

1 Kings 16:29-17:24

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- [0 : 00] Heavenly Father, all good gifts come from you. And on this Thanksgiving weekend, we give you thanks for food, for shelter, for life, for health, for one another.
- So much we take for granted. And we realize that it all comes to us from your hand. And we praise you too for your word. And we pray that we would never take it for granted, but tremble before it.
- And listen to you and so live. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Please sit down. Well, we have a change of pace today.
- We move from the book of Ruth, the gentle, quiet, lovely story of Ruth, to the violence and corruption and malevolence and evil at the centre of the people of God in the book of Kings.
- And for seven weeks, we're going to look at the life of Elijah. And if you want to turn it up, the passage today is on page 298 and 299, which is the end of 1 Kings 16 and all of 1 Kings 17.
- [1 : 20] This is the worst of times. It's not the best of times and the worst of times. It's just the worst of times. Since the end of Solomon's reign in 1 Kings, the kings of God's people have done the opposite of what they're supposed to do.
- Instead of leading toward God and caring for and shepherding God's people in cleanness, they have become vicious wolves, devouring God's people for themselves.
- And each one has done as best they can to pour spiritual sewage into the worship life of God's people. And the people of God have happily rejected God and gone after idols.
- And we reach the absolute bottom of the sewer, if a sewer has a bottom, with King Ahab. Chapter 16, verse 30. Just look down at it, please.
- Page 298. He does more evil than all the kings before him. And he marries Jezebel from the country of Sidon.
- [2 : 39] Sidon is where the national god was Baal, the god of rain. And so she brings Baal and also the sexy consort Asherah, the pole god.
- Like Solomon, Ahab builds a temple, but not to the true and living God. He builds a temple to Baal. And in verse 31, he gleefully serves and worships Baal.
- He replaces the worship of the true and living God of Israel and makes Baal worship the official religion of God's people. And Jezebel brings a thousand prophets of Baal with her and she immediately begins tearing down all the places of worship to the true and living God and slaughtering the prophets in Israel.
- Verse 33. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.
- Now, question. Why is it such a big deal? Why is God so provoked with this? Why does God have a problem with idols? And why is this important to us today? It's because of this.
- [3 : 51] It goes to the heart of who we are and the heart of who God is. It goes to the centre of our lives. And the key conflict through all the Elijah story is idols versus God.

It's the key to our world. It's the key to our world. Because idolatry is making God in our image. It's a reversal of reality.

It's a way of trying to bring God down to size, to localise him, to control him, to restrict him. It's a way of stealing God's freedom and power from him and locking him up as an object of our own imagination.

Could be a block of wood like Baal was. Although today, of course, we're too sophisticated for that, aren't we? We don't worship blocks of wood or stone. We much prefer mental idols, what the Old Testament calls idols of the heart.

We remake God to be more what we want so that God serves our self-fulfillment and our self-actualisation and our self-realisation.

[5 : 00] You're all very familiar with the Zoom mute all button, which I have to confess I love. But this is what we do to God. When we make God in our own image or when we make idols in our own heart, we're pushing the mute button on God.

You know, we don't like the fact that God loves those people who really don't like. Just hit mute. We don't like the fact that God has wrath. We just mute that part. And the Bible says we end up worshipping ourselves and not the true God.

And any idol we construct in our hearts and minds, if it's outside of us or it's inside us, means we miss the true splendour and beauty of God.

Because by shrinking God down to the size of our imagination, we no longer have a God who we can disagree with. We no longer have a God who sees us as we really are and who can tell us who we really are and loves us all the same.

This is the fundamental sin and blasphemy throughout the Elijah narrative, throughout our lives. We all struggle with this in our world and through history.

[6 : 09] Am I going to determine who God is and what he's allowed to say or is God allowed to speak for himself? And because of how profoundly and deeply God has bound himself to his people by love and covenant, steadfast love, every act of idolatry is a personal betrayal to God.

It's not breaking random rules. It's breaking his heart. And the Old Testament calls it spiritual adultery. And you know what that's like in families. Since his commitment to us is so passionate, our defection from him to other gods is so unbearable.

And so we come to the end of 1 Kings 16 and it is unbearable. The living God has been pushed to the margins, replaced by Baal.

And what is God going to do? How is God going to defend himself? Answer? He sends the word of the Lord in the mouth of his prophet Elijah. And if you look at chapter 17, verse 1, there is a turn in the story.

Elijah just appears. No introduction, no CV, no warm-up routine for Elijah. He just appears to King Ahab with the word of the Lord.

[7 : 32] And it's interesting, Ahab is not mentioned again in all of chapter 17. Because the focus is the power and significance of the word of the Lord. The life-changing, history-changing, boundary-breaking word of the Lord.

And in the Old Testament, prophets ace kings. They trump kings. They're more important than kings. Prophets make kings and prophets break kings.

Not because of anything in the prophet himself. But because they're sent with the word of the Lord. So we're going to spend the rest of our time together looking at these three scenes in chapter 17.

And the first one in verses 1 to 7, I've called breaking out of the boundaries of Israel. Ahab, verses 1 to 7, is silent and passive. Elijah comes to him with the word of the Lord, announcing that God is sending a drought.

