

A Prophet, a Widow & a Chipmunk

We continue on this morning with our review of the life and times of the Prophet Elijah. Last week, God had sent him to the Brook of Kerith to be tended to by ravens as he hid from the evil King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel. And we considered the fact that God's plan for Elijah's survival may not have made sense to Elijah at the time. To Elijah's ears, it may have sounded like a *risky plan*, but ultimately it ended up being the very thing that he needed. That, in and of itself, is one of the most important lessons that comes out of Elijah's story—trust in God, have faith in His ways, even when we do not understand exactly how he is working out the things in our lives. But *know*, despite the risks, that God's plan is always in our best interests.

As we continue our journey with Elijah, the importance of that lesson becomes even more evident. So let's take a look at 1st Kings 17:7-12 (NLT2) and see how this story moves on. Remember now—Elijah was not only trying to survive the clutches of an evil king and queen, he was also contending with a severe drought that God had sent upon the entire region in an effort to draw Israel to repentance for having worshipped the pagan god, Baal. This is what chapter 17 tells us: ⁷ But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land. ⁸ Then the LORD said to Elijah, ⁹ “Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, “Would you please bring me a little water in a cup?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called to her, “Bring me a bite of bread, too.” ¹² But she said, “I swear by the LORD *your* God that I don't have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.” 1 Kings 17:7-12 (NLT2)

Now there is more to this story, but let's pause a moment and think about what we've just read. We naturally tend to focus upon Elijah as the hero of the story—and he certainly is exactly that. But, we don't want to forget the heroic actions of the widow as well. So, let's think about what both Elijah and the widow did in this passage that should gain our attention. First, God told Elijah to go to Zarephath in Sidon. So, what is the significance of that? Well, Zarephath was a little village located on the Mediterranean Sea about 7 miles from what was a fairly sizable city—the City of Sidon. They are in an area that is now located in modern-day Lebanon. Interestingly, a person on the run from Queen Jezebel would not normally have chosen any area around Sidon as a place of refuge. The problem was that Sidon was far outside of Israel and right smack dab in the middle of Jezebel's homeland where Baal

worship was at its strongest.¹ But, once again, Elijah didn't hesitate one minute, nor did he debate the merits of staying away from Zarephath and Sidon—rather, he headed straight that way and traveled about 100 miles to the northeast in order to get there.

God sent him to this particular part of the world for a reason. He wanted to prove that Baal—the pagan rain-god who had so many devoted followers throughout this region—was not only incapable of dealing with God's drought, but neither could he contend with a prophet who would defiantly dwell in the very center of Baal's territory.² There were great dangers, of course, associated with living in the heart of such an idol worshipping land, but Elijah was up to the task. And while this plan may have seemed as crazy to Elijah as the earlier one involving the Brook at Kerith and the use of ravens, as if they were butlers, to serve the food, he trusted that God's plans are always better than our own. He followed what one of our favorite hymns would one day proclaim: "*Trust and Obey.*"³ It is one of the simplest doctrines to express, but sometimes one of the most difficult for us to follow—Trust and Obey.

But, this isn't the only thing that shows Elijah's great faith in God. Keep in mind that the drought brought with it a general famine, and food was very scarce. And if you wanted to look somewhere for food, probably the last place that you would look would be in the cupboard of a widow. Widows in the ancient world were notoriously poor and always short on food—particularly if they had a young boy to feed, as this poor widow did. And yet, God told Elijah that there, in Zarephath, would be a widow who would be his benefactor. Again, Elijah never questioned God. Being a Prophet of God, he was likely aware of one of Solomon's most important proverbs that reminds us: "God blesses those who obey him; happy [is] the man who puts his trust in the Lord." Proverbs 16:20 (TLB) Now, that summarizes what we can garner from observing Elijah's conduct here. But, what about the widow? What can we learn from her?

When I read these verses and think about the widow, I am reminded of something that Pastor Ken Shigematsu tells about his wife. Ken is a pastor in British Columbia. His wife's name is Saiko and she really loves animals—particularly those that are vulnerable. And what could be more vulnerable than a baby chipmunk that had been kicked out of his litter because he happened to be the runt. Yet, when Saiko found this abandoned baby chipmunk in her yard, she took him in. The local veterinarian assured her that the chipmunk would die after only a few days. Nevertheless, she kept nurturing him and even gave him a name. She named him "Forte"—which means to be **strong**—because that's what she wanted him to do: Grow up and be strong. And, despite all the odds, that's exactly what he did—he grew up to be a perfectly healthy and strong chipmunk. Whenever Saiko came back home from work, the chipmunk would be overjoyed to see her—he'd be so happy that he'd just run around in these little

