



Lessons from Elijah's Life

Food from an Empty Barrel

Date: 29 January 2020

Text: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Key Lesson: We must trust God's Word even when it seems illogical.

Waiting on God!

At the brook, Elijah had learned greater dependence on the Lord. Day by day, without fail, God sent the ravens to him with delicious food. As the drought worsened, the water in the brook Cherith decreased to a trickle and then completely dried up. As Elijah sat beside the dry brook, he may have felt as if God had abandoned him. Have you ever felt that way? It is a terrible feeling! However, God had not forgotten about Elijah!¹ God simply waited until Elijah's water supply was gone before showing him the next step. God often does this to keep us depending on Him. God waited until Sarah was too old to bear children before giving her a son (Gen 21). God waited until Israel had no way of escape before He opened a dry path across the Red Sea (Exo 14). God waited until the night before his execution before He sent an angel to let Peter out of prison (Acts 12). God waited until all hope of surviving the storm was gone before He gave Paul assurance that he and all those with him would survive (Acts 27). We must not lose faith in God when He waits until we are desperate before helping us. Pastor Alan Carr put it this way, "Before God can mould us, He must first melt us!"² (Isaiah 40:31) "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

God is Always on Time

When Elijah had no more water to drink, God once again gave him three clear directions.

1. First, he was to **arise**. This was a welcomed command since he had no more water in that place.
2. Second, he was to **go to Zarephath**. He must leave his secret hiding place near the brook Cherith and travel 130 km northwest to a town called Zarephath. The name Zarephath means "smelting-shop, 'a workshop for the refining and smelting of metals', a small Phoenician town, now Surafend, about a mile (1.6 km) from the coast, almost midway on the road between Tyre and Sidon."³ It was the home country of wicked Queen Jezebel. God must have a great sense of humour to send Elijah to Jezebel's home area for his next hiding place. I wonder what Elijah thought of the idea?
3. Third, he was to **dwell there**. He was not to leave. Zarephath was to be his home until further notice. God would use this time in that small smelting village to melt Elijah so that he could mould him into a finer vessel. God would also use that time to be a huge blessing to that dear foreign widow saint and her son.

God's Promise

God followed His three commands with a promise. He assured Elijah that He had commanded a widow woman there to sustain or care for his needs. God knew that in the land Phoenicia lived a foreign widow who had faith in Jehovah. This woman's husband had died leaving her with no means of income and she had a young son to feed. Even without a terrible drought, widows were the poorest of the poor people. Once again, God was testing Elijah's faith. How could a desperate widow possibly feed him? Our job is not to question how God will keep His promises to us; it is to trust God to keep His promises. (Isaiah 55:8-9) "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Elijah's Response

How did Elijah respond to God's commands and promise? "So he arose and went . . ." No questions, no arguments, no complaints—just obedience.⁴ Elijah had a long walk of more than 130 kilometres ahead of him. Without taking a long detour, his travels would take him directly through the heart of Ahab's kingdom. In addition, he was a wanted man. Ahab had searched everywhere for him (1Ki 18:10). Many people were looking for him. During his journey, God must have disguised his appearance or maybe he walked at night to hide. In some miraculous way, God provided food and water for him as he walked this dangerous trek. God never promised His children a life of ease. Job affirms this in Job 14:1, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." During times of trial and trouble, we must give our burdens to the Lord. (Psalms 55:22) "Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

If possible, watch this excellent video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAwuKUHKKBw>

¹ Pastor Alan Carr, http://www.sermonnotebook.org/elijah/1%20Kings%2017_8-16.htm

² Ibid. (grammar edited)

³ Easton's Bible Dictionary

⁴ J. Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in the Life of Elijah*, Testing and Ministry at Zarephath, (1 Kings 17:8-16)

The Widow's Serious Distress

When he arrived at Zarephath, God led Elijah directly to the widow woman near the city gate. Was she waiting for Elijah? Had God told her of His plans? Her response to Elijah indicates that she knew nothing of God's plans. She was gathering sticks to make a tiny fire and cook her last meal. Elijah called to her and asked her for a little water to drink. That simple request was made more difficult because of the terrible drought. Then he also asked her to bring him a morsel of bread. He may not have known it, but he was asking for her very last tiny loaf. Depending upon a foreign widow to provide his meals was humbling and a huge test of Elijah's faith. It was the man's place to provide for women not the other way around. He was a Jew; she was a Gentile woman. She was a poor, destitute, widow woman facing imminent starvation. However, his request may have been an even greater test of the widow's faith. She was asked to give her all. Remember what Jesus said about the Jewish widow's mite, He was more interested in sacrificial giving than in abundant giving (Mr 12:42).

