

“Facing the Unforeseen”

1 Kings 17:18-24

Let's open up our Bibles this morning to the seventeenth chapter of 1 Kings.

We're in a study of the life of Elijah, a man who is described by James in the New Testament as being 'a man like us,' or a man with a nature like ours. And that means in spite of the ways he was used mightily by the Lord, Elijah was an ordinary man who had the same issues that we face in life. His life is very much a story of what it means to experience the 'ups and downs' of life. The text goes back and forth between what God is doing through Elijah and what God is doing in Elijah to prepare him for those things. It is certainly true that God works through us to accomplish His purposes, but He is also working in us. And He is far more concerned over what He does in me to shape me into the image of Christ. The way that He does this in Elijah's life is by leading him to places where he will become totally dependent upon God for his wellbeing, and by being stripped of self-sufficiency. It will be from a place of weakness that God's strength will be made perfect in his life. God does this same thing in our lives as well. Maybe we've experienced a setback of some kind, or a feeling of inadequacy in what we have or what we're supposed to do, or we're weakened by a sense of failure. Disappointments and frustrations like these are intended to teach us how to depend on God, so that we are not strong in ourselves, but are strong in Him. The psalmist wrote:

Psalm 84:5-7—“Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.”

The picture there is of pilgrims traveling toward Jerusalem, passing through difficult terrain. Instead of being defeated by the difficulties of the journey, they find renewed strength in God as they press on. The idea is not that God's people move from one success to another or that life progressively gets easier. Rather, God supplies the strength necessary for each stage of the journey. His provision for yesterday is the foundation for trusting Him today, even though today's circumstances demand a deeper dependence upon Him. We're able to see that truth beautifully illustrated in the life of Elijah. For instance:

- At Kerith, he learned to trust God's **provision**

God sent the ravens to feed him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank water from the brook. God was sustaining His prophet through unusual means.

- At Zarephath, he learned to trust God's **promises**

When the brook eventually dried up, God sent Elijah 100 miles to the northwest, to a Gentile village where he is led to a poor widow. God made a promise that her jar of flour and oil would not run out until the day the rains returned. And that brings us now to verse 18, where Elijah will learn yet another important lesson about what it means to trust God's **power**. (Read)

We're just a few days away from October, and those of you who are baseball fans know what that means. The playoffs are about to begin, and we're only a few weeks away from the World Series. I enjoy watching baseball, but something else I've noticed is that it has given us a lot of expressions that have made their way into our everyday conversations. Just consider a couple of examples. Whenever somebody surprises us, we say so-and-so 'threw us a curveball.' Or whenever someone does something with excellence, we say they

‘hit it out of the park.’ Or whenever they fail at something, we say they ‘struck out.’ But when something happens that we never saw coming, we say it came ‘out of left field.’ It is said that the expression can be traced back to 1919 and the way a particular ballpark in Massachusetts was built so that the left and right field of the park were at different lengths. The left fielder was farthest away from the infield, which made it difficult to communicate clearly with home plate. Over time, it came to refer to something that was unpredictable or unexpected.

That is a pretty good description of life at times. Have you ever experienced something that seemed to come ‘out of left field?’ Something that was unforeseen, unexpected, or out of the blue? And it is this uncertainty of the unforeseen that insurance companies thrive off of. We all know that tragedies and disasters strike, and we hope that they will never happen to us. But there is no way of preventing it or knowing it in advance. Part of Elijah’s story in 1 Kings 17 will now involve something that seems to come ‘out of left field.’ God has been providing for him in Zarephath where he has multiplied the widow’s flour and oil. The Word of the Lord had said that there would be sufficient provision for both Elijah, the widow, and her son until the Lord sent the rain. But then something happens that is unforeseen by Elijah as a disaster now strikes this little household in Zarephath. An empty barrel is one thing, but the empty bed of a beloved child is another. And we learn from this the truth that sometimes the greatest tests of our faith are unforeseen, they come when we least expect them, and they often shake our belief in what God has said. Yet we will see that His promises still stand and His faithfulness is unchanging, even when it may not appear that way initially.

1—A situation that seems HOPELESS (17:17-18)

“After 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.”