figure eight's . Sometimes when she was working on her computer, he'd jump on her shoulder, then bound down onto the keyboard and scamper up and down, randomly pressing the keys, as if he were trying to help her out in completing her work. And like all chipmunks, he absolutely loved walnuts. When she'd give him some walnuts, he'd take them and carefully store the nuts in this little crate close to where he slept. Now, I've watched chipmunks in my yard at home and they are really stingy when it comes to nuts. I've seen a chipmunk that is about a quarter the size of a squirrel, beat that squirrel up and run him off, if the squirrel even came near to a nut that the chipmunk was guarding. But, here's the thing—Saiko's chipmunk wasn't at all like that. He would take half of his walnuts and scurry over to where Saiko slept and put them on her pillow. You see, the chipmunk apparently came to understand that Saiko was his provider—that Saiko treated him as if he were one of the family. And so, as an expression of gratitude, he wanted to share with her what she had so freely been given to him.⁴

Sometimes it's good to be like a chipmunk. In fact, the widow of Zarephath was a lot like that chipmunk. Now I will elaborate on that in just a minute, but first I want to set the record straight on this widow because I think that some good Christian theologians have sometimes failed to give her the credit that is due. Many times they refer to her as a woman who was **not** a believer—a woman who, in this land of Jezebel, still worshipped Baal.⁵ To support this quite **erroneous** position, they latch onto verse 12 in which the widow responds to Elijah by referring to “the Lord **your** God”—as if the pronoun “**your**” somehow excludes the possibility that she was certainly open to entertaining the Lord as **her** God, as well—if, indeed, she had not already done so. I suspect that this widow actually had extraordinary faith for one who had not yet been formally introduced to the particulars of Judaism.⁶ I also can surmise that this woman was extremely perceptive and looked at the world around her and saw the drought, famine and death that had descended upon the land—a land in which the people had devoted their praise to the supposed rain-god, Baal. But, Baal had not provided any rain because the true God of Israel had forbidden any rain to fall. And so, I suspect that this young widow recognized the futility of following an empty, hollow idol like Baal. And when the true living God spoke to her, her heart was receptive and she was ready to follow His command to attend to the stranger who was on his way—that prophet who was sent by God.

Notice that when Elijah showed up and first spoke to this widow, it was not with a friendly, chatty greeting. He did not explain who he was or why he had come. Rather, the first words that he uttered to this woman were something like: “Hey, how about fetching me a cup of water?—I am feeling kinda thirsty, you know.” And before she could even return with it, Elijah added, “And throw in a slice of bread there, if you don't mind—I'm kinda hungry as well!” How would you have responded to that?

There you are in the middle of a terrible drought—the water is almost gone and there will be nothing more to drink. There’s no Walmart down the road at Sidon where you can buy a craft of bottled water to get you through this natural disaster. The Red Cross hasn’t shown up yet with truckloads of food—and they won’t because they didn’t even have a Red Cross back then. And, this strange guy comes along out of the blue demanding water and bread as if you are operating a restaurant, but the reality is that you and your poor emaciated son are dying of starvation and from lack of an adequate water supply. So, under those circumstances, how would you have responded to this demand for water and bread in a time during which you are barely surviving? Well, I will let you answer that question.

But, I feel fairly certain how a Baal worshipper would have answered the demands of this stranger in need—they would have told him to take a hike. They would have asked him if he were out of his mind. You see, the one thing that we know about Baal worshippers is that they were very materialistic. By that, I mean that they embraced the things of this world. They were very selfish and loved to hoard material things for themselves—in times of plenty, and particularly during times of scarcity—as was the case during this time of drought. Now, you might think of Baal-worship as being a thing of the past—something that ended during the Old Testament period. But oh, we have so many Baal worshippers in this country today where materialism so often reigns with all the authority of a pagan god. So again, be honest with yourself, how would you have answered Elijah? Does the answer point toward those who follow Baal, or those who follow the commands of the Living God?

You see, God wants us to be more like that chipmunk and more like the Widow of Zarephath. The chipmunk gave back to his Master. And the widow responded to God’s call to give. And when we give to others in time of need—even in times when we may have so little to give—we too are giving back to our Master—and responding to our Lord’s call. But you don’t have to wait for a prophet to come along before you start doing the giving. Jesus taught that we also give back to God when we render aid to the “least of” His children. Jesus said that when you serve them, you serve Him as well.⁷ Saiko, the pastor’s wife, understood that when she reached out to help the helpless runt of the litter. We are called to show that we understand that when we meet the needs of our fellowman all around us—from the great ones to the very “least of these.”

