

“Lessons By the Brook”

1 Kings 17:1-7

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Kings 17, and we will read verses 1-7 in just a minute. In his book, *The Great Bridge*, author and historian David McCullough tells the true account of all that went into the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. The bridge was a major project in its day, taking nearly 14 years to complete. Once it was finished, the bridge crossed the East River and connected Queens and Manhattan.

At the time of its construction, the Brooklyn Bridge was the world's foremost engineering marvel. The odds against the successful completion of the project seemed staggering as deadlines weren't met, lives were lost, and surges of public opinion constantly threatened the project. Its construction was started in 1869 and wasn't finished until 1883. Interest in the project was high, and New Yorkers were excited to see that the work had officially begun. Each day, curious citizens would make their way to the banks of the East River and wonder what was going on. The project required the construction of large caissons, which are hollowed out boxes under the water that are then pressurized to remove water so workers could descend to the bottom of the river and begin the slow and arduous task of removing sediment and bedrock. But three years into the project, New Yorkers were getting antsy and impatient, making the assumption that nothing was happening. To dispel this myth, the Chief Engineer of the project wrote in the newspaper:

“To anyone who thinks no work has been done on the New York tower simply because there's nothing to see above the water, consider this: during the past winter, we put as much concrete and masonry into the foundation below the

water as there is in the entire Brooklyn tower you can see above the water today.”

In other words, when people were assuming that work had come to a halt, the most important work was happening below the waterline where no one could see. The people saw one thing, but the Chief Engineer saw something else.

When the ‘Chief Engineer’ wants to do a real engineering marvel in a man’s life, He first works below the waterline. It is the work done beneath the surface in a person’s life that determines whether or not he or she will stand the test of time and challenge. God does His best work beneath the surface of our lives where no one else can see. Before He can ever work through my life, He first has to work in my life. How many of you know that what God does in you is of greater consequence than what He does through you?

We’re in a series on the life of Elijah, which we began last week. James 5:17 says Elijah was a man like us, someone with a nature like ours. Which is to say he is someone we can identify with. And the key to the greatness we see on display in his life wasn’t found in himself, but in God. His life is an illustration of surrender to God’s call. And though he was a choice servant of God, in no way does that mean his life was free from struggles. We witness Elijah standing boldly at times, and yet we also see him struggling to find his way through the fog of despair. But what God will do in the prophet is the secret of what God does through him. In the text that we’re going to read this morning, God will take Elijah to ‘school’ down by the brook of Kerith. (Read)

The people of Israel stood in special covenant relationship to God. They were to live under the authority of His Word. But when King Ahab came to the throne, he and Jezebel promoted Baal worship. Once we say that some part of our lives

doesn't need to come under the authority of God's Word, we set ourselves up for calamity. And it didn't take long for that calamity to come upon Israel. Elijah is sent to declare the Word of God to the king, and his message is found in verse 1, "As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!" Supposedly, Baal was the storm god in control of the weather. Therefore, the declaration by Elijah that there would be no rain was really a decree of judgment against the whole idolatrous system that Ahab and Jezebel had promoted.

Now, we might think that the logical thing would be to keep Elijah in Ahab's face, like a constant 'bur in the saddle' of sorts. Ahab needed a godly advisor, and none of the men he had surrounded himself with came close to the caliber of Elijah. Aside from him, there was no one else who had the courage to confront the king's idolatrous ways. And so to us, it would make sense to leave Elijah in a visible role. That might have been what we would do, but it isn't what the Lord does. Instead, God directs the prophet to a spot where he will go into hiding. He has some things that He wants to accomplish deep within Elijah's inner spiritual life, things that would prepare him for encounters that might be the undoing of a less-prepared man.

What are some of the lessons we learn from this season in Elijah's life as he in the 'school' of Kerith Brook?

1—God's HIDDEN seasons are not wasted seasons (17:1-3)

"Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, 'As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!' Then the Lord said to Elijah, 'Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River.'"

