

Elijah's Encounter at the Gate of Zarephath

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[0 : 00] Well, now let's turn to the book of Kings, 1 Kings. And we may just read at verse 8, 1 Kings 17, that is, and reading at verse 8.

And the prophet Elijah is still at this point at the brook Kareth. And we read at verse 8, Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Arise, go to Saraphath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.

See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you. So he arose and went to Saraphath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed, a widow was there gathering sticks.

And he called to her and said, Please bring me a little water in a cup that I may drink. And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.

So she said, As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar.

[1 : 29] And see, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my sin, that we may eat it and die.

Our focus this evening is on verses 10 to 12, or at least part of verse 12. And we want to look this evening at Elijah's encounter at the gate of Saraphath.

Now, we saw last time that there is simply no fathoming of God's dealings with his people in Providence.

That even when we look back on a trial or another, we really don't have all the answers. And we looked at how God took the prophet into a secluded place, into hiding, away from Ahab, but away from the people too.

He withdrew Elijah's prophetic ministry from the people, and all too soon the drought that was promised took hold.

[2 : 41] And what we were looking at there mainly was simply that God's dealings with us in Providence we cannot really fathom. We cannot really altogether understand, even as we look back on this situation or that.

We have some idea, but we don't know all the answers to all our questions. But we noticed and we emphasized that God expects us to obey him, not to understand him.

And we tried to show that Elijah, great man that he was, great man of God that he was, didn't really understand all that God was going to do with him at the Brute Caereth, or indeed where he would go from there.

But God expected him to obey the word. And it's interesting, you see, that at the point that we read there this evening, verse 8, it says, Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Arise, go to Saraphath.

The time came when things would change. God closed off one source of provision there at Caereth.

[4 : 03] And he was now testing his servant again in the next stage of his spiritual pilgrimage. But what God made clear to his servant, the prophet Elijah, is that he would continue to provide for him.

His time at Caereth ended, and he had to make this risky, indeed dangerous, crossing of the country, some 75 miles, we were saying, on foot from Caereth to Saraphath, out on the Mediterranean coast.

Those of you who are into the geography of it, if you look on your map, it's halfway between Tyre and Sidon. And he had to cross-country Caereth, about, if you go six miles south of the Galilee, and then go across the Jordan east.

You're more or less in where the brute Caereth was, Wadi Caereth. And so he had to go that way, and we made the point that he had a tricky and dangerous journey, because there was a price on his head.

But the wonderful thing is that he arrived safely at the gate of Saraphath. And we remind ourselves, before we get into this proper, that Elijah was obedient to the word of God.

[5 : 25] He did what the Lord wanted him to do, even though it was difficult and dangerous. Arise and go. Do this for me. And trust me to provide for you.

And I think most of us here tonight learned the verses in Proverbs 3. And the people that taught them to us were wise to teach us.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And lean not on your own understanding. You remember? In all your ways acknowledge him. And he will direct your path.

And you'll never get beyond that. You'll never be so mature in the life of faith that you'll not need that. And those who taught us that, whether it was mother, father, grandparents, or Sunday school teacher, or whoever, they were wise in teaching us that.

Because, you see, that's just what Elijah had to do. He had to trust the word that the Lord gave him. And go. So he arose, verse 10, and went to Salaphath, knowing that God would provide for him.

[6 : 34] Verse 9. See, I have commanded a widow to provide for you. He would provide. The New Testament perspective on it, I suppose, is what Paul said to the Philippians.

My God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches by Christ Jesus. So then, we start this evening, and we think about Elijah's encounter at the gate of Zarephath.

We start just there. Elijah meets a widow woman at gate Zarephath. Now, we've already noted, but we'll just remind ourselves, he had journeyed some 75 miles or so on foot.

And scripture is actually silent about the journey. We don't know what the prophet's reflections on the journey were.

We're not told. But that doesn't mean that we have nothing to say. We don't need to speculate on this. What we do know is, as we've said already, he arose and went according to the word of the Lord.

