Good morning,

In the 1930s the Southwestern United States experienced the most severe draught in our nation’s history. The lack of rain in conjunction with unwise farming practices led to massive dust storms. Some storms were so thick you couldn’t see more than three feet in front of your face.

This event, known as the Dust Bowl, is memorialized in John Steinbeck’s classic novel The Grapes of Wrath. During this ecological and financial disaster 500,000 people became homeless, and millions of people moved away from the affected areas. Droughts can bring immense suffering. One character in Steinbeck’s novel proclaims; “I’m jus’ pain covered with skin”

Droughts, literal or figurative, can also bring clarity. When everything is stripped away, we find out what is really important and what can truly sustain us. In our deepest moments of loss and need God often meets us in miraculous ways. Our story today is about a drought, but more than that, it is about a God who longs to provide for his people, if they will only turn to him.

I am so glad that you have joined us today as we begin our new series on the life of the prophet Elijah. There are no books of the Bible named after Elijah, but many consider him to be the most significant prophet in the Old Testament. On the Mount of Transfiguration, recorded in the Gospels, two Old Testament figures appear with Jesus – Moses, who represented the Law, and Elijah who represented the prophets. Elijah’s story is recorded in 1st and 2nd Kings.

Our passage today in 1 Kings 17 records events that occurred hundreds of years after the events in Exodus. God’s people, who had been wondering in the wilderness, reached the promised land, and eventually they became the nation of Israel. There were three kings that ruled over all of Israel; Saul, David, and Solomon. But after Solomon died, Israel was split into two Kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom.

In both kingdoms the people often chose to worship idols rather than the Lord. But even then, God did not abandon his people. He sent prophets to call them back to himself. One of these prophets was Elijah. When Elijah began his ministry, a king named Ahab was ruling the Northern Kingdom. Ahab was married to a Phoenician princess named Jezebel. Together they were a despicable duo. In 1 Kings 16:30 we read that; *“…Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him.”* Ahab was the worst king yet.

Under Jezebel’s influence, King Ahab led the people to worship a false god named Baal. People believed that Baal had power over the weather and fertility. In their mythology, Baal worshipers believed that Baal battled with another god every year and was cast down into the underworld. During the dry season, he lay dead. Every year he needed the help of yet another deity to resurrect so he could provide the spring rains. This background is essential for understanding the challenge that Elijah brings in our passage. Please following along as I read beginning in verse 1.

*17 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+kings+17&version=ESV#fen-ESV-9319a)*] in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” 2And the word of the Lord came to him: 3“Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” 5So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook* *Cherith that is east of the Jordan. 6And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. 7And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.*

There are two things we should notice right away. First, Elijah says the Lord God is alive, and second, that he promises there would be a drought. Both of these statements are a direct assault on the supposed power of Baal. If you remember from during our study of Exodus, the plagues that the Lord unleashed in Egypt were designed to reveal the powerlessness of specific Egyptian deities. Something similar is happening here. This drought is designed to show Baal’s impotence. He does not control the weather or fertility. He is powerless in the face of the Lord. The false god would “stay dead”, while the true God was alive.

So Elijah, an unknown man from an uncertain place, confronts King Ahab. Then the Lord leads Elijah away, probably in part for his protection. God leads him to a location where he would be provided for as the drought began. There at the brook Cherith the Lord did for Elijah what he longed to do for all his people, provide for them. If it was really God’s desire to provide for his people, why would he send a drought?

The truth is that God loves his people deeply enough that he won’t let them stay in the wrong place. Worshiping a god that doesn’t exist isn’t good for anyone. God wanted them to know the true source of life. We have a hard time changing when we are comfortable. Hardship does not always mean that there has been sin or rebellion, but God uses hardship to force positive change.

We should also know that what Elijah predicted was exactly what God had promised would occur. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Lord describes the blessings that would happen if his people kept his covenant and the curses that would happen if they did not keep his covenant. We read in Deuteronomy 28:23-24 what the results of unfaithfulness would be;*“And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. 24The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.”* Elijah merely declared the judgement that the Lord had promised. This should have been completely predictable for the Israelites.

In the New Testament, James uses Elijah as an example of the power of prayer. He says, *“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.”* The message here is that if Elijah was a normal dude, and God responded to his bold prayer, we can have hope that God will respond to our prayers. This is absolutely true. But we shouldn’t miss the fact that Elijah’s prayer was in sync with God’s promises. He knew how God had already decided to act. The closer we grow to the Lord, the more our prayers will reflect his heart and his plan.

During his time at the brook Elijah had breakfast and dinner provided by birds. Many of you know enjoy nature photography. I enjoy taking pictures of birds, but I am not sure I would want to eat something a raven brought me. Ravens are scavengers who eat dead animals. In fact, in the law of Moses they were considered unclean birds. And yet, curiously, these were the birds God chose to provide for Elijah’s needs.

As the draught worsened, eventually the stream dried up. Elijah’s retreat was over. God had a new mission for him. Let’s pick up our text again in verse 8:

*8Then the word of the Lord came to him, 9“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” 10So 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, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” 11And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12And she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” 13And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. 14For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’” 15And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. 16The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.*

Where is Zarephath? It was on the Mediterranean coastland between the two biggest cities in Phoenicia. Now, who did we say earlier was from Phoenicia? Jezebel, the Baal worshiping queen. This was the heart of Baal’s territory. And yet we find that the drought was apparently here as well. Baal was impotent in his homeland as well as in Israel!

