

“The Life-Giving Word”
I Kings 17:7–16
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Hear now the Word of the Lord from I Kings 17:7–10 which says [7] *And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.*

[8] *Then the word of the LORD came to him, [9] “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” [10] So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” [11] And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” [12] And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” [13] And Elijah said to her, “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. And she and he and her household ate for many days. [16] The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.* Thus says the Word of the Lord.

Prayer:

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank You for Your Word that has been given to us. We thank You for how You have revealed something of Yourself in this story about Elijah and the widow. Lord, we pray that we would see Christ in this passage. You know my own shortcomings and weaknesses and that You would overcome these things so that Christ may be glorified above every name and that Your Word may be applied to those reading this today. We pray these things in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

The story of Elijah and the widow takes place in the midst of a severe famine that is happening in the land of Israel and its surrounding regions. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus tells us that this particular famine lasted for about three and a half years. Since we live in such an affluent country and have never experienced a famine like this for ourselves I’d like to put this in perspective for you. There was a great Irish potato famine which you may have learned about in history class that occurred in the mid-1800s. It last roughly about the same amount of time as the famine in this passage. It killed one million people which is five times the population of the city of Birmingham, Alabama. A quarter of the population of the state of Alabama wiped out and that happened at a much more advanced age so you can only imagine the devastation that this famine was wreaking on the people of God.

Perhaps you’re wondering why God would allow such an awful thing to happen to His chosen people. It is because Israel disobeyed the Word of the Lord. They failed to heed the warnings of Moses as He laid out for them in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 28:15, 22–24 says [15] *But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all*

his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

[22] The LORD will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish.

[23] And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron.

[24] The LORD will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.

So we see that God brought this famine upon His people because He is true to His Word. Israel disregarded these warnings because they were led astray by an evil king named Ahab who were are told in I Kings 16:30 that he did evil in the sight of the Lord, more evil than all who were before him. A few verses later it says in I Kings 16:33, *[33] Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.* Ahab went against God's Word and married Jezebel, a Canaanite princess from the land of Sidon. To make matters worse he even worshipped her god known as Baal. Baal was supposed to be the god of fertility and agriculture. Baal worshippers had all sorts of evil practices, like temple prostitution and even child sacrifice. Both of them were able to get Israel to do what they were doing as well which is why the Lord saw fit to punish them with this terrible famine we just read about.

As we approach this passage I think it would do us well to realize our own present time is under the curse and wrath of God because we all have disobeyed the Word of the Lord. Disobedience began with our first parents – Adam and Eve – and it continues into the present day with you and me which is why we can read in Scripture that surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

The Apostle Paul describes the way of the world as following the prince of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. He also describes our present time as a time of spiritual darkness that is ruled by cosmic forces of evil. In this present age we may not have a king or queen leading us astray but we do have political leaders, social media influencers, Hollywood and universities think tanks constantly trying to influence our behavior away from the Word of the Lord. This is the context of our current situation – the emptiness, brokenness, pain, losses we all suffer from, or the effects of the fall of humanity from God's grace and the divine punishment we justly deserve for our sins.

This was the case with Elijah and the widow, in our passage, both of whom are suffering personal effects of the Lord's punishment of Israel. This leads me to my first point which is the Word of the Lord brings about difficult and even dire circumstances in our lives. Sometimes God allows us to reach the very end of our rope, to come to the end of ourselves where we have no more resources to fall back on. This was certainly the case with His prophet Elijah. The brook of Cherith was Elijah's life supply. Day after day he sat by this brook and watched it evaporate until it turned into dust. You can imagine how disheartening that must have been for the Lord's prophet. This brook was all that he had and the Lord saw fit that it should come to an end. After all, Elijah could have easily taken this as a sign that the Lord had abandoned him for it was the Lord who had directed him there in the first place. Elijah knew that God had the power to make this brook last forever if He wanted to. So why didn't He? Was it possible that God had left him to fend for himself?

The widow in this passage also found herself in dire straits. As a Canaanite it is likely that she also worshipped Baal. Baal was the god of rain and it hadn't rained in over a year. Make no mistake, Yahweh the Lord of Israel showing her god to be full of false and empty promises and as a result she was paying for it dearly. She had no food and day after day she saw

herself and her son slowly wasting away. Her situation was so hopeless that it was inevitable that she and her son would eventually die.