[7 : 48] But we shouldn't overlook the fact in history here that Elijah had the Psalms. Historically, he was familiar with the Psalms that we know.

Not the metrical versions, I don't mean that. But he was familiar with the Psalms that emphasize trusting God with our lives. Set your trust upon the Lord, be doing good, and you shall dwell in the land and feed on his faithfulness.

Psalm 37. When I'm afraid, Psalm 57, I'll trust in you. In God I'll trust his word. And you see, he was crossing through the land with a price on his head.

And it's not idle speculation to say the word of God would have been his comfort in that dangerous crossing. Psalm 57, verse 2.

I cry out unto God, to God Most High, who performs all things for me most perfectly. So it is sufficient for us to say that the word of God was his comfort in that journey.

[9 : 07] And so he arrived at gate Saraphath. And suddenly, and I suppose in a measure, unexpectedly, even for Elijah, we're told in the passage, So he arose and went, verse 10, to Saraphath.

And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed, a widow was there gathering sticks. And this is a great, that little word, indeed, is that great word, hene, behold.

When God wanted to emphasize something, through the prophets, the word hene was used, behold. Look, consider.

With the emphasis on, how about that? What do you think of that then? And the modern translation here is indeed. Consider it.

Look there. It's just as I told you, a widow woman. Now, some of you will remember something of what I'm about to say about recognizing the widow by her clothing.

[10 : 20] You'll know this better than me, for you're a wee bit older than me, some of you. But I remember in my home village, vividly, that the widows wore distinctive clothing.

Not just for a year, it was officially a year's mourning. But I can remember very, very strikingly, the widows who wore their clothing, the dark clothing, for the rest of their days, really.

And this is something that carried from biblical times, that clothing identified people. That you could recognize them at a look.

You know how in the prophets themselves, the prophets were recognizable by their clothing. Elijah was recognized by his rough camel skin coat with his leather belt.

The prophets' clothing was maybe warm, but it was certainly uncomfortable. They were recognized by it. The priests were recognized.

[11 : 34] The Levites and so on. People were recognized by their clothing. The Israelite virgins were recognized by the clothing they wore. And the widows were recognized too.

And here, right in front of him, at Gate Saraphath, is this widow woman.

And the Lord made sure she was there. The Lord, who works all things after the counsel of his own will, brought this very thing to pass. This marvelous encounter.

How often do we fail in life to think about God putting people in our way? We don't think enough theologically.

We tend to think about coincidence or a chance happening, a lucky happening or something like that. Not very theological, is it? But we who believe that God works all things after the counsel of his will, that he directs the steps of everyone, that nothing is random.

[12 : 49] We ought to marvel, yes, and to give thanks at the work of God in providence. And to be more sensitive to what God, or shall I say, to whom God puts in our way.

And we were reading there tonight, in Genesis 24, about that wonderful story of Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham's top servant, old Eliezer.

And he was sent with some men to Nahor, to Abraham's family in Mesopotamia, and to find a wife for Isaac.

And you read the story with me, and you listened, and I hope you took note in your own minds, that when it all fell out wonderfully, and he had received water, and his camels were watered, and she told him who she was, and what her background was, what did he say?

He marveled, he wondered at it. And he wondered to see if the Lord had indeed made his way prosperous.

[14 : 07] And of course the Lord had made his way prosperous. And he worshipped the Lord for showing his chesed to his servant Abraham, his loving kindness.

Elijah was so filled with thankfulness at the wonderful thing the Lord did. And here's Elijah at gate Saraphath.

And behold, a widow woman was there. Elijah doesn't need to go searching in Saraphath. He doesn't need to question the inhabitants.

She's there. Where the Lord wanted her to be. And Elijah would meet her. And whatever else we have to say about her and her circumstances, disadult to the fact that she was there at God's bidding and in God's timing.

And it's interesting, you know, in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, how again and again he taught the disciples in that way.