But why would God send Elijah out of Israel? There may be a couple of reasons why. First, if the Lord was speaking through Elijah, and Elijah represented the presence of God, sending Elijah away was symbolic of God’s blessing departing from his people. They had chosen to reject the Lord and so the Lord was granting them their request. In Luke 4 Jesus refers to this story, and there he says that while there were many widows in the nation of Israel, God chose to send Elijah to a widow in another country. The point is that when God’s messengers are disrespected and unwanted God often sends them elsewhere.

But I also think there is a second reason God sent Elijah to Zarephath. It seems that he specifically wanted to show love and care to this woman and her son. This story shows us that the Lord’s compassion extends to more than just the people of Israel. And this was always God’s heart from the very beginning. When the Lord called Abraham, the forefather of Israel, to follow him, in Genesis 12:3 he said that through Abraham *“all the families of the earth [would] be blessed.”* Elijah’s visit to this widow is an example of God blessing the nations through his people. This gentile widow was important to God.

Elijah meets this woman as she is preparing for her last meal. He asks for water, and then for a loaf of bread. And though she had little, she did what she was asked. And the Lord did an incredible miracle for her and her household. In a miracle that recalls the daily provision of manna in the desert, the Lord gave the woman an endless supply of flour and oil.

I imagine that as I was reading this story some of you parents were wishing that God would give you some form of this miracle. Some of you have teenagers, and I am sure you would love to have a fridge that automatically refilled itself. I hosted two Chicago Eagles soccer players this past week, and those guys could really put the food away.

Did you notice that this woman’s act of faith preceded the miracle she experienced? She listened to Elijah, and God poured out his blessings. Think about what is happening here. A widow gives all she has to the Lord in faith. Can you think of any similar stories in Scripture? You may remember the story in Mark 12 where a widow gives her last two coins to the Lord. In that passage, Jesus commends her faith and says that she has given far more than those who gave large bags of money. In Scripture, God repeatedly uses the sacrificial faith of vulnerable women as a model for God’s people.

In the same way that God used ceremonially unclean birds to provide food for Elijah, he used a gentile woman to provide him food. These stories attack the idea of Israelite superiority. They also demonstrate God’s ability to make unclean things clean. This gentile widow displayed more trust and faithfulness than God’s chosen people did. She was someone the people of Israel could be like. God wanted his people to have faith like this widow did. How did the widow express faith? She trusted the Word of the Lord and gave all she had. But her story was not over, and soon tragedy struck. We pick up the story in verse 17;

*17After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18And she said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” 19And he said to her, “Give me your son.” And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. 20And he cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?”*

When we first met this widow, she was expecting to die. Then God miraculously provided for her. But now, the death she was expecting came to her son by surprise. She had trusted the Lord by giving up her final meal. But now, she wonders if God is doing some sort of bait and switch with her. She worries that she is being judged for her sin.

For a widow, in this time, the loss of a son was not only a reason to grieve. It was potentially a sentence of destitution for her. Economic opportunities for single women were minimal in those days, and her son could have supported her in her older years.

I know the parents here who have lost children can relate to the despair this woman must have felt. She had faced starvation earlier, but now she faced profound grief. She had a need that was deeper than her jar of flour or her jug of oil. All the food in the world could not lessen her anguish. She had a food provider, but what she really needed was a death defeater.

At times the Lord tells Elijah what he should do next, but in this instance, Elijah seems to be taken off guard. He grieves along with the woman and asks what the Lord is doing. And his grieving soon turns to pleading with the Lord. We continue in verse 21;

*21Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.” 22And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” 24And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”*

Elijah had twice responded to the Lord’s Words, and now the Lord responds to Elijah’s pleading. The Lord restores the life of the child. And finally, the widow knew that what Elijah said about God was true. Through Elijah God provided for her in the ways she needed it most. The widow’s needs were big, far too big for Baal. But while Baal stayed dead, the Lord returned life to a boy and gave hope to his mother. The widow discovered that there was only once source that could truly provide for her needs.

1 Kings 17 contains three stories about the Lord’s provision. They are wonderful stories. But what do they mean for us?

Most of us are not Baal worshipers, but we often trust in other things to provide for our needs. Some of us trust in our jobs or investments. Others of us trust in our physical abilities, youth, or attractiveness. We might also put our trust in people or relationships. Ultimately, anything we trust in besides the Lord will not provide us with what we need. Our idols will always fail us.

Like the widow, when we are pushed to our limits, we come to see that there is only one source that can satisfy our deepest needs. If you are in a drought, let it draw you closer to the source of life. But brothers and sisters, you do not need to wait till the rain stops to turn to the great provider. Trust him and hold everything else with an open hand.

I am sure we would love to have Elijah as our houseguest. Unfortunately, that is not an option. But Elijah has a successor who did come to live with us. He was born in Bethlehem, and they called him Emmanuel which means “God with us”.

The Lord’s provisions for Elijah were temporary. The stream dried up. The supply of oil and flour lasted only for a time. The widow’s son did not live forever. But what Elijah’s successor offers is better in every way. His provision is perfect. He offers *“living water”* that can forever sustain our thirst. (John 4:10) He says, *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger…”* (John 6:35). He announces; *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”* (John 11:25)

The ministry of Elijah gave God’s people a glimpse of the abundant provision that would one day be offered through Jesus. Not only would Jesus eternally supply the needs of his people. Not only would he forever defeat death. But he would also solve the problem of sin that plagued the conscience of the widow in our story. Through his death and resurrection Jesus made a way for her salvation and ours. Those who have received Jesus do not need to fear God’s wrath because Jesus has already taken that judgement on himself. His provision is perfect.

The Lord is our provider. Brothers and sisters, don’t put your faith in anyone or anything else.