

The LORD who Gives Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 February 2026

Preacher: Emily MacArthur

[0 : 00] So, Kate, my daughter Kate, says that when I got the preaching writer for this term, I did a bit of a whoop and a fist pump, because the theme is the Lord who gives life.

And what a great passage here in Elijah. We think of Elijah, don't we, as a major prophet. But I feel the account of his life as given in 1 Kings is quite different from some of the other prophetic books in the Bible.

I love all the prophets. I sometimes find them a bit difficult to get through because there's a lot of words. But in Elijah, we have a lot of action, don't we? It's almost like a thriller.

It's so exciting. There's drama. There's the lurch, and we see it in this passage between joy and despair, victory and defeat. It's quite a ride.

And I think Elijah tells us a lot about faith in action. And I'm going to look at the actions of Elijah, I hope, a little bit today. And I'm going to look at three themes, and they are compassion, completeness, and courage.

[1 : 23] Could you put the slide up? Thank you. So, in the style of your favourite Amazon Prime thriller, last week on Elijah, in case you missed it, God has sent a drought as punishment for King Ahab's worship of Baal.

And God has sent Elijah to shelter in the house of a widow. God has enabled the widow to provide for him using all that she has, but with the jar and the oil that doesn't run out.

And it's an image of the immeasurable grace of God. And just when we think that Elijah and his hosts will get through unscathed, tragedy overcomes them.

The widow's son dies, not from famine, but from illness. He has become weaker and weaker. But you can imagine the widow who has opened her home to the man of God, who has witnessed these miracles, maybe somehow believing it's all going to turn out okay.

So, the widow is angry and confused when her son dies. Has Elijah come to bring blessing or curse upon her?

[2 : 48] Has he come to punish her for her sins? And what I really like is Elijah doesn't contradict that. He doesn't argue with her. He doesn't try and defend himself.

But he says to her, give me your son. And I feel like he's kind of taking responsibility, somehow just saying, let me handle this.

Maybe saying to her that the responsibility is not on her. It's not about her sins that has caused him to die. And Elijah takes the son upstairs.

He lays him on his bed. And in the privacy of his room, he says to God, have you brought tragedy on this widow? As if he is saying, is what she says true?

And this is the prayer that for me felt very familiar. When we pray to God, is this your plan? Because it feels tough.

[3 : 51] And it feels really unfair. And it's heartfelt. But I wonder if in this moment, Elijah is doubting God's compassion for these people.

But God, of course, is compassionate. It's not that what Elijah says in this moment causes God to change his mind. And we have evidence for the compassion of God because he's been keeping them alive through the miracle of the oil and the jug.

And although Elijah is doubting, I think what happens here is that Elijah's compassion for the widow and her son align in the moment with God's compassion for them.

And that causes something very powerful to happen. And it reminded me of something that Pete Gregg, who's the founder of 24-7 Prayer, this is from his book How to Pray, says about intercessory prayer.

He says this, So it's not that God changes his mind.

[5 : 26] And in this moment, Elijah's compassion meets God's compassion. C.S. Lewis famously said, I don't pray because it changes God.

I pray because it changes me. The widow's grief doesn't change who God is. God is unchangeable, the Alpha and the Omega.

But this tragedy changes Elijah because his compassion for the widow's son changes his heart. He is moved by her plight. Complete mess. So Elijah prays for the widow's son.

And he could have left it there, couldn't he? And I'm aware that actually I often do leave it there. I often think I prayed about that. It's in God's hands. But sometimes we need to act.

[6 : 26] And Elijah acts in this passage. He doesn't want to leave anything undone that could have been done. And it's a very physical action. Elijah stretches himself out over the body of the boy three times.

And I think when we see three times, I don't know about you, but I think for me it foreshadows the life and ministry of Jesus, the raising of Lazarus on the third day, the three days Jesus spent in the grave before his own physical resurrection.

I'm aware that the contemporary listeners to this account, the readers of this account, wouldn't have known that. But I think they would have recognized something in that threefold repetition.

It's not as common in the Old Testament, but we do have quite a few examples of it. And it's mainly in the prophetic books. So in Ezekiel chapter 21, he repeats the word ruin three times.

We have actually two examples. I included one on the slide in Jeremiah. The temple of the Lord is repeated three times. Land is repeated three times in chapter 22.

[7 : 47] And the most well-known example of threefold repetition in the Old Testament is in Isaiah 6, verses 3, where we have, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. The emphasis of holy. But it's also thought to glorify God as the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I've also included some New Testament examples of threefold repetition. Paul prays three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed.

Peter denies Jesus three times, and then it's restored by him three times in the question, do you love me? And in Peter's vision, when the food comes down on the sheet, it's lowered and it goes back up three times.