The reason that I know that this widow was a believer is because her response to Elijah was not a worldly one. It was not something that was indicative of a Baal worshipper—they don’t act with the sacrificial compassion of this widow. As the story continues, we begin to see that this widow would be true to the commands of God, and despite her own dire circumstances, she would attend to the needs of Elijah. This is what we find in 1 Kings 17:13-16: ¹³ But Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid! Go ahead

and do just what you've said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what's left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son.¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again!¹⁵ So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her son continued to eat for many days.¹⁶ There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the LORD had promised through Elijah. (NLT2)

Before Elijah appeared on the scene, it's pretty clear that the widow had planned to prepare that last little loaf of bread and pour that last cup of water. And, and with nothing being left, she was resigned to the fact that she and her son were going to die of thirst or starvation. But, Elijah did show up just as God had indicated he would. And now, she was in the presence of a Prophet of God. Not only that, but God Himself had told her to tend to this Prophet by feeding him—all she had to do was follow through on what He commanded. That was God's plan—take that little handful of flour she had left, pour on the remaining olive oil and bake that last little loaf. And then came the hardest part, turn and give it to the Prophet. That was the plan. As God had done with Elijah by the Brook of Kerith, He was basically saying, “Yes, that's what you are to do; follow my plan and everything will be alright.”

And, so she did follow the commands of the Living God even when it seemed dangerous to do so. And she headed into her kitchen, and baked that last bit of bread with the intention of giving all of it to Elijah. Note that her initial plan had been to bake the bread, eat it with her son and then die. That was *her* plan. But, God's plan in the end is to give us life, not death. The reality is that when we bake our bread according our plans—those plans that we bake with such care—maybe we get a loaf of worldly bread (maybe). But, regardless, that bread never lasts. It always either molds or get used up. And then, we die. That's how it is when we are doing the baking on our own—using *our* recipes. But, **when God is in the kitchen wonderful things happen**— because the Bread that we bake according to His recipe is *eternally* nutritious. And so it was for this young widow and her son. Every time they used that last flour and olive oil to prepare their *daily* bread, when they went back again, there was always just enough there to prepare one more meal. The widow was *faithful* to Gods' command. She *submitted* to His plan, and God honored her for it by providing for her essential needs.

Now before I conclude, I want to say one more thing about that chipmunk—the one that was so faithful in giving back half his walnuts to the young lady who rescued him and sustained him. If there were such a thing as a “*Chipmunk Award*,” the Widow of Zarephath would have won it. In fact, she would get a “*double*” *Chipmunk Award* because the chipmunk gave back only half of what he had—the widow gave it all. The *Chipmunk Award* goes out to all of those with the faithfulness and courage to

give back to God even when it hurts—even when the act of giving is **risky**. It is so very interesting that the Bible seems to point to widows in particular as deserving recipients of such an award, for even Jesus offers us the example of another widow. After watching the poorest of widows drop her two coins in the Temple’s collection box, Jesus turned to His disciples and said: “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions.”⁴⁴ For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on.” Mark 12:43-44 (NLT2)

Being faithful to God, even when it’s risky—that’s what God calls **us** to do. He calls us to be **risk-takers** for His sake. And yet, there are all those Baal-worshippers of this world looking on with expressions of doubt, wondering if taking such risks is the prudent thing to do? Is the risk worth it, they ponder? But, for all those who follow and trust the One True Living God—for all those **chipmunk-like widows** out—there comes the realization that to turn down God’s risk, is the greatest risk of all. For as Jesus said, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” Mark 8:36 (NKJV) If you are willing to put it all on the line for God, it may cost you all that you have. Yet, in the end, **you gain all that He has.**⁸ And, there’s no risk in that—it’s all eternal gain.

Let us pray.

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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, ed., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. “ZAREPHATH,” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

² August H. Konkel, *The NIV Application Commentary – 1 & 2 Kings: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 296.

³ The hymn, “Trust and Obey,” was written by John H. Sammis in 1887.

⁴ Ken Shigematsu, Pastor, “Pet Chipmunk Saves Nuts for Owner,” (British Columbia, Canada) Preachingtoday.com.

⁵ For an example, see the usually spot-on Warren Wiersbe, who on this point, simply gets it wrong: *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Responsible (1 Kings)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 469.

⁶ For an agreement with this assessment see: Dr. Thomas Constable’s *Notes on 1 Kings, 2017 Ed.*, p. 74.

⁷ Matthew 25:40 (CSBBible) And the King will answer them, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

⁸ Dr. Bill Lawrence, “Knowing God in Times of Risk,” www.crosswalk.com/faith.