

The Covenant Pulpit



1 Kings 17:1-24

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We know little about this desert prophet except that he comes from the arid wastes east of the Jordan River. He looks like a scarecrow—wiry thin, skin blackened by the sun, and bushy hair and beard tangled like a lion’s mane. But it’s his piercing hot eyes that cause you to shiver.

Out of nowhere, the desert wind blows him into a king’s palace. As he stands pointing boney finger at royalty, you think of those words from Neil Diamond’s hit song, *Brother Love’s Traveling Salvation Show*:

The room gets suddenly still, and when you’d almost bet
You could hear yourself sweat—he walks in.
Eyes black as coal and when he lifts his face,
Every eye in the place is on him.
Starting soft and slow, like a small earthquake,
And when he lets go, half the valley shakes.

Cowering before him is Ahab, king of Israel. But the real power is Ahab’s wife, coiled next to him like a snake. Her very name *Jezebel* is synonymous with evil. The daughter of a Phoenician king, she has instituted Baal worship with its hideous idols, false prophets, temple prostitutes, and infant sacrifice. This shady lady is the original “queen of mean.” She would make Al Capone sleep with a night light. Jezebel has a quaint name for those who cross her: *victim*. A hush falls over the court as Elijah’s piercing eyes focus on the royal couple. Then he bellows a single line recorded in verse one:

“As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew or rain these years except at my word.”

God has declared war on Ahab and Jezebel. Palestine is one of the driest spots on earth. Without rain there will be famine. Elijah couldn’t have brought down a worse curse. The air is sucked out of the room. Before anyone can react, Elijah is gone. From this moment on, he is *Public Enemy Number One*, a fugitive in hiding with a price on his head, reduced to utter desperation, depending on the supernatural for survival. Other than Moses and Christ, no prophet ever sees more miracles than Elijah.

Are you in a place of desperation this morning? Or is God calling you to take some action that will force you into a place of desperation? Then take heart and hope from Elijah. Here’s a principle from his life:

**Faith calls us to do the *unthinkable*
so that we might receive the *impossible*.**

God is in the business of shaping prophets. When we first see him in 1 Kings 17:1 he is introduced as Elijah the Tishbite. It's like calling me Bob the Neapolitan. But it's not enough to be *Elijah the Tishbite* or *Bob the Neapolitan*. God has bigger plans for us than that. But we have to grow up first.

By 1 Kings 17:24 Elijah has a new name: "Man of God." Now he's ready to take the prophets of Baal head on. What's the difference between *Elijah the Tishbite* and *Man of God*? It's the years and experiences recorded between verses one and twenty-four. God takes Elijah to school by putting him in impossible situations to build his faith and forge his character.

The world is in desperate need of prophets. Hosea 4:6 says, "My people have are destroyed for the lack of knowledge." In John 8:32 Jesus said, "The truth will set you free." But, if we are going to reach the next generation, we will have to do more than *speak* the truth. Pollster George Barna says that the Millennial Generation is turned off by people who say one thing and do another. He says that the Millennials responds to what they see, not what they hear. Ravi Zacharias says of this generation, "They hear with their eyes. If we are going to be prophets to them we will have to live the truth *visually* as much as we speak it *verbally*. So, how does God transform prophets so that they *live* the truth? He puts us in impossible places to shape us into men and women of God. Look where he takes Elijah:

1. A brook called *Kerith* to show that growth comes when we are cut down to size. Look at verses 2&3:

"The word of the Lord came to Elijah: 'Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.'"

The Hebrew word *Kerith* literally means "to be cut down" or "to be cut off." *Kerith* is in the badlands of the Palestinian wilderness; a moonscape of rocks and snakes where temperatures soar to 110° Fahrenheit during the day and plunge to below freezing at night. The strongest of people are cut down to size in the purgatory called *Kerith*. Only the insane—or those called by God—would dare venture there.

But here God provides a bubbling brook and some ravens to sustain Elijah. Who would ever suspect that, in the midst of a drought, that a desert hellhole would be the source of water? Only God can do something like this. But later verse seven says, "...the brook dried up..." Things go from impossible to *really* impossible at *Kerith*. If Elijah is going to school, then

you might call this place **Dry Brook University**. Some of you are graduates of this school. You know what it means to be “cut off” or “cut down” to size. Some of you are there right now, and it’s tough. Others of you are on the way there. No one ever wants to go there, but its one of the places that turns *Elijah the Tishbite* into *Elijah, the man of God*. How does God cut us down at Dry Brook University so that we can grow up?

