

*In 1978, I graduated from high school and three days later I was in boot camp to begin the transformation process of becoming a Coast Guardsman. If any of you have served in the military, you know all about boot camp. In my case, it's was a place where a bunch of young men from every walk of life and background, young men who were generally undisciplined, unorganized, and self-willed, were brought together under very challenging and punishing conditions to become something we were not.*

*Day after day, week after week, absent of family and friends, we were badgered by a drill instructor who was Satan incarnate. By design, we were subjected to relentless military drills and inspections, we counted off thousands of pushups and sit-ups, we endured miles upon miles of marching and running, and we were challenged academically until we thought our brains would explode.*

*Slowly but surely, we were being stripped of our independent spirits, broken of our rebellious attitudes towards authority, pushed far beyond our perceived limits – and without even realizing it, we were being changed.*

*It was harsh both physically and mentally – it was meant to be, because that's how military members are made. In adversity, under great pressure and stress, we grew stronger, we became more grounded and mature, we learned the value of being part of a team, and we became prepared for whatever task lay ahead. None of us, when we arrived, were the same men when we left boot camp.*

In many respects, this boot camp type experience is what the Lord had in mind for His prophet Elijah. I don't know about you, but when I think about Elijah, I first think about the very public showdown on Mount Carmel, where he boldly takes on 450 wicked prophets of Baal. Greatly outnumbered, He will courageously call down fire from heaven to prove who the true God really is, but the Bible tells us that Elijah was a man just like us, and he needed to be prepared for such a task.

This morning, we are going to be in the book of **1 Kings** – a book about the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah – a book which draws our attention to the kings who walked with God and those who didn't. If you recall, God's people were a divided people. To the north, were the ten tribes called *Israel* with their own king, and to the south were the two other tribes called *Judah* with their king.

Now, focusing on the kings of Israel, there is a long list of kings who did not walk with God – they were evil, going from bad to worse, and just when it seemed the kings couldn't get any worse, King Ahab takes the throne.

King Ahab was a terrible king – the worst of the worst, a king greatly influenced by his wicked wife Jezebel, and together they turned the people of Israel away from the one true God and to a false Canaanite and Phoenician god called *Baal*. Under their rule, Baal worship was officially sponsored by the government, a temple as built in the capital city of Samaria, and those who opposed this pagan religion – namely the prophets of God, were sought out and exterminated by Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel turned Israel into a cesspool of immorality and idolatry – but true to God’s word, He raised up a standard against them – a prophet, and that brings us to **1 Kings 17, verse 1**. We are told,

**Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”**

Here we are introduced to Elijah, a man of great zeal and passion for God, whose name means “*the Lord is God*.” He was a Tishbite from the town of Tishbe, east of the Jordan River – who was sent by God to give a message to King Ahab, and in his message, Elijah reminds Ahab that God is not dead as the king seems to think, and then like an arrow hitting the bullseye of a target, Elijah prays there will be no **dew nor rain** for years until he gives the command.

Now, this mention of rain was very relevant because this false god Baal was believed to be the fertility god who caused the crops to grow, animals to produce young, and people to have children, and as such, it was believed he brought rain to bring life. So, in so many words, Elijah is telling Ahab, “*If Baal can provide rain and bring life as you believe – then let him do so, but just so you know, it’s not going to rain again until God gives me the word.*”

And just as suddenly as Elijah had come on the scene, seemingly out of nowhere – he leaves for camp. You see, up to this point, Elijah was a messenger, he proclaimed the word of God, but to be that mighty prophet of God we have come to know – he needs to be prepared.

Continuing with the next passage, beginning with **verse 2**, we are told,

**<sup>2</sup>The word of the Lord came to him, saying, <sup>3</sup>“Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. <sup>4</sup>It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.” <sup>5</sup>So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the**

**Jordan. <sup>6</sup> The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook.**

After delivering this horrible weather report to King Ahab, placing his life in danger with his prayer for drought according to the word of God, Elijah receives the command to **go away** and **hide** – to go to a hiding place along the brook of **Cherith**. Cherith means *to cut off, to carve, to hollow out* – it's a great name for boot camp. At camp Cherith, Elijah will be completely alone and isolated, but this camp is all inclusive so to speak. While he is there, as the drought takes hold in the region, the brook will flow with fresh water, and as for food, God will provide a catering service – **ravens** will deliver bread and meat.