Verse 1, There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word. This is perfect punishment that fits the crime for three reasons.

[8 : 44] Number one, Baal is supposed to be the ruler of rain. And by declaring a drought, God defies any notion that Baal is a real God. There is only one God who has made this world.

Baal is not it. First, two, the land of Israel. You remember this from when we went through Ruth? The land of Israel is not just real estate. It's spiritual geography.

It's the land where God chose his name to dwell, the holy land. And he has promised that he would supply rain to his people unless they turned away to idols and reject him for other gods.

And he's just following through. And thirdly, and this is very striking, this is a slow motion judgment that goes on for three and a half years, this drought.

And we learn from that, of course, that God doesn't just blow up in a fit of rage. He's gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. And the reason he removes the blessing of rain from the land is to give Ahab and all his followers time to turn back to the true and living God.

[9 : 50] But look at how God does this. In verse two, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah again and he sends Elijah eastward toward the river Jordan.

Actually, over the river Jordan, outside the land of Egypt, sorry, outside the land of Israel to this little brook called Cherith.

It is the reversal of the Exodus. You remember God brings his people after the Exodus across the Jordan into the land by miracle. Well, in chapter 18, the next chapter, we discover that Queen Jezebel has a search warrant out to kill Elijah.

So God sends his prophet outside the boundaries of Israel, not just to protect his prophet and his word, but to remove his word from Israel so that he waits for repentance.

So it's a double famine. It's not just a physical famine of rain and food. It's also a spiritual drought of the word of God. And there God commands some birds to feed his prophet with bread and meat by the brook Cherith, just as he did in the wilderness during the Exodus.

[11 : 05] Just think of how God is doing this. He could quite easily destroy all those who serve Baal. He could take their lives, but he does not. He sends his word to bring us to repentance and to bring Israel to repentance.

And when we reject his word, he withdraws his word from us. And soon the drought means that the brook dries up. And so God takes the opportunity secondly, in verses eight to 16, to break into the boundaries of Baal.

So my first point was breaking out of the boundaries of Israel. My second point, second paragraph, is breaking into the boundaries of Baal. Look down at verse eight, please.

The word of the Lord comes to Elijah again. And just as the drought stops any water in the brook east of Israel, God sends Elijah west, right through the country of Israel, right across the country of Israel to the coast, to the country of Sidon, which we already know is home for Jezebel, where the people of Sidon thought Baal was the unquestioned God.

And the living God sends his word and his prophet right to Sidon, right to the north of Sidon to a town called Zarephath. Now, why does he do that? It's not God's witness protection program from the Ahab search warrant, according to one of the commentators.

[12 : 35] It's not revenge against the people of Sidon for exporting their idol. It's because God wants to break into the boundaries of Sidon with salvation that's coming through his word.

Just as God commanded the ravens to feed Elijah in verse four, God tells us he commands a widow to feed Elijah in verse nine. And when he arrives, things look very dire indeed.

The drought that God had sent to Israel is causing famine in the country's roundabout. And he comes to Zarephath, and there is a widow, and he asks the widow for a glass of water.

And as she goes to get him a cup of water, he asks her for a bit of bread, and we discover that she is close to starvation with her boy, and she is preparing the last supper.

Look at verse 12, please. As the Lord your God lives, she says, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a jug.

[13 : 39] And now I'm gathering a couple of sticks so that I might go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die. And Elijah replies with something that is almost incomprehensible.

In verse 13, he says, Do not fear. Go and do as you have said, but first, he says to her, first, make me a little cake and bring it to me.

Then afterward for yourself and your son, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, the jar shall not be spent, the jug of oil shall not be empty until the day the Lord sends rain upon the earth.

Would it not be far easier if God did the miracle first? Supplying the bread, supplying the jug and the oil, and then feeding the widow and her son, and then she could feed Elijah.

You know, I see your kindness, Lord, and your great power, now I can feed your prophet. That's not how it works. Because God wants us to trust his word. And sometimes he calls on us to do that in situations that are humanly impossible.

[14 : 50] He wants us to trust him. And here is Elijah's word to the woman, do not be afraid. Make a cake for me.

And God promises he will multiply your bread until the end of the drought. And she is faced with a decision, isn't she, to trust her instincts or to trust the word of the Lord.

And in a miracle that's remarkable, she trusts the word of the Lord. And she now receives a slow motion miracle like the slow motion drought. Here is the slow motion miracle, verse 15.

She did, as Elijah said, You know, Jesus himself refers to this episode in the Gospel of Luke.

And he points out that when Elijah went over to Sidon by the word of the Lord, he passed by many needy widows in Israel to bring the word of the Lord to Baalsville.

[15 : 53] And even though God withdraws his word from the people of Israel, there is a wideness in his mercy. And God's purposes include all those who need to hear the life and death news of his word.

And in the very act of the judgment on Ahab, God is bringing salvation into the boundaries of Baal's territory to show that he alone is Lord. When we take him at his word, it means life.

