

## **The Crucible**

**I Kings 17:8-16**

**By Dr. John Currid**

If you will open your Bibles to I Kings chapter 17, the text is found in verses 8-9 of the chapter:

“And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, ‘Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’”

Now the context is this. There has been a drought in the land. There has been a famine in the land of Israel, and it was Elijah who called forth this famine. Ahab and Jezebel, those vile toads on the throne of Israel, are unhappy with Elijah and they’re seeking his life. They’re chasing him down, and in verses 1-7 of this chapter, Elijah has fled, and he is there by the Cherith brook in the land of Trans-Jordan. He's not even in Israel. God has caused him to flee outside of Israel. He has a safe haven near this stream, and there he is being fed twice daily by the ravens, and he is drinking from the stream.

But what happens, as we see in verse 7, is that the brook dries up because there was no rain in the land. And thus we are left with a question when we come to verse 7 as to what is going to happen to the prophet of God. What is going to happen to Elijah? How will God care for him? I suggest to you that the answer is quite surprising...that the answer here is quite unexpected. We see in verse 9, God tells him:

“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

God gives him two imperatives there: arise — go; get up and go to Zarephath. Elijah is to travel to that city, to Zarephath, and there are a number of things we need to know about that town.

The first thing we need to understand about Zarephath is that it is in the land of Phoenicia, and the text tells us that it belongs to the city of Sidon. Now, this is a stunning thing because in chapter 16, verse 31, we read the following:

“And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat [he's talking about Ahab], he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of

Ethbaal king of the Sidonians.”

Jezebel, that vile toad-ess (I'm not sure there is such a word like that, but it sure sounds good) — that vile toad-ess on the throne of Israel is the daughter of the King of Sidon, and God is taking Elijah from this safe haven, from this very safe port by the stream of Cherith where he has been fed miraculously by these ravens, and he's putting him right in the midst of the pagan Baal worshippers. God's putting Elijah right in the midst of Jezebel's people! It's Jezebel and Ahab who are trying to chase him down to destroy him!

Now the second thing we need to understand about this city, Zarephath, is that the name *Zarephath* literally means in Hebrew, *the crucible*. That's really important, for God is taking Elijah and putting him through the crucible. God is taking Elijah away from that hiding place by the stream and putting him into the fiery furnace, putting him in that place of refining so that the dross would be burned off of the agent of God. This is a true and extreme test of faith. How will the prophet respond to the crucible of life? How will he respond to the adversity and to the hardship in being placed in such a difficult situation?

But there is more. God tells Elijah that when he comes to this pagan city, to this Baal-saturated city, that “a widow will feed you.” That term in Hebrew, *to feed*, literally means *to supply your needs*, and it's the same verb used in verse 4 of this chapter regarding the work of the ravens. They supplied Elijah's needs, and here is this widow woman who will supply his needs. This is also quite stunning...that a pagan, Baalite widow would be the one who would care for God's prophet.

In ancient times, a widow was extremely disadvantaged, and a widow had little recourse in life. So here we have a Gentile Phoenician widow who lives in the midst of Baal worship, a servant of Jezebel's father, being the one who will supply for Elijah's needs. I suggest to you that this is a channel of grace that one would never have suspected. God's ways are not man's ways. And because He is sovereign, He can employ any means that He desires to care for Elijah, and thus these opening verses speak to the sovereignty of God and His care for His people. To sustain His prophet He uses unclean ravens to bring him food; to sustain His prophet He uses a pagan, destitute widow. God's ways are surely not our ways.

We can take great hope in this. As a believer goes through the crucible of life, God, because He is sovereign, can use any number of means to help the Christian face and endure the fire. God can use any means to help the Christian face the adversity and hardship of life, and He can do it in the most unexpected ways.

In this regard, I have recently been reading about the conversion of the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon. I would have suspected that such a magnificent

preacher would have been saved through magnificent preaching, but that is not the case at all. In a period of great despair in his life as he was going through the crucible, Spurgeon planned to hear his father preach one Sunday morning, but the weather was so bad that he turned aside into a small Primitive Methodist church. Only a handful of people were there that morning, and even the minister didn't make it because of the snowstorm. One of the men stood up to give a word. Spurgeon says he was either a shoemaker or a tailor, or a tinker...a very uneducated man who had a very thick country dialect. The man read from Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto Me and be ye saved." This common, disheveled man turned to Spurgeon and said, "Young man, look to Christ. Look, look, look. You have nothing to do but look and live." Spurgeon says at that very moment he saw the way of salvation. Indeed, how God's ways are not our ways.

Let's continue with our passage, looking at verses 10-11 to see how Elijah responds to the call of God.

"So he rose 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.' And as she was going to bring it, he called her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.'"

What is the prophet's response to the command of God? Well, we don't see him lingering. We don't see him hesitate, and we don't see him questioning. We don't see him complaining that God is sending him to Jezebel's land. We don't see him complaining that he is going to be fed by a widow in a land of drought, in a land of famine.

It's important to see that as Elijah goes through the crucible that he is obedient to God, that he is obedient to God's word. "So he arose and went to Zarephath." The circumstances don't matter. The extremity of the drought does not matter. What matters, no matter the situation, is obedience; and here he arrives at Zarephath, this Baal-saturated city. He comes to the gate of the city and sees a widow, probably wearing her mourning garb, and she is outside the city gate gathering sticks. And obviously she has no family to do this menial labor; she has no servants to gather wood for a fire. She's out there picking up the sticks herself in her mourning garb. And when you look at her, she is not a good candidate to get a meal from!