By putting us on the shelf

Notice again that frightening command in verse three: “...hide in the Kerith Ravine...” Is there anything worse than be cut off in a dry and lonely place? Elijah has been in the spotlight, on center stage in the palace of a king. Now he is absolutely alone, cut off from everyone. Later his aloneness will drive him to suicidal despair. Sometimes God puts us on the shelf. He takes us out of the limelight, and removes us from service. We feel so utterly alone and incompetent. Once we were big stuff, but now we are cut down to size. Even our friends have abandoned us. If you have been there, you know the pain that Elijah experienced. Like David in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, all you can say is “*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.*”

By stripping us of everything we trust in

I am most amazed by the words of verse six: “The ravens brought him bread and meat.” Remember, Elijah is a holy man who fastidiously follows the Jewish dietary laws. But ravens are meat eaters. Worse they are scavengers who pick the carcasses of dead animals. As a result, they are unclean animals according to the Law of Moses. And the meat they bring is defiled too. You might as well read in verse six, “And pigs brought him defiled meat.” Elijah’s whole world-life view is turned upside down. At places like *Kerith* God strips us of all our pre-conceived notions, our religious traditions, our support systems, and even our tried-and-true faith formulas. In the wilderness of *Kerith* we aren’t even sure of what we believe anymore.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *A Grief Observed* wrote about the horrific grief he experienced when his wife Joy Davidson died of cancer. He says that at first he tried to make theological sense out of his loss. An endless parade of friends dropped by to encourage him with biblical truisms. Through the torturous nights, when he couldn’t sleep he quoted Scriptures and recited doctrinal creeds, but they rang hollow. Like Elijah, all he could do was sit in a barren place and eat whatever food God sent him, even though it made no sense. At *Kerith*, we can only cling in blind trust to a God whose actions sometimes leave us confused.

By drying up the brook

Now the most distressing statement of all in verse seven: “Some time later the brook dried up...” Is there anything worse than a dried-up brook? A business goes bone dry. Finances dry up. Marriage grows cold. Dreams die. Health withers. Our ministry no longer bears fruit. How do we respond when the brook dries up? 1) **The God who provides the water has the right to withhold it. Praise him for both.** When his children were killed Job said, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” (Job 1:21). 2) **If God dries up your brook, it’s because he’s ready to move you on to a new place.** Though we are caught by surprise, he has already planned the next steps of our lives. 3) **A dry brook is not necessarily a sign of God’s displeasure.** Elijah is at Kerith because he was obedient to God’s command. Don’t allow a dry brook to fill you with false guilt; 4) **when your brook dries, wait for God to move you on.** It would have been easy for Elijah to panic, but he stayed put until verse 8 says, “Then the word of the Lord came to him...” When we get in a rush to solve our problems we sometimes miss the word of the Lord. Elijah has passed his finals at Dry Brook University, but there’s graduate school ahead:

2. A town called Zarepath where steel is forged in the heat of the furnace. God commands in verse 9, “Go at once to Zarepath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.” *Zarepath* literally means “the place of the furnace.” This region is famous in for metal produced in its foundries, and God is about to test Elijah’s metal. As bad as *Kerith* was, it was at least a safe place. *Zarepath* is the birthplace of Baal worship. Worse than that, Jezebel hails from *Zarepath*. Elijah couldn’t be in a more dangerous place. He has gone from Dry Brook University to the graduate school of faith at *Zarepath* so that he can grow by:

Depending on a widow

Though Elijah has left *Kerith* he is still being cut down to size. First he was fed defiled food by unclean ravens. Now he is being kept alive by a widow, and not an impressive one at that. When we first see her in verse 10, she is “...picking up sticks...” What a pitiful sight. All she possesses are a few twigs, a handful of flour, a few drops of oil, and a dying son. Remember, Elijah has just delivered God’s Word to a powerful king. Now his life is in the hands of a starving widow. Notice what she says to Elijah in verse 12, “As surely as the Lord *your* God lives...” Elijah’s God is not her God. She belongs to the people of Jezebel. She is a Gentile, a pagan, and probably a worshipper of Baal. God has taken Elijah from being fed by unclean ravens

to being sustained by an unclean pagan. God can never use us until he has chipped us down to size, and it seems that he never stops chipping away. After viewing Michelangelo's statue of King David, someone asked him, "How do you make a king out of a block of stone?" He replied, "I chip away everything that doesn't look like a king."

Sharing weaknesses together

Here's another thing learned at *Zarepath*: in moments of desperation we discover not only that we need God, but also one another. In verse 11 he says, "Please bring me a piece of bread." In verse 12 she replies, "I only have a handful of flour and a little oil..." You could put a caption on this meeting: "Extreme hunger meets a meager handful." They are both desperate: She needs his miracles and he needs the flour at the bottom of her barrel. A friend of mine has written on the inside of his Bible cover, "When you refuse to share your weaknesses with me, you deprive me of sharing my strengths with you." Our weaknesses benefit others. In pleading for her help, Elijah gives a widow a chance to help a prophet and discover his God. We forget that our troubles are for the benefit of others. How we handle them may well be our greatest opportunity to impact those who are watching us, as well as give encouragement to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Holding nothing back