In verse 3, God tells Elijah to ‘hide’ by the brook. What are the reasons for that? One reason could involve protecting His prophet as the draught conditions deteriorate through the land. Elijah is going to become a wanted man. And yet I’m convinced that the reasons go beyond mere protection. Another reason involves God providing for His prophet, and that too is very true. But there is more involved than simply providing for Elijah’s needs. I think the key here is found in the word ‘hide.’ As God’s prophet, there’s a sense in which Elijah represents the Word of God to His people. Their sin had brought on the consequences of the drought. And yet there is a worse drought than an absence of rain, and that is an absence of revelation. Later, the prophet Amos says:

Amos 3:7—“For the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets.”

Amos 8:11—“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

God says that His people would run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they won’t find it. And so there is this sense in which Elijah represents God’s hidden Word. The worst drought is that the Word was no where to be found. And then beyond that is another reason which involves the preparation of God’s servant. The Lord has work for Elijah to accomplish, but he must first be formed in private. What are ‘hidden’ seasons in life? Well, think of them as:

Seasons of necessary preparation

These are times in which God’s work in our lives is largely unseen by others. The places where our character is being forged, the hidden tests in our lives where God is quietly forming us into what He wants us to be. God will prepare

us in private for what He plans to accomplish through us in public. It is His way of working below the waterline, where no eye can see but His.

In Scripture, ‘hidden’ seasons often come before significant usefulness. Think about how Moses spent 40 years in the desert of Midian before confronting Pharaoh. David spent years tending sheep and hiding in caves before becoming king. Joseph was a slave in Potiphar’s house and prison before he ever stood before Pharaoh. The apostle Paul spent time in Arabia before his wider missionary ministry. Even Jesus spent roughly 30 years in obscurity before His three and a half year public ministry. And Elijah will spend time at Kerith Brook before he stands on Mount Carmel. It might have looked like Elijah was being sidelined just when his ministry was beginning, but God was preparing him for what was ahead. Before there could be Carmel, there had to be Kerith. God is developing privately the man He would later use publicly.

“Kerith” —*comes from a Hebrew root word that means to cut away, to cut off; interesting that it is the same root used in the expression for making a covenant (Gen. 15:18)*

The same Hebrew word behind the name Kerith carries the idea of cutting. And Kerith becomes a place where God is cutting away Elijah’s self-reliance, teaching him complete dependence. We might say that God is cutting Elijah off from the things he might otherwise depend upon. He has just stood before Ahab and declared the truth, and now God removes him from the public scene. He is cut off from the palace, from public influence, and from ordinary means. Elijah is being brought to a place where God alone will be enough. This lesson of complete dependence is the same lesson that God has to teach anyone He uses. It is as if He is saying, “Elijah, I’m going to cut you down. I’m going to remove any strength you have in yourself so that you come to depend completely

upon Me.” There are things that He will remove in our lives to get this lesson across. There are times that God adds depth to your life by subtracting. He sometimes cuts something away from us before He can build something greater within us. Jesus said is this way:

John 15:1-2—“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

Pruning leads to greater productivity and fruitfulness. From a spiritual perspective, it is part of His discipline in our lives.

Hebrews 12:6—“For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.”

What we naturally may interpret as a loss, God may see as a necessary preparation. And so God is preparing Elijah in this season of his life. Then there is something else about these hidden seasons:

Seasons of tested obedience

Verse 3 is remarkably simple. God tells Elijah to leave and hide, and verse 5 says, “So Elijah did as the Lord told him.” Elijah wasn’t given the entire plan up front. He was simply given the next instruction, and so Elijah obeys the Lord.

Elijah is a man of action, but here by the brook at Kerith, Elijah will have to be patient and learn to wait. Of course, that is a word that none of us wants to hear. We don’t like to wait. It seems so unproductive. When we are on our way somewhere, we don’t want to be delayed. We don’t want to be hindered. When we want something, we want it now. All of us get impatient and irritable when we

have to wait for something. Spiritually, all of us will be faced with seasons of waiting for God's purposes to be realized.

