

Elijah Lesson 3: I Kings 17:7-24

Objective of Lesson 3:

The objective of Lesson 3 is to see how God shows Himself to be the true Lord of life in I Kings 17:7-24, the God who has the power over the forces of nature and even over death itself. Baal, the god of the storm, the Canaanite god of life, holds no power.

The themes that we started to explore last week remain in I Kings 17 this week:

1. Life is made possible by God alone.
2. The word of the Lord as spoken through the prophet is important, is reality (Keck, et. al., 1999)

We will also study some similarities in stories of Jesus and stories of Elijah in I Kings 17.

Read I Kings 17:7-9

Even though God has been providing for Elijah miraculously with the ravens, he still allows the effects of the drought to take place with the brook drying up. God could have miraculously chosen to provide water for Elijah in the place he had been, but He chose not to.

Last week, we talked about how during this time, Elijah was learning to trust God more deeply - trusting Him to provide, trusting that He was at work even while Elijah was still. He was in an isolated place, learning to trust and depend on God. It may have been difficult to be away from the action, but it also was a time of strengthening faith.

Solitude with God is beneficial to our faith, to our relationship with God. But God does not call us to live constantly in solitude. At this point, he calls Elijah out of solitude and into ministry - into a more public role.

The word of God comes to Elijah. We do not know for sure, but the way it is worded, it sounds like this is the first word that Elijah has had since he went to the ravine. Elijah knows it is God's voice speaking even though God is telling Elijah to go to Sidon, the country that Jezebel is from, to receive help from the poorest of the poor.

God tells Elijah to do two things that seem counterintuitive:

1. Go to Zarephath in Sidon.

Zarephath was a Phoenician commercial capital known for its exporting of various goods, including wine, grain and oil. Zarephath was in between Tyre and Sidon (the city) and was ruled by Jezebel's father, in the middle of the land that worships Baal. And, yet even Zarephath, the home of Baal, the storm god, is under a severe drought.

In the ancient Near Eastern culture, people believed in resident gods. A god had his own territory that he ruled over. Zarephath was in Phoenicia, which was definitely Baal territory! God is sending Elijah into enemy territory, where many would have believed that Yahweh had no power but Baal had all the power. Why would a prophet of Yahweh go into Baal territory?

2. A widow there will provide for him

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, widows were usually destitute. In the Old Testament, widows are associated with the neediest in society, the orphans and the poor. Also, this widow is not even an Israelite; in fact, she is the same nationality as Jezebel.

What does Elijah do? Read I Kings 17:10a

How do you think Elijah was able to recognize God's voice?

Could the same be said of us? Do we spend enough time with God to recognize His voice even when He might ask us to do something does not seem logical?

Have you ever felt God asking you to do something that was counterintuitive or unexpected?

Read I Kings 17:10b-16

What must this widow have thought of Elijah asking her for food and water?

She recognizes that Elijah is an Israelite and worships a different God. This is a polytheistic time and the worship of different gods was not uncommon nor looked down on. Elijah would have worshipped the god of his land as the Sidonians would have worshipped the god of their land.

However, Elijah makes it clear that it is the LORD who will miraculously provide for her by not allowing her flour or oil to run out until He sends rain on the land - not Baal but the Lord of Israel! This is the word of the Lord proclaimed to a worshipper of Baal in the territory of Baal, the homeland of Jezebel!

She obviously does not have a lot of provisions - she definitely seems to fall under the category of most widows of this time - destitute. She was likely already poor and the drought would have made it worse.

What were her plans for that day?

What does Elijah ask her to do? What was she to do first before taking care of her own needs?

What can we learn from this woman's faith? From her obedience?

What a contrast to the Israelites! This poor widow from a foreign country has the faith, the obedience to do what God asks her to do - sacrificially. She follows without knowing for sure that God will honor His promises, but she trusts that He will. And, God provides for her - her food supply does not run out. The Israelites are living in the midst of a severe drought, without God's provision because they have not been obeying God, they (as a people) have been seeking prosperity at all costs - including following gods other than God.

Jesus points out the unwillingness of the Israelites to trust God or Elijah at this time when he speaks in the synagogue in Nazareth, comparing himself to Elijah,

Luke 4:25- 26

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. **25** I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. **26** Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

There is another story in the New Testament that reminds us of this widow who had almost nothing, yet was instrumental in being a part of God’s provision. (Keck, et al., 1999)

Mark 12:41- 44

41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. **42** But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. **44** They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Jesus does not offer this widow, who gives all that she has, any assurance that she will be provided for. Elijah tells the widow that she and her son will be provided for after she provides for him. The contrast between the two widows' offerings and those who only give what they can spare remind us that we struggle to offer real sacrifice to God.