So as a literary device, this isn't actually unique to the Bible. It's a common and ancient feature of language, which I guess has also given us three little pigs, the three bears.

[9 : 01] Mathematically, three is the smallest number that we need to create a pattern. In art, we have three-point compositions. In photography, we have the rule of thirds.

Actually, I was writing this, three things broke in my house this week. The Hoover, the oven, and the dishwasher. And the first two, I've managed to fix using spare parts and YouTube videos, but the dishwasher is holding out on me.

And it made me think, what is God saying? Is God saying something about my third unfixable item? Is he saying something to me?

So three things used for emphasis, to express when we need to complete something to satisfaction or completeness. And God created our brain with our three-part structure to recognize the beauty of three, to recognize it as a sense of completeness.

And I think there's a meaning here for Elijah. Three times, God's work completed, carried out to beautiful satisfaction.

[10 : 20] I think what is also relevant here is that three represents perseverance, because it's more than one or two.

I can tell you the number of times I would stretch out over a dead person in the effort to raise them, and that is zero. Zero times.

I'm sure some of you might be relieved by that. What courage must it have taken, Elijah, to do it three times? And I think it should give us courage to persevere when things seem helpless, when we have tried once already and failed.

What courage does it take to go back knowing it might not work again, and then to go back and try a third time?

And what's more is that Elijah really has no reason to expect this will work, because it has never happened before in biblical history.

[11 : 24] There is no precedent. There has been no one brought back to life in the Bible up to this point. We are told that Elijah stretches himself out over the body of the boy, and this image for me reminded me of the tabernacle with its stretched ropes and covering.

In Exodus 26, we have a very detailed description of the layers covering the tabernacle, the linen, embroidered cloth, goat skin.

All stretched out to contain the power and the presence of God on earth. Isaiah will later prophesy of an increase in blessing using the tabernacle image with these stretched out curtains.

Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch out your tent curtains wide. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.

It's an image of more grace extended to more people. So Elijah in this moment chooses to stretch himself out so that the presence and the power of God will come to these people, to the widow and the boy who have no status, but who God is compassionate towards.

[12 : 58] And the courageous act of Elijah brings about the most unimaginable spiritual breakthrough as he comes back to life.

If we want evidence for how seismic this event is, I think we can look at how quickly it happens again.

So it's never happened before in biblical history, but only a few decades later, Elisha performs a resurrection of a child in very similar circumstances.

We can find that story told in 2 Kings chapter 4. Elisha lays the child on his bed and lays out on him. Elijah knows it will work. Well, he believes it will work. He doesn't know it. Because Elijah did it before him. But Elijah did it first. And God has released a power here that will have an impact for the future as well as the present.

[14 : 04] And I was interested, I don't know if I'm reading too much into this, maybe, when Elijah anoints Elisha as his successor, Elisha, remember, asks for a double portion of blessing.

And I thought it was interesting then that Elisha is responsible for two resurrections to Elijah's one. The second one is pretty extraordinary.

In 2 Kings 13, a body is hastily buried in the same grave as Elijah. And when the body touches Elisha's bones, it comes back to life.

And as I've mentioned before, all this foreshadows Jesus's ministry and death. Jesus resurrects three people. Jairus's daughter, the son of the widow of Nain, we had that read earlier, and Lazarus.

But it is Jesus's resurrection and death, his death and resurrection, his body stretched out once and for all upon the cross. That will result in so many resurrections that we won't begin to count them.

[15 : 13] And it feels to me as if Elijah's courageous act has pulled something out of time. His action in the present perhaps brings a grace that was destined for the future.

And I think sometimes that's how prophecy works. We get a little bit of a glimpse of something of the yet to come. A little bit of fulfillment now as a sign of a greater future fulfillment.

So what can we learn from Elijah's actions? I think first of all, compassion is powerful.

When was the last time your heart broke for something that breaks God's heart? Our agreement with God in prayer is powerful.

Who are the people for whom God's heart is breaking? And can we partner with God in praying for them? God needs us and he can't act sometimes without our participation.

[16 : 26] Number two, what is the complete action? And where do we need to take action? How can we show willingness to do God's will in our behavior?

Where does God need me to act? Maybe it's picking up the phone to call someone, paying them a visit, making them a meal. Is it serving on a team or in a ministry?

Is it signing up for a rota? Is it taking responsibility for correcting a behavior that is harmful to myself and to other people?

And thirdly, courage brings breakthrough. Where does God need us to be brave and try again? Where can we stretch out or extend what we are doing?

Can we extend God's grace to people in a way that some people might find shocking? Elijah stretched himself out three times and his reward with spiritual breakthrough.

[17 : 39] Are we stretching out for the breakthrough that we want to see?