Chuck Swindoll — *“So many times, however, you and I miss the opportunity to watch the Lord work in mighty and miraculous ways. Why? Because instead of standing still and watching Him pull off our deliverance, we seek out the [worldly] alternative. We look for the back door, the fleshly shortcut...In the weakest moments, we hear the tempter's voice to take matters into our own hands instead of staying with the Lord's plan and waiting for Him to work.”*

Hebrews 10:35-36 — **“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”**

“Endurance” — *word is ‘hupomone’ and means patience that continues; the characteristic of a person who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose by even the greatest trials*

It is the same word used in James 1:3 that says the testing of our faith produces ‘endurance.’ It describes an attitude that holds up when under pressure. In life, things almost never turn out the way we expect them to, especially at the first. Even in life's lowest and most difficult places, God is still at work to achieve His purpose in and through our lives. Obscurity is certainly not a pleasant place, but it can be a very productive place where we learn life's valuable lessons. It was for Elijah. And in a similar way, we too can prosper when we're hidden at Kerith, whatever form it may take. I'm thinking of those circumstances that confine us emotionally, spiritually, or situationally. And yet no matter the circumstance or form it might take in your life, these ‘hidden’ seasons are not wasted seasons. Then notice a second lesson:

2—God's PROVISION is always sufficient for our situation (17:4-6)

“Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.’ So Elijah did as the Lord told him and camped beside Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan River. The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank from the brook.”

A second lesson that Elijah will learn down by the brook is that God's provision is always sufficient for the situation we find ourselves in. Where God guides, He also provides. Where God directs, He also protects. I've heard it said that the will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you. God leads Elijah to the place where He will provide for his needs in a most unusual way. Notice a couple of things about the way God provides:

He provides what we need where we need it

Without any mention of objection or protest, verse 5 says that Elijah did as the Lord told him. The Lord sends him to this little brook here at Kerith where he makes camp. As the situation got dry throughout the land, God leads Elijah to a source of water. The text doesn't say this, but I have this idea that it could very well have been the last source of water for miles around. And it was a hidden fresh fountain, kept safe for the man of God in his hour of need. Now by the brook, God is teaching Elijah what spiritual dependence looks like. There is one major obstacle in Elijah's life that God will overcome before He uses him. And it might not be what you think it is. Can you guess what it is? Call it self-reliance, self-sufficiency, or self-effort.

Here at Kerith, Elijah is in a place of weakness. There's no self-reliance. And that's important because if dependence is the objective, weakness is an advantage. You can't be too weak for God to use, but you can be too strong, or

too self-reliant. His strength is made perfect in your weakness. God uses the weak, not the strong. And I suspect that this was a lesson that came hard to learn for a man like Elijah, a man's man who had always taken care of himself. God takes that away from him and puts him in a place where he now has to depend upon the gracious provision of God for the food he eats and the water he drinks. Elijah is placed in circumstances where he cannot sustain himself. He must simply receive what God graciously provides.

That is precisely the posture of faith required in the gospel. We have to come to Christ admitting that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot erase our guilt, produce our own righteousness, or earn acceptance with God. We abandon all confidence in ourselves and rest completely in what God has provided for us in Christ. As Paul says, we "put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3), but seek the righteousness that comes "through faith in Christ" (Phil. 3:9). The sinner cannot provide for himself to gain standing with God. Rather, he must receive God's sufficient provision in Christ. God has a Source of blessing for you and me in which all of our spiritual needs are met and our deepest desires are satisfied. Now, I don't want to allegorize this passage, but Jesus referred to Himself as our source of Living Water. Remember what He said to the woman at the well of Samaria:

John 4:13-14—“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

John 7:37-38—“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

1 Corinthians 10:4 says that the people of Israel, while they were in the wilderness, drank from the spiritual Rock which followed them—and the Rock was Christ! Friend, Jesus is our Source of provision and His grace is sufficient for us no matter where we find ourselves. Stop trusting in what you can provide for yourself and simply receive what God has provided for you. You cannot save yourself any more than Elijah could sustain himself here by the brook. What we cannot provide for ourselves, God has provided in His Son!

He provides what we need when we need it

God's provision is usually through unexpected means. In verse 4, notice God tells Elijah that He has commanded the ravens to bring him food. Verse 6 says the ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening. In other words, God sees to it that Elijah has what he needs when he needs it. He doesn't supply a week's worth, but only a meal's worth. Think of it like Door Dash, raven style. And He does it every morning and every evening.