Why is it so hard to give sacrificially - at a cost to ourselves?

In light of the way God provided for Elijah during this drought - through unclean birds (ravens) and through a foreign (Sidonian!) widow, we are reminded of these verses in I Corinthians.

I Corinthians 1:27-29,

But God Chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

How is God honored through the use of the unexpected? How can we look for ways that God is working unexpectedly today?

The stories of Elijah often bring us back to Deuteronomy - back to the laws of Israel, back to Moses. This is by the design of the author, who is reminding those who have been taken captive how far Israel wandered from obeying the law. However, we also see Elijah as a forerunner of Jesus. There are two instances in the New Testament,

when Jesus is preaching and recognizes that the people are hungry and need food. In both of these instances, Jesus takes a small amount of food and multiplies it (Matthew 14:14-21 and Matthew 15:32-39). However, unlike Elijah, he is not the primary beneficiary of the food- he is the one who miraculously feeds the multitude with the food

We are amazed at the freedom and sovereignty of God! God can use whatever and whoever He wants for His purposes - He can use unclean birds to fulfill a divine purpose. He can act beyond the borders of Israel - even through Gentile worshippers of foreign gods.

We see that God cares enough about this woman not just to use her to help Elijah, but also to provide for her and for her son. The story shows that Yahweh is God not only in Israel but also in Sidon - Baal's territory!

Read I Kings 17:17, 18

What happened here? God is providing for this widow and her son, yet the son becomes sick and dies...not because of the drought but because of an illness! The woman assumes that it is because of her sin that the boy dies.

Read I Kings 17:19-24

What does Elijah do? Who does he turn to and trust to revive the child?

What emotions does Elijah seem to be feeling?

What does God do to answer Elijah's prayer?

This is the first recording we have in Scripture of the raising of the dead. When Elijah cries out to God, he does not know if God is going to answer his prayer. Nothing had happened in the past to make Elijah think that God had the habit of raising the dead. However, in his desperation, he cried out to God, and God answered His prayer.

Baal was considered not only the god of storms but also the god of life and death. Here, in Baal's territory, it is evident again that Yahweh is the God of Life - not Baal! Even someone who was already dead, could be raised back to life by God! And, the widow recognizes that the miracle was accomplished as a result of Elijah's prophetic word. When the woman declares, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of God in your mouth is true," she echoes Moses' standards for a prophet.
(Deuteronomy 18:14-22, read last week)

In this story, how does Elijah fit the picture that Moses describes as a prophet?

Do you think the author intends his audience to be reminded of Moses? (18:15)

Why is it important for the Israelites to recognize that Elijah is a true prophet?

It is interesting that it is a Gentile woman who first recognizes Elijah's status as a prophet - God's own people had yet to recognize Elijah as a true prophet.

Just as God works in unexpected ways, Jesus also works in unexpected ways. The Sidonian widow becomes a prototype for Gentile women who receive grace from Jesus. (Keck, et. al., 1999)

Read Matthew 15:21-28: The Faith of the Canaanite Woman

Where was the woman from?

This story reminds us that while we may think of "the other" being more distant from God than our own group, they are not. The story invites us to place ourselves in the role of the other, to struggle with God and also with our own stereotypes of "the other". Jesus calls this struggle "great faith"!

There is a similar story in the New Testament to this story in the Old: when Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain, from the dead, we are reminded of Elijah.

Read Luke 7:11-17

What are some details that seem similar to the story of the widow of Zarephath?

1. The meeting at the town gate

2. The plight of the widow - both have lost their sons, whom their well being depends on
3. A miraculous resuscitation
4. The return of the son to His mother

When the people said, "A great prophet has risen among us!" they had to be thinking of Elijah. However, just as Jesus surpasses Elijah in his provision for the multitudes, He surpasses Elijah here. Elijah begs God to bring life to the widow's son; but Jesus commands the young man to get up. Jesus also represents the power of God to grant and sustain life for always - his own resurrection from the dead being the ultimate testimony to the triumph of God over death!

Conclusion:

Yahweh is God of Israel and of other lands - even those lands where Baal is thought to be the god. Not only is he the God of all, but He cares for all, even a destitute Gentile widow and her son. There is more confirmation that Elijah is a prophet of Yahweh because what he says comes true. We see that in the New Testament, God continues to provide for his people in unexpected ways through Jesus and to show love to unexpected people through Jesus. It is interesting to think about how much the Jews of Jesus' day might have thought of Elijah as they saw Jesus perform miracles similar to miracles performed by Elijah.