

Our scripture lesson last week was also from the book of 1 Kings, which tells us about the reign of King David; the reign of his son King Solomon; how the nation of Israel was divided; the reign of those kings that ruled Israel (the ten northern tribes); and the reign of the kings that ruled Judah (the two southern tribes). We learned about King Ahab, a strong military leader, but one of the most ungodly or disobedient of the kings of Israel. He led many of his people into worshipping idol gods and generally disregarded the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. God sent a mighty prophet named Elijah to confront King Ahab and these people. We learned that power, status, appearance, and material possessions can become our gods if we devote our lives to them.

The question that we post today is do we have the faith to follow the instruction that the scriptures teach. Many times we think that instructions were for people in the ancient past, but have nothing to do with us today. When I mentioned to my son George what the scripture said, he immediately said, oh, you mean like following the instructions about tithing and giving to the work of the church. I'm not sure that that was the direction I was going, but I believe following that instruction can also apply to how we live our lives faithfully and obediently.

We are reading these scriptures backwards. You see the scriptures last week were from the 18th chapter and the scripture this week is from the 17th chapter, so we are going back in time. Remember that King Ahab worshiped the Baal, the god of fertility and power, the god of the rain and thunder. So as punishment to the King and his people for worshipping the Baal, God sent a famine to the land of Israel and the surrounding nations. At the point of this scripture the famine is probably entering its second year. Elijah has successfully escaped King Ahab's scouts and God has sent ravens to feed him twice a day and he drank from a brook. Now the brook has dried up and God is giving Elijah further instructions. Elijah

had learned that God would miraculously provide for him, but now God was teaching Elijah that God could provide for others—even Gentiles!

Elijah was directed to Zarephath, a town on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, present day Lebanon, and the homeland of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab who had introduced her husband and his subjects to Baal worship. Zarephath was 80 to 90 miles from where he had been hiding. God told Elijah that a widow would feed him. This is the point that I would probably start questioning God. You are sending me to a foreign and hostile land and a widow is going to provide for me...yea...right! Widows were usually poor people, because they do longer had a husband to provide for them. Women and their children were normally totally dependent on the income and resources of their husband. So, normally the widow ran out of food first in a famine. And remember God, you have sent a famine and given no indication of when this thing will be over! So going to a widow for food was a strange instruction. But remember I told you that God has used ravens to feed him, and now God was again using an unusual source to feed His prophet. Elijah had the faith to trust God by the brook and now he is follows instruction again.

Obediently Elijah made his way to Zarephath. When he entered the town he tested the first widow he saw. To discover whether it was to her that the Lord had sent him, he asked her for something to drink and for a morsel of bread to eat. She assured him, with an oath by Yahweh, that she had nothing baked, (a cake baked in hot ashes), but only a handful of meal in the a pail or small vessel in which meal was kept; and a little oil in the pitcher, and that she was just gathering wood to cook this little for herself and her son, that they would eat it, and then die. Some scholars question the truth of this statement – if things were that bad, why would she have granted his request? We see from her statement that the drought and

famine had spread across the Phoenician frontier; and that she was a worshipper of the true God and recognized the prophet as an Israelite.

Here was a Gentile woman in Phoenicia who believed in the Lord. God had sent him to a foreigner that believed in God; that worshipped God; who trusted God. When God gives instructions, things are happening behind the scenes that are preparing the way of our salvation.

Elijah calmed her fears of himself, her hunger, and her imminent death. He asked her to feed him first and then use what was left to feed herself and her son. Then he gave her a promise on the authority of the word of God: she would have food until the drought ended.

Her obedient response demonstrated her faith in the word of the LORD. The Lord honored her faith by fulfilling His promise miraculously. This miracle of God's continually supplying flour and olive oil was another proof of the impotency of Baal; the same as the drought. Baal-worshippers believed he was a fertility god, giving rain to make crops grow. But Baal could not overcome the drought to make wheat and olive trees grow. Only the true God could provide meal and oil in a drought! And because of her obedience, the widow received a prophet's reward, and for the one meal she gave to Elijah, God, by a miraculous increase of her little stock, gave her food for over two years.¹

Some time later, the exact time is not given, but it may have been a much as two years later, tragedy struck Elijah's hostess. Scholars believe that the woman who owned the house was the widow that Elijah had met at the city gates. I'm not so sure. Maybe our widow worked for another widow and that widow was a homeowner and gave Elijah a place to stay. When the Bible says that they all ate,

¹Jamieson, Robert ; Fausset, A. R. ; Fausset, A. R. ; Brown, David ; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. 1 Ki 17:1

this may have meant the woman, her son, her employer, her employer's son, and Elijah ate from the meal and the oil. After all in a close knit community this woman would have shared her blessing with others. At any rate, the young son of the owner of the house became ill and finally stopped breathing. Some Bible critics say the boy was only unconscious, not dead, and that his restoration was therefore not a miracle. However, verses 18, 20, 22-23 make it clear that he had actually died.