In verse 13 Elijah says the widow, "Don't be afraid...first make a small cake for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for your-self and your son." Exodus 22:29 gives us the quintessential principle of worship: "Hold nothing back." When she gives the first portion to the prophet she is really tithing to God. Sometimes we reason that God wouldn't expect us to give when we have little to give. But it is at the moment when we are scraping the bottom of the barrel that our tithing becomes most powerful. We read in verse 16, "For the jug of flour was not used up, and the jug of oil did not run dry in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah." We can't out give God. If *Kerith* is Dry Brook University for Elijah, then *Zarepath* is the Empty Barrel Graduate School. It is when we give out of our need that faith goes to its highest levels.

Scraping bottom every day

We are most comfortable with full barrels, but they erode faith. Right now you are making a decision about the commitment pledge you will make to

our *Bridge to the Future* ministry. I want you to remember that every day, that widow reached down to scrape the bottom of her barrel, she had a new faith adventure. George Mueller opened an orphanage in England in 1832, with a commitment never to ask for donations. Each day he would pray in what he needed. One morning the table was set for the children, but the dishes were empty. As Mueller and the children prayed, there came a knock at the door. It was the baker who said, "Mr. Mueller, I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow I felt you might not have food this morning, so I got up at 2 am and began to bake bread for your children." A second knock followed. The milkman came in and said, "My cart broke down. I need to empty it to fix the wheel. Can you use my milk?" During his ministry, Mueller housed more than 10,000 orphans. When he died, at age 93, he had recorded 50,000 answers to prayers in his diary. As you decide how to give to this campaign, or to any ministry of the Lord, don't try to keep your barrels full. God builds faith when we scrap the bottom and step out on audacious faith. And here's the bottom line issue of stepping out in faith to bring God's Word to the next generation—both for Elijah and Covenant Presbyterian Church:

When a prophet covers a corpse we see that our ultimate success is to be like Christ. Elijah has now mastered the Empty Barrel Graduate School. But there is a final test that will prove whether he is *Elijah, Man of God*. In verse 17 the widow's son dies. Out of her tortured soul she screams in verse 18, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" She was warming up to Elijah's God. But now he has shown himself to be as cruel and capricious as her Baal gods. As far as she is concerned, this God has discovered her sins and is killing her only son as punishment. But now Elijah has an opportunity to show her who his God really is. This is the God who has indeed discovered her sins, and all of our sins. But rather than killing her only son to exact justice, 900 years later on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem God's One and Only Son will die to pay the penalty for her sins. This is what the truth that our world desperately needs to hear. And now Elijah is going to demonstrate that truth *visually* by acting out God's redemptive plan by:

Loving the unloving

This woman says some cruel things to Elijah. Yet he never says a harsh thing back at her. He simply responds in verse 19, "Give me your son." Elijah visually demonstrates the love of Christ. Isaiah said that Jesus went silently to the Cross. More than that, the gospels tell us that he cried out, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." To be like

Christ is the ultimate mark of maturity. This is the love the world needs to see in us as we respond to its slander and gossip about our faith.

Touching the defiled with empathy

Elijah does a strange thing. He takes the boy upstairs and lays the corpse out on the bed. Then verse 21 says, “He stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, ‘O Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him.’” Remember, Elijah is a holy man of Israel. It is against the Mosaic Law for him to touch a corpse, let alone defile his bed with it, and then cover it with his whole body. This too is a picture of Jesus who in his holiness comes and wraps himself around our defiled humanity. Isn’t this what Jesus did on the Cross? He wrapped himself around our dead, sinful bodies and shielded us from the justice of his Father by taking our punishment and soaking up our death in his body. He entered our death, so that he might give us his life. He became our sin so that we might become his righteousness. This is the empathy that Jesus perfected in his own wilderness suffering, and the empathy that Elijah learned in the wilderness of *Kerith* and the furnace of *Zarepath*. Isn’t this our ultimate perfection?—that we might become like Christ, and that the people of this world might see his gospel lived out in our lives?

Bringing life where there is death

Jesus came that we might have life, and he has sent us into the world that we might bring life. Elijah was like Jesus in that he held nothing back when he gave his whole body to heal that boy. God honored him for that, in the same way he will honor us when we hold nothing back. Verse 23 says, “The Lord hear Elijah’s cry and the boy’s life returned to him.” Did you know that this is the first resurrection from the dead recorded in the Bible? And the woman cries out in verse 24, “Now I *know* that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.” It is not so much the truth we speak that will impact the world, but the life of Christ that we *visually* demonstrate.

In the end, our *Bridge of the Future* campaign is not really so much about new buildings or a campus better situated to reach the next generation. It is really a faith journey that is transforming this church, and each of us who step out like Elijah in obedience to God, into the very *visual* image of Christ.