And here - it's at the city gates! And what do we know about the city gate in antiquity? That this is where the elders of the city sat. Why not speak to one of them for sustenance? This is where economic trade and transactions took place. Why not speak to one of these rich traders for sustenance? They have the means, they have the sustenance. A poor widow picking up sticks? Well, yes. God's ways are not man's ways.

And again, what do we see? Elijah is obedient to the word of God. He doesn't

question, he doesn't linger, he doesn't hesitate. God said this woman would supply Elijah's needs, and so the prophet asks her for food and water. When I look at that, the request almost sounds cruel, and that it will only intensify the woman's troubles and intensify her despair. She's going through the crucible of life. She has no food. She doesn't have much water. And it appears that when Elijah makes this request that it only makes her life worse; it only puts her into greater despair; it only puts her deeper into the fiery furnace.

And note how she responds, in verse 12:

“And she said, ‘As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked. Only a handful of flour and a little oil in a jug. And now I'm 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.’”

First note that she takes an oath on the name of Yahweh, on the God of Israel. Look at what she says: “ ‘As the Lord [as Yahweh] your God lives....’ ” she says to Elijah. She recognizes that he is a Hebrew, but she is not. It's clear she is not a believer. As Yahweh *your* God lives...not *my* God...she doesn't say that. She's in Jezebel's land. She's in Zarephath. She's in that Baal-saturated city. And she says to him, “I have nothing baked.” That's actually not a very good translation. What it really says there is, “I have no place to turn for provisions.” She says, ‘I have nowhere to turn. I have no one to turn to. I have nothing. All I've got is this little handful of flour and this little oil, and I'm out here gathering these few sticks to prepare a fire for my last meal and for my son's last meal. We're going to die. This is the end.’ She's at the end of her rope. She has no place to turn. She's ready for herself and her young son to die. Sheer desperation and helplessness to the point of giving up on life...an utter lack of hope and bitter despondence. This woman is encountering extreme suffering...the crucible of life. And here comes a Hebrew prophet almost tormenting her for her last little morsels of food.

And verse 13 is where we get at the crux of the story, as Elijah answers this woman who is despondent.

“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.’”

This woman who is in the Slough of Despond, who is in desperate straits at the close and end of her life, Elijah says to her, “Do not fear.”

Do not be afraid? Although she is facing the great obstacles of life, the prophet tells her ‘Here's how you respond. Do not fear.’ And then he tells her to do what he has said. She needs to be obedient to the word of God spoken through the prophet Elijah. And I think there's a parallel situation going on here. Both Elijah and the woman are in difficult circumstances. Elijah is in the midst of Baalism and relying on a destitute widow to provide for him. The widow is at the end of the line

with nowhere to turn. They are both in the fiery furnace. They are both in the crucible of life.

How are they expected to respond? First of all, without fear; and, secondly, with obedience to the word of God.

The text is telling us how to respond to the hardships of life: Even without knowing how things will work out, as we go through the crucible we are to be faithful and steadfast, and leaning and relying on God's word. And we should not be afraid, for God is sovereign and providential, and in control of all things. Even our times of adversity and suffering are in His loving hands. Do not fear, and be obedient to God's word.

Now note how God cares for them in verses 14-16.

“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 send rain upon the earth.’ And she went and did as Elijah said, and she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent; neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord, who spoke by Elijah.”

In this story, God resorts to a miraculous intervention to provide for the widow and to provide for Elijah. Yahweh, through Elijah, miraculously multiplies the flour, miraculously multiplies the oil, so that the jars which contain them are never empty, and this lasted for many days. And those in her house ate to the fullness...a wonderful miracle by the prophet Elijah. What a great prophet! What an answer to their desperation!

As I look at that, I say, “I don't see God answering my desperations that way.” But I want to suggest to you that He has done that exactly, because I want to announce to you this evening that something greater than Elijah has come. Yes, Elijah is a grand prophet who does great miracles, and great miracles of multiplication...stopping the rain from coming, and, indeed, in the very next passage of the book he even raises the dead.

But Someone greater than Elijah has come: the One who multiplied the wine at Cana, who stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and raised Lazarus from the dead. Someone greater than Elijah has come, because He bears upon Himself our crucible, our infirmities and weaknesses and iniquities, and He has taken those very things and nailed them to the cross. So, as we go through the crucible of life, we have One who says to us, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And so I say to you, people, look to Christ. “Look, look, look! You have nothing to do but look and live.”

Thus we learn from this passage how we are to respond to the crucible of life. We should respond fearlessly. We should respond obediently; and we should

respond by clinging to the cross of our Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen and amen.

Please pray with me.

*Most heavenly Father, I pray that You would set this word deep in our hearts, that we know as we go through the crucible of life that we do not go alone, but the Sovereign God goes with us and He has taken care of all our infirmities by the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross; and, therefore, may we go forth fearlessly and obediently. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray this. Amen.*

Would you please stand for the benediction.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace, now and forevermore. Amen.*

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