I wonder if you know what it's like to feel this way. I hope you don't know what it's like to starve to death or to thirst like this but you probably know what it's like to be stuck in a bad or tragic situation with no way out. You probably know what it's like to wait with no control over what might happen next, to you. In such situations, it's easy to feel helpless or hopeless and to despair. It's even tempting at such times to think 'Does God really exist because why else would something like this happen to me? Believe it or not, according to our passage there is something harder than waiting in misery. It is actually receiving a word from the Lord in your misery especially when that word was not what we were expecting or hoping for which brings me to the second point of our passage.

The second point is that the word of the Lord is often not what we expect and it's even more challenging than just waiting where we are. We see this in I Kings 17:8–9a which says [8] *Then the word of the LORD came to him, [9] "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there."* Elijah's heart must have sunk when he heard the Lord's orders. Not only was Zarephath 100 miles across the wilderness but it's part of Sidon which is where the evil queen Jezebel is originally from for this is her home territory where all of her allies are. It is the very center of Baal worship. In I Kings 18:4 we see that Jezebel has given orders to hunt down and kill all of the Lord's prophets. So if Elijah is caught he is a dead man. There is no way around it so why would the Lord send him to Zarephath, into enemy territory?

If that isn't bad enough it gets worse when the Lord tells Elijah who he will be staying with for he would be staying with a poor, pagan, Canaanite widow. Widows in those days were not welcome. They had no life insurance policy to collect. They were some of the poorest, most neglected and vulnerable people in that society. So it stands to reason that this woman had everything to gain by turning Elijah in for why wouldn't she want to? After all, it's Elijah's God who is the reason that she is starving. You would think she would want some revenge.

What probably makes this word of the Lord to Elijah even more challenging to obey than anything else, was the fact that there were better alternatives around for Elijah. In the first few verses of the next chapter, I Kings 18, you read about a man named Obadiah who feared the Lord greatly and he was also in some position of power and authority to help. He was already in the business of saving the Lord's prophets. He was already giving the Lord's prophets food and water and that sounds like a great situation for Elijah. At the very least, God could have sent him to a widow in Israel for Jesus tells us in Luke's Gospel that there were lots of them around. Seems like anyone would have been a better choice than this poor, pagan, Canaanite widow.

This widow also receives a word from the Lord through Elijah. This word is even more challenging than the word that Elijah receives. Elijah abruptly shows up on this woman's doorstep and immediately tells her to bring some water, not by asking but telling and it's not a very tactful approach. With the famine going on water was in really short supply. You might if you were nice share some with a dear friend but you would definitely not share it with someone who was your enemy, someone who's God made it His business to wipe you out. This makes it all the more surprising that she actually responds positively. She stops what she is doing and goes to get him some water. Perhaps it's because the water comes from the community well or she figured she wasn't going to be around much longer so why not?

Yet it definitely does not work when he tells her to bring him a small piece of bread. By requesting a piece of bread, Elijah had just crossed the line because this request was going to cost this woman personally. This bread would have to come from her own kitchen and not the

community well. A small piece of bread would send her son to an early grave, Elijah is therefore challenging this woman to risk everything she holds dear.

I think we all naturally think of ourselves as the victims in our own life stories. When something terrible happens we half expect the Lord to come to our rescue, like a knight in shining armor, but we never imagine that He would come in our weakest of moments just to demand something from us, like He does with this poor widow. We think 'surely the Lord doesn't want me to sacrifice the very thing that gives my life meaning and purpose. Surely the Lord wants me to be happy.' We say we don't believe in a God who would demand something so difficult from us but this passage tells us something quite different. Sometimes the Lord does indeed challenge us even when we find ourselves in the most difficult circumstances already. In other words, the word of the Lord doesn't always give us the easy way out.

I can still remember one particular time in my own life when this was true for me. I was 14 years old working my first job on a farm in New Hampshire. I was as green and naive as they come. I knew nothing about farming or about hard work. Roger, the man that I worked for, was kind of mean, old and had a nasty temper. He didn't really make for a pleasant work environment. In fact, I dreaded going there every day after school. My worst day at work came when I accidentally stepped on one of his sunflowers, like the oblivious person that I am sometimes. I'll never forget this. When Roger saw what I had done he got in my face and screamed at me as loudly as he could until his face turned purple with rage. He called me insults I had never heard before. I was absolutely humiliated and scared. I don't think I have ever felt so low in my life than at that moment. I went home that day in tears at the age of 14 and it was embarrassing.