[15 : 13] He underscored the minutia of his providence. The way he is so precise. There's no lucky happenings. There's no random things that just happen to come round.

No, he is ordering it and commanding. Think about Mark 11 and from verse 2 following. Jesus told the disciples, you remember at the time he went down into the city from Bethany down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem.

And he said to them, Go and you will find in such a place a colt with its mother tied. Loose it and take it to me.

And if anybody asks you about it, say the master has need of it. And that's exactly what happened. They went, they found the donkey and its coat with it.

And just as the Lord said. At Passover, Mark records for us, Mark 14, 13. Go into the city and you will meet a man carrying a picture on his shoulder.

[16 : 23] Follow him into the house. And when you get to the house, ask the house owner, Where is the upper room that is furnished and ready that we may prepare it for the Passover?

God working in Providence in that precise way, ordering all things. Acts 9, 11 is another example and will do.

A wonderful example of the same point. Let me remind you of the context here. Acts 9, 11. And that's just what Ananias did once he was reassured that it was safe to do so.

This is the God with whom we have to do. And we mustn't let life today take that away from us.

We can easily be influenced. I would say we are influenced too much by the way the world operates. And we lose sight of the God with whom we have to do.

[17 : 46] With a kind of carefulness in his purposes. We have to lay to heart. This is the same God with whom we have to do.

That Elijah had to do with when he arose and went from Kerith to Saraphath. And behold, at gate Saraphath, sure enough, there was a widow woman there gathering sticks.

He was working according to the counsel of his own will. When Francis Schaeffer, who became a great Christian apologist in Labrie in Switzerland, you remember he was looking for a home there.

And he had his plans. And he tried to get something within his budget. Limited though that was. And it wasn't really working out.

And then, unbeknown to Francis Schaeffer and his family, God was operating behind the scenes. And when Schaeffer's plans came to nothing, God put a generous benefactor in his way.

[19 : 08] A lady who sold them a property. Who allowed them, what you would say, a real bargain. God provided. God was at work.

God was going before his servant to provide for him. And there's a reminder in this, and we need it again and again, to commit our ways to the Lord.

To be ready to commit our ways to him. And not to be of an anxious mind. We're all the same like this. We're all the same.

We like to have it all worked out. We like to have all the answers. But that's not living by faith at all.

It's living by having the answers. And God would take that away from us at times. In order to make us live on him. Live by faith in him.

[20 : 08] Casting our all upon him. Not having the answers that we like to have. He would have us rest in him.

And know that he orders and commands. And he bids us, even in this, to wait upon him. See, to go back to verse 9bc.

Or behold, Hinnah, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you. Aye, Elijah, you mightn't like it.

It might be a bit humbling. But that's the way it is. And Elijah met her there at gate Saraphat.

And the second thing, then, we want to look at flows out of that. Elijah's request to the widow. And it's clear, of course, from the context that even in and around Sidon, the drought was affecting the people.

[21 : 19] And the basics were in short supply. The very fact that the woman was having to look for a few sticks to make a fire to eat her last meal tells you what you need to know about it.

And the famine, by this time, because of the drought, was in the whole land. Elijah, of course, had traveled a long way.

And by this time, he was in need of water. And that's the first thing he asks for. Please bring me a little water in a cup that I may drink.

And it's revealing, even at this stage, we'll come back to this, her response. But even at this stage, it's revealing to notice that the widow woman responded positively.

She immediately went to get emorted. And we shouldn't lose the point in this, because here's a widow woman. Here's a Canaanite.

[22 : 23] Here is someone in the heartland of Baal-merkart. And she would recognize this Hebrew prophet and have nothing to do with him.

But it's not like that. She responds positively. She could have said, well, the Jews and Samaritans principle applies here.

He's a worshiper of Yahweh, the God of Israel. I'm a Canaanite. As well as that, why is a Hebrew prophet speaking to a woman, albeit a widow?