Okay, I have some questions. **Why ravens? Why these greedy scavenger birds which are considered unclean by God?** These are birds that will even neglect their own young. **Why didn't God send angels? How about manna from heaven?** That worked for an entire nation of people who were wandering in the wilderness. But no – ravens. **Can you imagine Elijah sitting there alone by the brook watching a flock of big black birds approaching him, swooping down with pieces of bread and meat hanging from their beaks?**

I was thinking about this – probably way too much, and the only other similar account I could think of was what occurred to Peter in **Acts 10**. If you recall, God was reaching out to a Roman centurion named Cornelius – a Gentile devoted to God, and as a reminder, Gentiles were considered unclean by the Jews – Jews just like the apostles – Jews like Peter. Well, Cornelius had a vision and, in his vision, he was told to find Peter. So, he sends servants some 30 miles to do just that. Then we are told beginning with **verse 9**,

*<sup>9</sup> On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. <sup>10</sup> But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; <sup>11</sup> and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, <sup>12</sup> and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air.*

*<sup>13</sup> A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." <sup>15</sup> Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.*

So, this was God's version of "pigs in a blanket" – something detestable to a Jew like Peter. What God was saying to him went totally against the grain, but this was all done to prepare Peter for a knock on his door – from unclean Gentiles who were seeking to know Jesus. Peter knew that God had changed the rules, Cornelius and his household would be saved by sharing the gospel to them, and the ministry of the apostles would now take the next step to include the Gentiles.

I think that when it comes to Elijah and these unclean ravens, in a similar way, God was preparing this Jewish man to take the next step – something we will come to see a little bit later.

Now, if you noticed, the ravens came twice a day – morning and evening to provide the food Elijah needed. They didn't bring food to last a whole week, instead they brought enough for the day. While Elijah camped where he was told to be, God provided what he needed on a day-to-day basis. So, it becomes apparent that Elijah's escape to the brook was more than for his protection – it was also for his preparation – moving Elijah from self-reliance to God dependence.

So, for maybe a year, maybe longer – and that's speculation on my part, in obedience to God, Elijah is camped by the brook during the drought, provided with water and food each and every day picked up by ravens and flown directly to him. He didn't have to look for other sources of water, and he didn't have to gather or hunt for food – it was "Door Dash" twice a day. God was faithful, Elijah was blessed, and relatively speaking – things are working out just fine.

Then we come to **verse 7** where Elijah learns, on a personal level, that the same God who provides water can also take it away.

**It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.**

Eventually, the drought grew worse, and Elijah would experience the results of his own prayer to withhold rain. The water that once flowed freely is now gone. The brook has dried up for him.

Okay – I'm going to put myself in Elijah's shoes for a moment. I'm going to react just like all of us would typically react when the brook dries up for us.

*"Now Lord, with all due respect, please hold on a minute. I know there is a drought in the land, I prayed for it, but now this is getting personal. **Why did that brook dry up for me?** You know I can't survive without water. I have been in*

*hiding – I’m a wanted man because I spoke to King Ahab just as You wanted. I brought the drought like You told me to do. Up to this point, I have done exactly as You have commanded, camping near this brook, and eating food from these unclean birds. As far as I can tell, I am in the center of Your will. Lord, I have been faithful to You – **how could You let this happen to me?**”*

**Sound familiar?** I think in some weird way, we have this idea that once our heavenly Father gives us a blessing – He can’t take it away – but the truth is – He can.

Sometimes the brook dries up, and for many, this is how you might describe last year because a dried-up brook can represent any number of things in our lives. Sometimes it’s our finances or our resources that dry up. Our careers, our opportunities, our ministries suffer a dry spell. Maybe it’s our health – or our relationships may run dry. Whatever the case, the brook dries up, something goes wrong, and we think – the God who gives us water has no right to take it away, and so we cry out, *“It’s not fair. God has abandoned me and left me out to dry. He doesn’t really love me.”*

**Is that the truth?** Of course not. The Bible says that God will never leave us nor forsake us. We are told our names are inscribed in the palm of His hand – so we are never forgotten by God. We are also told that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God will not forsake us, He cannot forget us, and He won’t ever stop loving us.