The only thing that gave me any comfort was the thought that my dad would surely let me quit when I told him what had happened. I even thought maybe my dad would even get in his face and confront him for me, but to my dismay that is not what happened. Instead my father encouraged me to go back to work the next day to enemy territory and confront Roger myself. When I heard my father's advice I was convinced he just didn't believe what had happened or that he didn't love me. I thought what kind of father wouldn't stand up for his own son after being treated so terribly. Regardless of how I felt I had to go back to work the next day. I went back with fear and trembling as I obeyed my father's instructions. I confronted Roger about what had happened and told him that if happened again I would quit. To my great surprise, Roger sat there and listened to what I said. Our relationship completely turned for the better from that point on.

Years later after working for him he would tell me that conversation had really impressed him and it was the day I had earned his respect. That never would have happened if I had disobeyed my father's instructions. The truth is that I had no choice in the matter because my father wouldn't let me quit so I was stuck in that terrible job whether I liked it or not and it was only out of a sense of pure desperation with no options left that I actually heeded his advice. Such is the case with our heavenly Father. Sometimes the word of the Lord comes to us and it just seems unbearable but out of desperation we have no choice but to trust in what the word of the Lord tells us which brings us to the third point.

The third point is we are challenged in life's most difficult moments so that we learn to depend on the word of the Lord alone to be our life support. It's true that God's Word doesn't always make sense to us especially when our happiness or livelihood is at stake. Why did Elijah have to go to Zarephath and dwell with a poverty stricken widow? Why did the widow have to

give her last bit of food that she could have used to feed her own child, to a total stranger and an enemy? That doesn't seem to be very merciful.

In our arrogance or pride we say things like 'that's not the way I would do it for God really needs to get His act together.' But we need to remember what the Lord tells us elsewhere in Scripture through His prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 55:8–9 says [8] *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.* [9] *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* We might not think it prudent to seek help from a poor widow but that's only because we lack the eternal, omniscient perspective that only God has.

Proverbs 14:12 says [12] *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.* King Solomon, who wrote the book of Proverbs and the wisest man to ever live, is a good example of this. In all his wisdom he thought it best to disregard the word of the Lord, to make alliances with other countries and to marry their daughters. He then thought it best to make his wives happy by building for them places to worship their false gods. If we're honest with ourselves we'll empathize with King Solomon here, because how many men think it's not best to make your wives happy. If the wisest king's best decision led to the destruction of his own kingdom then how much more incapable are we of making wise choices for ourselves? Yet we are still foolish enough to think we know what is best, which is why it is necessary for the Lord to humble us and challenge us with various trial and difficulties in order that we learn to depend on Him and Him alone for life. This is the way the Lord has always dealt with His people.

Moses says in Deuteronomy 8:3, [3] *And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.* The Lord was using the trials in the wilderness to wean the people of Israel off their dependence on Egypt and to teach them to depend on Him alone to be their life support. This is exactly what He is doing with Elijah and the widow in this I Kings 17 passage.

He is teaching them that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from His mouth. So in the face of certain death Elijah says to the widow in I Kings 17:13–14, [13] *And Elijah said to her, "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.'"*

This poor, pagan widow is told not to fear losing her son because the Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken the last word and He has declared that little amount of flour and oil should last until there is rain on the earth once again. It is these verses that make it abundantly clear why we cannot always understand God's ways or why the things that He does doesn't always make sense to us. It is simply because God does not have the same limitations that we have. The things that we are hindered by are not hindrances to God. This is why we are in no position to question Him. The world, the reality, the time and space in which we live – these things cannot contain our one true God who has made the heavens and earth and all that is in them. With the Lord the God of Israel all things are possible.

So if you want to make a little flour and a little oil last forever that's exactly what He'll do, but what is almost more amazing than what was in I Kings 17:13–14 is the very next verse which says [15] *And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days.* Where did this incredible act of faith come from? The act itself came from a belief

for she believed that the word that Elijah spoke to her was the only thing that could save her. She believed that her situation was as hopeless as it actually was. More than any other reason, according to I Kings 17:9, this woman acted in faith because the Lord commanded her to. The word of the Lord has been at work in her heart even before Elijah ever showed up on the scene.

This means that this woman's salvation was not of her own doing. Her acting in faith is only the manifestation of a work that God had already been doing in her. She is a perfect example of what Paul writes in Philippians 2:12b–13 which says *[12b] work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*. It is what James means when he writes in James 2:17, *[17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*. True faith which God has worked in us will always express itself with obedience to the word of the Lord.

The question now is what has the word of the Lord spoken to us in our own time, in our own age of spiritual darkness? The Gospel of John tells us that the word of the Lord has come to us in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus our Savior. John describes Him like this in John 1:1–5, *[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*.