This is reminiscent of the way that God provided for Israel in the wilderness after He brought them out of Egypt. He gave them manna in the morning and quail in the evening. The people of God ate bread once a day and meat once a day. But Elijah is given a double portion of daily bread and daily meat. To put in modern terms, he had pancakes and bacon for breakfast. And then he had two all-beef patties on a sesame seed bun for dinner. The point is that God is providing for Elijah's needs when he needs them. And it is a generous provision!

Matthew 6:11 — “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Faith trusts God with its needs. And God has promised to meet those needs in your life. That doesn't mean that we always get what we want, but we do have what we need.

Philippians 4:19—“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

I can imagine Elijah bowing in prayer to thank God for the provision brought by the ravens. Not some perfunctory prayer, but the kind that comes from a truly grateful heart. Gratitude is the antidote to self-sufficiency. That's because it acknowledges that what we have is received, not merely achieved. Self-sufficiency says, “Look what I have built, earned, accomplished, or provided.” Gratitude looks at those same things and says, “What do I have that I did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7). What if the only thing God gave us was what we asked Him for, and what if the only thing He let us keep was what we thanked Him for?

Behind our abilities, opportunities, resources, relationships, and even our next breath stands the gracious provision of God. It might not come from a raven, but God has given it nonetheless. Ultimately we are stewards, not sources. He is the Source! Every time those ravens arrived with a piece of bread, Elijah is reminded, “I'm not sustaining myself, but God is the One who is sustaining me.” Think back in your life at all the ways God has proven to be faithful over and over again. Hasn't His provision always been sufficient for your situation? There's a third lesson, and it is this:

3—God's DIRECTION doesn't have to make sense for it to be right (17:7)

“But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land.”

God has led Elijah to the place where He will meet all of his needs. What will happen when the very provision He gives suddenly dries up? Because that's what Elijah will face in verse 7. After a while, the brook which he drank from dried up because there was no rain in the land. Now, in my mind I can't help but

think that the prophet was beginning to get used to things here by the brook. Fresh water when he is thirsty, and bread and meat from the heavens when he is hungry. But as the days went by, perhaps he began to see that the brook wasn't flowing as much as it had been. And soon it was nothing more than a trickle until the day came when it dried up completely. God had led him to this place. Is the Lord about to abandon him now? Why would God have led Elijah to a brook that would eventually run dry? Because it is all part of God's classroom. We can infer a couple of things. For one, it shows us that:

Difficulty doesn't imply disobedience

Just because we experience hardships in the will of God is not an indication that we've missed His plan. Elijah is right where God told him to be, yet the brook still dried up. In a drought, it was bound to happen. The very drought that is brought on by Elijah's obedience to God's Word. We must not make the mistake of thinking that obedience to God is the means of a care-free, problem-free life. No, I think just the opposite is true. God does not spare His servants the pain of hardship. We sometimes think, "If this were God's will, surely it wouldn't be this hard." The Bible contradicts that assumption—Joseph had a prison, Moses had a wilderness, David had caves, Paul had a thorn, and Jesus had a cross. A difficult road is not always the wrong road!

I've counseled with couples over the years who encounter some difficulty in their marriage. And one of the first things that they're tempted to think is that they married the wrong person. Couples often go through seasons of conflict and pressure while still being committed to God. Maybe a thing like a 'drying brook' can tempt you to think, "Maybe I made a mistake." But difficulty is not evidence that the marriage was a mistake. Sometimes the difficulty is precisely where God teaches us sacrificial love, forgiveness, patience, and faithfulness. And the same

thing can be said about raising kids. A hard season doesn't mean that you've failed as a parent. The point is that difficult, dry seasons come and it does not mean that we're out of the will of God. Something else we see is that:

Disruption doesn't imply desertion

What purpose could there be for Elijah to watch the brook that had been his lifeline dry up a little bit more each day until it was gone? Though the brook dries up, God had not abandoned Elijah. Rather, the drying up of the brook was God's way of letting the prophet know it was time for him to move, for God had somewhere else in mind for him. One thing I have noticed in Scripture is that God rarely does the same thing in the same way twice. There are things that God does which are similar, but not in the exact same way. Our faith is not to be in His gifts, but in God Himself.

Graham Cooke — *“God is consistent, but He is also unpredictable. He is consistent in His nature. You always know where you are with God, but you seldom know what He is going to do next. You cannot find security in what God is doing. There is only security in who God is.”*

God is consistent in His character, but not predictable in His methods. That's why we must trust Him and follow Him one day at a time, one step at a time. Sometimes He will dry up the brook because He doesn't want us trusting in it— He wants us trusting in Him!