But the question still remains. **Why did the brook dry up?** Surely if God could send ravens with food, He could keep the water running. We are not told that Elijah did anything wrong to incur God’s disfavor. As far as we know, he was in the center of God’s will. God did not forsake him, did not forget him – loved him, and yet the brook dried up. **How could God let this happen?**

There could be any number of answers, but keeping this in context, let me offer a thought.

Elijah’s brook dried up not because God was angry or displeased with him, but just the opposite – God was on the move and Elijah was ready to join Him. God was at work, and for Elijah to join God in His work, Elijah could not stay where he was. The brook dried up because this was God’s way of closing one door and inviting

Elijah through another. *“God, my brook has dried up. This is serious and You got my undivided attention now. What do You want me to do, where do You want me to go?”*

We need to understand, that as part of God’s divine purpose and plan, sometimes the brook dries up because He has something else waiting for us down the road. God simply uses the dry brook as a vehicle – as motivation for change and to move us forward. *“Yes Elijah, I know you have been blessed by this brook, but it’s dried up because as part of My purpose and plan, I have a new opportunity for you to join Me somewhere else.”*

Charles Swindoll says, *“Dried-up streams don’t cancel out God’s plan. Often, they cause it to emerge.”*

Although God had now created the ideal environment for change, Elijah stayed put until He got a word from the Lord to go, and beginning with **verse 8**, he gets his marching orders.

**<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup>“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.”**

God tells Elijah to go to **Zarephath**, in the territory of **Sidon** along the Mediterranean coast of Phoenicia, and there he will meet a **widow** who will provide for him. At first glance, these marching orders by God may not seem like much, but there is more here than meets the eye.

First of all, Zarephath was some 90 miles way, and that’s a long and hard trek during drought and famine conditions. Secondly, God is sending Elijah to Jezebel’s old stomping ground. This is where she grew up, it’s her home, its enemy territory, and it lies at the heart of Baal worship.

Then, there’s the widow. Widows were usually the poorest of the poor, normally the first to run out of food during a time of drought and famine. Widows were typically dependent on the charity of others, **so how is she going to provide for him?** Oh, and one more thing. God is sending Elijah – a Jewish man, deep into Gentile country where he is to be provided for by a Gentile widow woman, and with that, God’s use of the unclean ravens now makes more sense. God used the ravens to prepare Elijah to serve and to be served by this Gentile.

Then beginning with **verse 10** we see how this all plays out. We are told,

**<sup>10</sup> So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, “Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink.” <sup>11</sup> As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.” <sup>12</sup> But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.” <sup>13</sup> Then Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. <sup>14</sup> For thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.’” <sup>15</sup> So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke through Elijah.**

So, Elijah made his way to Zarephath, and when he gets to the town gate, he sees this widow woman, probably wearing a black dress which widows wore, gathering some sticks. Elijah had no idea which widow woman God had set aside to provide for him, so Elijah tested this woman by asking her for a drink of water, and because she responded by going to get it, it led him to ask her for something else – a piece of bread as well.

The widow knew Elijah was a Jew, likely by his clothing – a follower of the living God, and she told Elijah she had no bread to give, only a handful of flour and a little oil to make one last piece of bread before she and her son eat it and die of starvation.

The situation must have been a little perplexing to Elijah. The Lord had said that He had commanded a widow to provide for him – but this starving widow can’t even feed herself and her son. **So, why did God choose her?** I think because she was a giver at heart. Yes, she had real needs and real problems, but when it mattered – she gave. Deep down inside, that’s who she was, and God could use her.

So Elijah, who had learned to trust God at camp by the brook, fed daily by ravens, invited the widow to trust God as well. He tells the woman to make a small cake of bread for him first, and then make one for her and her son – and he followed his request with a promise – **‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the**

**jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.'**

If I understand this passage correctly, God provided Elijah, the widow, and her son with what they needed on a day-to-day basis – something Elijah was prepared for at camp. God did not supply a barn full of grain and barrels of oil, instead, for each meal, God continued to replenish the small amount of grain and oil each time they were used during the drought, encouraging all of them not to focus on the grain and the oil, but rather to rely upon the God who gave them their daily bread.

This was a great miracle of God's provision through Elijah, and later he would bring the widow's dead son back to life, and after that, he would have his showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, but first – God had to prepare Elijah at camp and then dry up the brook. You see, God knew exactly what He was doing. It was all part of God's purpose and plan – all along.

Source Material:

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