What do you suppose went through the mind of that poor widow when Elijah made his request? When she said, "as the LORD thy God liveth", she revealed several facts that she had observed (v.12). First, she recognized him as an Israelite. Second, though most in Israel no longer served the LORD, she assumed this man did. Third, she knew that God's title was LORD or Jehovah. Fourth, she also believed that the LORD was a living God. Though she lived in this Gentile land, somehow she had learned about Jehovah the living God and had placed her trust in Him. God gives us no clue as to how she had come to faith in Him, but she evidently had. God made no mistake in sending Elijah to this particular widow woman. If we will trust in the Lord, He will direct our paths as well (Pr 3:5-6).

The widow explained, "I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse". This cake was a small biscuit made from flour and oil and baked on hot stones. The famine had reduced her limited resources to nothing but a handful of flour and a tiny bit of oil. She continued, "and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die." She had nothing else. She was in serious distress. Here God brought together Elijah and a widow who were both so poor that they had nothing so that He might show himself strong. (2 Chronicles 16:9) "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. ..."

Elijah's Confident Faith

By faith, Elijah urged her not to fear. Her situation was humanly fearful. Starvation was imminent. Though humanly foolish, we need not fear as long as we are in the centre of God's will. The Psalmist wrote, (Psalms 56:3) "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

Elijah challenged her to trust God and make him a cake first. This seemingly selfish command was to tested her faith yet farther. Was she willing to give the very last that she had to God's servant?

Elijah confidently revealed God's promise to provide (v.14). God specifically gave this promise to Elijah and the widow. Not every Bible promise is for us. We must be careful not to claim Bible promises that do not rightly ours to claim. However, when we have a promise from God that does belong to us, we must confidently believe it. How can we know which promises are ours to claim? Evaluate the promise. To whom was it first written? Do other Scriptures apply it to Christians? Is it a general principle that is for everyone? Is it a conditional promise? If so, have I met the conditions?

The Widow's Courageous Faith

Without hesitation, "she went and did according to the saying of Elijah" (v.15). That is courageous faith! She based her faith on what she knew of the character of Jehovah and on what this total stranger, Elijah, said was the promise of God. She simply knew God and believed His word. We have no excuse for lack of faith.

God's Daily Supply

God honoured His word and her faith (v.15-16). The three of them ate from that handful of meal and little oil for many days. (Matthew 6:33) "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Neither the meal nor the oil ran out according to the word of the LORD.

Legend has it that a man was lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old shack—a ram shackled, windowless, roofless, weather-beaten old shack. He looked about this place and found a little shade from the heat of the desert sun. As he glanced around he saw a pump about fifteen feet away—an old, rusty water pump. He stumbled over to it, grabbed the handle, and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out.

Disappointed, he staggered back. He noticed off to the side an old jug. He looked at it, wiped away the dirt and dust, and read a message that said, "You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug, my friend. P.S.: Be sure you fill the jug again before you leave."

He popped the cork out of the jug and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live. Ah, but if he poured all the water in the old rusty pump, maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from down deep in the well, all the water he wanted.

He studied the possibility of both options. What should he do, pour it into the old pump and take a chance on fresh, cool water or drink what was in the old jug and ignore its message? Should he waste all the water on the hopes of those flimsy instructions written, no telling how long ago?

Reluctantly he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump, squeak, squeak, squeak. Still nothing came out! Squeak, squeak, squeak. A little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump. Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it. He filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents.

Then he filled the jug for the next traveler. He filled it to the top, popped the cork back on, and added this little note: "Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back." That is the essence of genuine faith! It is not a risk, but it is a challenge to human reasoning. *Faith will call on us to do the unthinkable so that we might receive the impossible!* (See Alan Carr's sermon)