to the theme of ch17 – the word of Yahweh gives life. Yahweh lives and so does this young boy.

The widow's confession brings this chapter to its logical, climatic conclusion. What is she saying here? Is she not referring to the knowledge of Yahweh she has gained through her agonizing experience? Wasn't it the reliability of Yahweh that seemed to be questioned early on in the crisis? He had clearly indicated by His earlier promise (14) and by His daily provision (15b-16) that He intended to preserve her and her household. Her son's death seemed to blow a huge hole in Yahweh's word. Was He just like all the pagan gods in their spastic, capricious unpredictability? Was He good at making promises but unable or uninterested in keeping them? As it turns out, she sees that Yahweh's word that Elijah speaks is reliable. At the end of her trial, Yahweh has proven Himself to be faithful.

Is this spiritual principle only valid for Phoenician widows? Doesn't this small bit of Zarephath theology carry a heart-warming word to all of God's people everywhere? This truth simply testifies that in the face of God's perplexing, seemingly absurd and contradictory ways, He will show Himself faithful to His people at the end of their trial. This is the God Moses praised to Israel in Deut 8:16 as the God who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end. Sometimes this testimony is all we have to keep us going but it is still enough.

But the mission of this passage goes far beyond trials in general and tackles the one great trial in particular – death! When the widow's son dies, a whole new challenge arises to Yahweh's adequacy and authority. It's one thing to rescue people from the jaws of death but what can Yahweh do when death has swallowed its victim up? Yahweh can act across the border from Israel in Sidon but is there a border He ultimately cannot cross? Is there a kingdom in which He has no power? When faced with death must the Lord, like Baal, bow the knee?

Ch17 declares the answer for all to hear and see: Yahweh is not only the victor over dearth (1-16) He's victor over death as well (17-24). No plague or

blight can limit Yahweh's supremacy, least of all death. No one in death's domain is beyond the pull of Yahweh's irresistible power. That is the undeniable testimony of this text and that is why higher critics desire to discredit it. They want to render this passage moot because it is a sign text that points to the essence of Christianity itself - the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Sure, [1 Kings 17](#) isn't telling us about an empty tomb like [Mark 16](#) or a supper at a house in Emmaus like [Luke 24](#) or a breakfast on the shore of Galilee like [John 21](#). This text is not in the same category as the resurrection narratives but it is a "sign" passage, much like the story of Jairus' daughter in [Mark 5](#) or when Jesus ruined the funeral of the only son of the widow of Nain in [Luke 7](#) or Lazarus in [John 11](#). All of these stories served to reveal that Jesus' power extends over and into the realm of death, where He can plunder its victims at will! Sign passages like our text here in [ch17](#) should not be ignored or despised. Signs are significant because of the powerful truths they point to but because they are just signs, they can be more subtle and sometimes more instructive.

Next time we will launch into our study of [ch18](#), the great public showdown between Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, and Baal, the pagan god of Sidon, introduced by Jezebel and spreading like a noxious, invasive weed. Baal seems to be the latest religious fad in Israel but will he show up for this big showdown?

We look to [ch18](#) as the big showdown between Yahweh and Baal but as we have seen, [ch17](#) is jam-pack with one showdown after another, albeit all in private, but a contest of wills and strength just the same. At every turn there are a series of circumstances that come together to try and thwart the intentions and declared purposes of God. And yet, time and time again, God proves that He is more than a match for the circumstances of this life. If this was a comfort for the widow and the prophet in their time of distress and confusion, how much more should this comfort us in the midst of our own trials and perplexity?

God has brought each of us individually and all of us collectively to this very spot. It cannot be that He has brought us here just to abandon us; that's not His style. He's brought us along this far for a purpose and it would behoove us to discover that purpose. But, if we never discover it we can at least trust

in His purpose and His goodness to us! 😊