The woman had a guilty conscience and immediately concluded that God was punishing her for her sin by killing her son. This is a common reaction among many people who do not know God's ways well when personal tragedy enters their lives. What sin she was referring to is not stated. But we know that God is a merciful God and does not kill our children for our un-confessed sins.

The boy was small enough to be carried in his mother's arms. Many homes in Palestine at that time had guest rooms built on their roofs. It was in one such upper room that Elijah was staying. Elijah's first prayer simply expressed his compassion for the woman who, in addition to the trials of the famine, now also had to bear this tragedy. Implicit in the prayer was the desire that God relieve her of this added burden. Often in cases of miraculous restoration and healing, God's servant placed his hand on the afflicted one to indicate that the power of God in him was passing to the needy individual. In this instance Elijah out of heartfelt concern stretched himself out placing the whole body of the boy in contact with his own. Three times Elijah did this, praying each time that God would restore the boy's life. Persistence in prayer is a fundamental requisite for obtaining one's petitions. It proved effective in this case.

God miraculously restored the boy's life. This is the first recorded instance in Scripture of restoration to life of one who had died. Elijah carried the boy downstairs and presented him to his mother. This miracle proved to the woman

that Elijah was truly a man of God and that the word of the LORD that Elijah claimed to speak was indeed the truth.

This incident showed the widow and others that the power of the Lord as the true God contrasted greatly with the impotency of Baal.²

As a human being Elijah reminds us that it takes courage for the believer to take a stand for God, to follow instructions when everyone else is doing their own thing, and that commitment is often lonely. Yet Elijah also reminds us that one person who does follow God's instructions can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.

"Zarephath:" the town to which God sent Elijah was in Jezebel's homeland! When Baalism entered Israel, the result was a devastating drought that crippled the land. But when Yahweh's prophet obediently entered a foreign land, he brought hope to a starving widow and her household and even restored her son to life!

One indication of the validity of our faith is its impact on individuals. Today as in Elijah's day the messenger of God must obediently bring compassion and healing as well as truth.

It is also important to remember that Elijah did not bring a massive food supply. The little that the widow had proved always to be enough. God stretched supplies to meet daily needs. It is the same for us today. Jesus calls us to depend on God for our "daily bread." It is wonderful to know that we can depend on God to provide what we need when we are obedient.³

I am also impressed by the obedience of this widow. She gave up the certain of a last meal for the uncertain of a promise, because she trusted the word of the Lord, and received the reward of her believing confidence in the fact that during the

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:524

³Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 234

whole time of the drought she had meal or oil. This act of the pious Gentile woman, who had welcomed with a simple heart the knowledge of the true God that had reached her from Israel, must have been the source of strong consolation to Elijah in the hour of conflict, when his faith was trembling because of the multitude of idolaters in Israel. If the Lord Himself had raised up true worshipers of His name among the Gentiles, his work in Israel could not be put to shame.

Because of her obedience, this believing widow, received from the prophet not only a material blessing, but a spiritual blessing also. Can you imagine how blessed the household was with a prophet of God in residence. His presence and prayers and teachings blessed them. Elijah was not sent to this widow in order that he might be safely hidden at her house; but because of her faith, namely, to strengthen and to increase it, he was sent to her. God met her physical need for daily food, but her spiritual need and even showed her that God had power over life and death. Which God would show again when he raised Jesus from the dead after he had paid the price for our sins.

The faith to follow instructions is important even today. The faith to believe that God sent Jesus to die for our sins takes faith in our self-sufficient world. To admit that I can't be good enough, be holy enough without the help of God, takes faith to follow instruction.

Surrender your will to God today and God will give you the Holy Spirit so that you will have faith to follow instructions.⁴ People will know that we are children of God if we are willing to follow instructions and can be relied on share God's words with others.⁵

⁴Keil, Carl Friedrich ; Delitzsch, Franz: *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA : Hendrickson, 2002, S. 3:166-170

⁵Auld, A Graeme: *I & II Kings*. Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, c1986 (The Daily Study Bible Series), S. 108