That's the second paragraph, breaking out of the boundaries of Israel, breaking into the boundaries of Baal. And then the third paragraph, verses 17 to 24, breaking out of the boundaries of death.

Now in this last scene, death comes into the home in Zarephath, in Sidon. The little boy catches a deadly virus that stops him breathing. And the threat of death that hangs over Ahab and Israel now visits here in Sidon.

During the slow motion miracle of feeding, now the boy is taken by death. And I think as we're reading this, we want to say something like this, Lord, is this how you treat the one who takes in your prophet and you support them?

[17 : 09] After miraculously providing food for them, now you let the boy die? How could you let this happen? Why are you doing this? Or is it that you can keep people alive on this side, but when they pass the boundary of death, they're gone from you?

There's never been a resurrection in the Bible before this. And the woman's reaction is completely understandable. She's crushed and confused. She says to the prophet, look, she says, I know I'm sinful.

And now by coming to him, you've brought my sin to God's attention. He's punishing me. Is he punishing me? Does my boy have to pay for my sin? Notice, please, that in her grief, she shows a humility that comes from faith.

She still believes that God is entirely in control. She's heard the word of the Lord. She knows the reality of her sin. And we also see some of the sensitivity and tenderness in Elijah.

He is in grief. He's completely bewildered, like this woman is, who's taken him in at great personal risk. And thankfully, he doesn't argue theology with her.

[18 : 22] He doesn't give her some platitude and empty comfort. He does something completely forbidden to every Jew. He picks up the dead body and takes the boy out of the room, up to his room.

And he cries out in verse 20, Oh Lord, my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourned by killing her son? Very revealing.

Elijah's prayer also combines humility and faith. He doesn't blame God. He doesn't say, why? Which is usually our question. He doesn't say, why did you let this happen? Instead, he calls out of the deepest intimacy of his relationship with God, Oh Lord, my God.

And in his desperation, he stretches himself on the boy three times. He's deeply affected by the death of this boy. Is he trying to somehow identify with the death of this boy in some way?

I don't know. And as he realizes his absolute helplessness, he prays again in verse 21, Oh Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again.

[19 : 31] And God does. And Elijah takes the boy back to his mother for the blissful reunion. And for the first time in the Bible, God raises someone back to life again, showing he's not just the creator and sustainer in control of all the world, but he has power over death.

It's absolutely beautiful. But the question I think we ought to be asking is, how do we apply this to ourselves? I mean, we are not Elijah.

It's not as though if I pray hard enough and believe strongly enough, nobody in my family is going to die. And if they do die, I can raise them back to life again. I do know people who believe that. And I think it's the last verse in this passage that's so helpful and steers us in the right direction.

It is the woman's response. And again, it's remarkable. And this is where the writer wants us to go. After the blissful reunion of the mother with her boy, what do you expect her to say?

I mean, I would expect her to say something like, now I know Baal is just a block of wood. It's a complete mistake to worship him. That works, doesn't it? Or how about this? Now I know that God is the Lord of, and the true God.

[20 : 50] He has power over life and death. That'd be good, wouldn't it? Or how about this? Now I know that the death of my son had nothing to do with my sin, but everything to do with mercy.

By allowing my son to die, by raising him back to life, he's given me even greater hope. Life after death. That'd be good, wouldn't it? Doesn't say any of those things. She shows us exactly how we should apply this to ourselves.

Verse 24. Now I know, she says, you are a man of God, belong to God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. So in the context of drought and desertion and death, the word of, the word of the Lord is the source of life and hope, she says.

In every episode that we've seen, every episode is set moving by the power of the word of the Lord, and every episode has as its aim the mercy of God by the word of the Lord.

So the drought is to show the desolation of worshipping false gods and to give God's people time to come back to him in repentance. And as God calls us, tells us through a later prophet after God's people have gone into exile, as surely as I live, declares the sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather they turn from their ways and live.

[22 : 10] Turn, he says, turn from your evil ways. Why will you die, people of Israel? God takes no pleasure in the work of judgment, but he does in grace and giving life.

His judgment is only the response to our idolatry and sin, but his love and mercy is not the response to our goodness, but arises out of his own free character. And God preserves the life of his servant in the wilderness, just as he did in the Exodus.

He withdraws his word from Israel to make the people more hungry, and humble before his word. And then he takes the word into Baal country, bringing faith and food to one family there with a multiplication of bread.

And then he raises this young boy back to life, giving a joy to this woman that's quite unimaginable, strengthening her faith so that she becomes the spokeswoman for the chapter in verse, in the last verse, the word of the Lord is true.

And every one of these episodes, I think, point to the person of Jesus Christ, of course. And I just say this very briefly. It's Jesus who went into the wilderness to be sustained by God.

[23 : 22] It's Jesus who multiplied the bread and fed thousands. It's Jesus who raised a number of people back to this life and died, and was raised to a completely new life in heaven by his resurrection.

And it's Jesus who tells us that he has life in himself, and that he will rise, he will raise every one of us at the last day, if we believe his words, giving us eternal life.

And here he says it in black and white, in John 5, let me read two verses. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word, believes him who sent me, has eternal life.

Doesn't come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. Amen.