It's not a kosher thing to do. But it is done, and she responds positively. And I say again, all the more remarkable, she responds positively as someone who doubtless was weakened by the food shortage.

She's going to make a wee fire. To cook the last bit of food she has. To eat it and to die.

[23 : 41] And wonderful thing it is, therefore, that she's ready to go at the prophet's request to get him some water. But she stopped in her tracks.

Because the prophet asks for more. We'll come to that in a moment. I just want to underscore the point.

That she was willing to go. She was willing to act. She recognized the genuineness of his request. Indeed, the sincerity and the courtesy with which she asked, Fetch me, please bring me a little water and a cup.

The word behind please is not the usual word for please. It's the old English way of translating it was, I pray.

I pray bring me a little water. A respectful way of putting it. And so he asks her in that way. No rough demand is made.

[24 : 52] No superior attitude. He recognizes she is a widow. And doubtless well knew God's attitude to the widow as we were singing in the psalm.

He is the support of the widow. He sustains the widow. Psalm 146 verse 9. And God had long ago taught the Israelites to regard the widow and the fatherless and the stranger.

And to care for them. So Elijah is respectful of her in this. And asks kindly for her help. And there's something useful and practical in that, you see.

We ought, as those who would profess the Lord, we ought to be influenced by the law of God in our thinking. And to be ready to honor people, regardless of their standing or station in this life.

Not to look down on them. But to stoop down and help them if we can. And as we'll see in a moment, Elijah does that very thing.

[26 : 12] It's interesting, you see, that Elijah is doing something here. Although we'll probably not cover it this evening. But he's doing something that Jesus himself did at the well of Samaria.

For the woman of Samaria. Sychar. He asks for help. In order to give help.

You remember how Jesus at the Sychar, at Jacob's well, asked the woman for a drink of water. But he had planned that request when it was granted.

He had planned that he would use that opportunity. Excuse me. To help the woman. And I think there's a practical point in this.

That even when we ourselves encounter an opportunity in which we need some help. We ought to use that opportunity to help others on the back of it.

[27 : 20] To be imitators of Christ in this regard. And of course, as the story unfolds, we see that that's the very thing. Elijah's there not only to be helped by her, but more particularly to help her.

And from that we can learn. Well, the final thing we want to look at here. And again, it just moves on in the story.

The widow responds to Elijah. I don't mean with regard to getting the water, for she was ready to do that. What I mean is that the second request was more difficult.

And when she heard it, she halted. It presented her a problem. Verse 11. And as she was going to get the water, the prophet called to her and said, Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.

So she said, As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread. Only a handful of flour in a bin and a little oil in a jar. And see, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.

[28 : 38] Well, we can't blame her for having difficulty with acquiescing in this second request. What are you asking me to do? I can't do it.

I've only got enough for my son and myself, that's it. As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread. Now it seems to me that at this point we need to think a little bit about the faith of the woman herself.

We can't be dogmatic about it, of course, by saying she definitely had come to faith at this stage. But it seems to me that she shows a selflessness.

She shows a readiness to go and help the prophet at a critical time in her own life. We were thinking recently just on our study in Thessalonians and how Paul commended the labor of love of these Thessalonians.

They put themselves out. And she certainly was willing to put herself out for the prophet. The second thing about this is she recognized Elijah as a servant of the Lord.

[30 : 01] As the Lord your God lives. That's a theological statement of great moment. And we ought not to overlook it. Where did she get the doctrine?

She had it. As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread. And it seems to me there is a reminder in this that for all that she had a limited access to the good news, to the word of God, she had sufficient.

She had come to understand who the Lord God of Israel was and that she had come to trust him. When you look at the life of Rahab, there is not much to go on to say she was a believer, yet we know she was.

She is even commended in Hebrews 11. Maybe she couldn't recite her catechism, for it wasn't around then.

And maybe she couldn't have done a very comprehensive recitation of all the doctrines of grace. But she had this going for it.