Elijah came to the widow in Zarephath with a word from the Lord but Jesus comes to you and me as the Word of the Lord Incarnate. He did not just have a word to speak for He Himself was the Word. This makes Jesus the greatest Prophet to have ever lived. He is the One in whom the story of Elijah and the widow are pointing us to. All that Elijah did, Jesus did on an infinitely greater scale. Elijah learned to obey the word of the Lord even though it was dangerous and costly to him. Likewise the author of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 5:8 which says *[8] Although he (Jesus) was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*.

Elijah left the comfort of a quiet shady brook. Jesus left the comfort of His eternal dwelling in the heavenly places with God the Father Almighty, *[7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2:7). Elijah traversed through enemy territory in order to save a woman who was by nature his enemy at the risk of losing his own life. The Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, was incarnated in enemy territory to save you and me who were by nature His enemy at the cost of His own life. In other words, He not only risked His life but actually gave it up and though He had offered perfect obedience to His Father, He suffered and died at the hands of wicked men for our sake, our disobedience in order that we might have life in His name.

This is not something Elijah could do and it's not something that the Lord required that he do. Nothing is more offensive to the way of this world than a Savior had to be crucified for our disobedience which is why Peter and Paul both quote Isaiah and call Him a stumbling block and a rock of offense. Now Jesus is the greater Elijah which means that you and I are represented in the story by the poor, unbelieving, pagan widow. Like her, we too were perishing under God's wrath due to our sin. Also like her, there is nothing special about us that God should show us any mercy yet He did to the point that He sent His one and only Son, the Word made flesh, to save us. Just like Elijah told the widow to stop putting her faith in empty, material possessions and instead live according to the word of the Lord, so too does Christ come to us and tells us to stop putting our faith in empty, material possessions – in our idols, our false gods – and to instead believe in Him alone for our life and our salvation.

We see from this passage that trusting in Christ will be costly, it won't be easy and it will challenge us because to trust in Christ means to follow Christ. Jesus says in Matthew 16:24–25, [24] *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* He also says John 14:15, [15] *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."*

This is why this widow is a perfect example for us. She believed Elijah and trusted that the word he spoke to her was truth so she obeyed him, even at the risk of losing everything. So likewise if we believe in Christ, if we trust Him to be our Lord and Savior, we will necessarily obey Him, we should die to ourselves, we should pick up our cross daily and follow Him at the risk of losing everything. But like the widow we need to trust that the Lord's daily provision of grace will always be enough for us. You may have noticed that the Lord didn't just bless the widow with storehouses of oil and flour, the commentators on this passage all agree that the amount of flour and oil stayed the same as it was. It didn't increase but it didn't decrease thus each day for the widow was an act of faithful obedience met with a gracious provision of supply as she ate and drank according the word of the Lord which is why I Kings 17:16 is no throw-away verse.

I Kings 17:16 says [16] *The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.* It emphasizes for us that when we respond to the word of the Lord with faithful obedience He is always faithful in return to keep His promises no matter how difficult our situation may be. When the word of the Lord declares that something shall be, that thing always is. The word of the Lord does not come back empty.

In conclusion, I hope this passage encourages us that as we learn to respond in faith to Christ in the midst of life's trials and tribulations that He will always be faithful to supply us anew with a daily provision of grace and mercy as we seek shelter from the wrath of God that is being poured out on the sons of disobedience in this age. Hear the words of our Savior – the Word Himself made flesh when He says in John 6:35, [35] *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

Therefore brother and sisters in Christ, I encourage you and plead with you, obey the word of the Lord. Go to Him. Believe in Him. Feed on His righteousness and enjoy life everlasting. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Almighty God and heavenly Father, Creator and Redeemer, we thank You for the word that you have supplied us with, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who fulfilled the law on our behalf, who offered a life of perfect obedience to the point of death on a cross. Lord this is unbearable to think about this that it should have come to that and yet it did and we thank You Lord. We rejoice in the sacrifice that He made for us and we rejoice in the fact that even now He intercedes for us at Your right hand. Lord, I pray that Your Holy Spirit would come into our hearts and lives and apply Your Word that You would teach us to feed on You even when life seems unbearable, even when Your Word challenges us to the very core. May we always feed on Christ, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith for we pray these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

The Life-Giving Word

1. The Word of the Lord brings about difficult/dire circumstances in our lives.
2. The Word of the Lord is unexpected and challenging.
3. That we may learn to depend on the Word of the Lord for life.

Main Point: Obey the Word of the Lord and live!