The people of Israel had been in a similar place. After they passed through the Red Sea, God led them into the desert where their faith would be tested. And they travel for three days without finding any water. When they finally come to a place where there is water, they discover that it is bitter and they're unable to drink it. So they complain against Moses, and he cries out to the Lord for help.

God showed him a tree which he was to then cast into the well so that the bitter water was made sweet. Sometimes, the will of God may lead us to bitter places and dried up brooks. But God's direction doesn't have to make sense to us for it to be right. Will we trust God in the midst of the struggle, will we panic when things don't go the way we thought, or will we complain? Listen to this:

Jeff Manion — *“As we pass through [life's wilderness], it is critical to recognize that not simply the hardship, but also our reaction to the hardship, is forming us. With each discomfort we experience, our responses both reveal the person we are and set the trajectory for the person we are becoming. Whether we age with grace and poise or become bitter, resentful people is largely determined by our response to disappointment and the habits of response that often result.”*

When a brook dries up in your life, how will you respond? Don't think that this is something that God only wanted to do for Elijah. Friend, it is something that He will do in your life and mine. Its been said that life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it. Our reactions to life's stuff is a gauge for our growth. And the depth of a person's maturity is often most on display when the brook dries up, so that it is a revealing place. It is easy to rejoice when we are in a place of comfort, but when all of the comforts that we are accustomed to are removed, we find out real quick where our strength is found. And so Kerith Brook is a place where need is met and faith is proven. It might have dried up, but the ultimate Source of Elijah's provision had not!

Psalm 121:1-2—**“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”**

We'll come to this next time, but God is going to lead Elijah to Zarephath and to a widow there whom the Lord will use to provide him with food and shelter. And

the interesting thing about Zarephath is that it is in the shadow of Sidon, near the Mediterranean coast. Which, if you'll remember from 16:31, is the very same city that Jezebel is from and of which her father is king. God is leading Elijah into the heart of enemy territory where He will provide for him and safely hide him until God says otherwise. Elijah is praying the will of God, obeying the word of God, and trusting the wisdom of God. His example shows us the necessity of:

- Obeying God's instruction, no matter what
- Trusting God's provision, no matter when
- Following God's direction, no matter where

God's not looking for super-human people with great talent to use on earth. He's looking for ordinary people who have unconditional surrender and unusual confidence in Him. Elijah reminds us that we can trust God when His direction doesn't make sense, when His provision seems unusual, and even when the brook we've relied on dries up. But our ultimate confidence isn't found in Elijah's faithfulness or in our own. It is found in Jesus Christ, who trusted and obeyed the Father perfectly as our representative. Christ followed the Father's will all the way to the cross, died for our disobedience, and rose again so that those who trust in Him can now walk by faith. When you cannot understand the pathway before you, look to Christ. Elijah's experience ultimately points us toward Christ, the perfectly obedient and dependent Servant of the Lord. How so? Well, think about it for a minute...

Elijah obeyed when God sent him into obscurity. So did Jesus, but infinitely more so. He left the Father's side, left the glory of heaven, took the form of a servant, and lived His earthly life in obscurity. He didn't come to be served, but to serve

and give His life a ransom for many. In His life and ministry, Jesus continually submitted Himself to the Father's will. He said this:

John 6:38—“I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me.”

Elijah lived in dependence upon God's provision. Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness, refused to turn stones into bread and declared in Matthew 4:4, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” What Elijah had to learn at Kerith, the Lord Jesus embodied perfectly throughout His life.

Elijah went where God sent him, even when the way seemed strange. Jesus went where the Father sent Him, even when it led Him to Calvary. Philippians 2:8 says He “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” For that reason, God has bestowed upon Him the name which is above every other name! And it is at the name of Jesus that every knee will one day bow, and every tongue will one day confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. And the greatest question is this one—Have you placed your faith in Him? Where are you placing your confidence? Go back through these lessons and apply them to your life:

- God's hidden seasons are not wasted seasons
- God's provision is always sufficient for our situation
- God's direction doesn't have to make sense to be right