[31 : 19] It was obvious she had become a believer in the Lord God of Israel. We have heard, we've all heard, how the Lord delivered you from Egypt and all that he had done for you.

And she, by the grace of God, had come to trust in that same Lord and was willing to put her life on the line, not only for the two spies, but for the whole of the people because she knew that the Lord had given Jericho into their hands.

What am I saying here? I'm saying that the woman at the widow at Gate Saraphath may not have had the knowledge that you and I have of salvation, but she had sufficient.

And she acted on it, and she acted in a way that was in keeping with godliness. Do you know that in this whole story of the life of Elijah, there are only two people who use the expression as the Lord your God lives.

One was a Canaanite woman, and the other was a man called Obadiah. He was in the king's service, and then he knowing to the king he had hidden a hundred prophets in caves to protect them from Jezebel's persecuting attempts to destroy, to wipe out the prophets of God from the land.

[32 : 56] And that man, Obadiah, said when he met with Elijah, we'll come to it later on, tell your master that Elijah's here.

And Obadiah said, as the Lord your God lives, I'm going to paraphrase, he said, what do you take me for? Do you want me to lose my head? So what I'm saying here is, there's another little piece of evidence that we can say this woman at Gate Saraphath, this woman, this widow, was a godly woman.

Even at this stage. Because it is said of Obadiah, who used that same expression as the Lord your God lives, he was a man who greatly feared the Lord.

And so we may say, that the woman acted out the life of faith in a way that was appropriate.

If you like, it was the cup of cold water Christianity. The cup of cold water in the name of the disciple for a disciple. I'm going to let you into something just now.

[34 : 09] And be knowing to a certain person in here tonight, as she was coming into the church, I asked her, did she want a cup of cold, a glass of cold water? She didn't know that this was coming in the sermon, but I did, you see.

And I was reminding myself, these things are important in life. We ought not to overlook them. We do for the disciple in the name of a disciple.

We do it as unto the Lord. So then let us lay to heart that this woman responded as the believer ought to respond.

When the request for help comes, you do what you can. But there's another side to this that we must finish with.

We need to lay to heart that there were many Israelite widows in the days of Elijah who had the opportunity of receiving not the water that we can drink, but the water of life.

[35 : 23] They were denied it. Elijah was taken away from them. And the few prophets that were left were hidden in caves before they would be killed. And in the days of our Lord Jesus Christ's public ministry, there were many who had those same spiritual privileges and they were heedless of them and they paid the price.

They didn't lay hold of him by faith and they were losers. They didn't see him as the one who gave living water. It was a Samaritan at Jacob's well.

Give me this water that I may not thirst again. And although she was limited in her understanding, we know that she came to experience that living water, the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ himself.

And it's important there for us to use our own opportunities. Colin often prays in prayer time there, we're a privileged people.

We're a privileged people. And we must use our privileges while we have the opportunity. We ought to be making the best use of them.

[36 : 46] We ought to be looking at this woman at Gate Saraphath and saying, what about all the widows in Israel? What happened to them? They were passed by.

And they were passed by for the same reason as all the men were passed by. Because they wouldn't have the Lord to rule over them. The same happened in our Lord's time on earth.

they were passed by if you had known only you in this the day of your visitation. But now it's hidden from your eyes.

And whatever else we take away out of this encounter at Gate Saraphath between Elijah and the widow woman, let's take away the importance of using our opportunities wisely and well and stir ourselves to that end.

and let's not be afraid those of us who follow him and who know it of putting ourselves out for others of serving him.

[37 : 56] I came across this wee saying and with this it's in the form of a question and with this we finish. It's this is thy heart a living power self-entwined its strength sinks low.

It can only live by living and by serving love will grow.

and I thought that so fitted this situation. It can only live in living and by serving love will grow.

May be that the Lord will give us grace to lay to heart what we've thought about tonight that we may become more effectively doers of the word to his glory.

Amen. Amen.