Notice how verse 17 begins with the words, ‘After this.’ In other words, after the things which have already happened thus far in Elijah’s life. In verse 1, he has stood before the king and declared that it would not rain until he gives the say so. In verses 2-7, he has spent time by the brook at Kerith where God provided for his needs and deepened his reliance. From there, verses 8-16 tells us how the Lord led him to Zarephath and to the home of a widow and her only son, for whom God miraculously provided flour and oil even though the jar was a scoop away from empty. And so it is after these things that Elijah will be faced with yet another difficult situation.

The death of an only son

Verse 17 says that it was after these things that the son of the woman became sick with a severe illness. It wasn’t an illness from which the child would recover. But so severe is this illness “that there was no breath left in him,” which is to say that the child died. Which means the widow is facing a situation that no parent would ever want to experience. It is evident that she is no stranger to suffering, for she is a widow. At some point, she had experience the loss of her husband. And now she experiences the unforeseen loss of her only child. It is a reminder to us of the frailty of human existence. We’re all subject to sickness and death. We all run the race of our lives knowing that death is waiting for us at the finish line. Even the strongest of men are but mere mortals. And a lot of people spend their entire lives running from this inescapable fact. Listen to what the wisest man who ever lived wrote:

Ecclesiastes 7:2 (NLT)—“Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—so the living should take this to heart.”

In other words, when death stares us in the face, we ought to take a good long look. Our own mortality as well as the mortality of those we love is something we ought to take to heart. Hold onto the people in your life, but not too tightly, lest your world comes crashing down when they're gone.

The distress of a grieving mother

When death visits our lives in an unforeseen, unexpected way, it stops us in our tracks and forces us to grapple with the brevity of life. We grieve sudden loss. We're often left in shock, and we have these questions for which there are no answers. You see that in the way the widow is grieving the loss of her child. She is in the depths of anguish. Her distress is seen in verse 18, “And 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!’” She's not only filled with grief, but she is also filled with resentment. She had accepted the fact of their looming death when the jar was a scoop away from empty. But then Elijah showed up, and with him the provision of God and the promise that they would always have enough. But then illness and sudden death comes to the boy, right out of left field. Things had gone from bad, to good, and now to worse so that her world is falling apart. And so she blames the man of God, and then she blames herself.

Philip Graham Ryken—*“The woman’s spiritual condition was one of ‘disbelief’ rather than ‘unbelief.’ An unbeliever is someone who has not yet put his or her faith in God. The widow was not an unbeliever in this sense. She had received the miraculous grace of God. Even though she was down to her last meal, and*

even though she was an alien to the family of God, God sent His prophet to save her from starvation. The widow had enough faith in God to trust His word and to give Elijah the main course of her last meal, trusting that God would provide her daily bread. Yet the troubles of life had made a disbeliever out of the widow. In particular, she was in disbelief about the goodness of God. She knew something of God's grace; she had learned to trust Him for her daily bread. However, she did not have the spiritual resources to cope with the death of her son. She was filled not only with grief, but also with resentment. When he died she found that she had little faith, or none at all. She had faith enough for the good times, but not the bad times—for life, but not for death.”

And it is understandable because the widow has now lost everything. She has lost her closest companion in life, her only family member in the world, and security for her future. A.W. Pink says of the child, “In him all her affections were centered, and with his death all her hopes were destroyed.” Sometimes, grief speaks before faith has an opportunity to collect its thoughts. The widow’s words in verse 18 come from the grieving heart of a mother who has been shattered by loss. She essentially says, “Why would God do this to me?” Maybe you’ve asked the same question.

After losing his wife to cancer, C.S. Lewis experienced a crisis of grief that shook him to the core. He would write about his experience in the book, “*A Grief Observed*.” He had written other books in which he defended the Christian faith and offered compelling arguments for the goodness of God. But when suffering entered his own home, he found that understanding it intellectually was vastly different from experiencing it personally. His faith had been shaken. But in time, it was also profoundly deepened. He wrote:

“God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn’t. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down.”

The same thing will happen in the widow’s life. Though her eyes are filled with tears and her words are filled with grief, Elijah doesn’t try to offer her an explanation. He does not say, “I guess God just needed another little angel!” Don’t say that to someone who is grieving, by the way. He does not attempt to give her a theological lecture. He responds with tenderness and says, “Give me your son.”

How do you respond when the ‘unforeseen’ happens? You know what I’m referring to, don’t you? I’m talking about the things that happen in our lives which come out of nowhere, the things that you really have no way of predicting. Some of the most difficult things we experience in life are not so much those troubles which we saw coming, but the ones that come ‘after this,’ troubles that suddenly show up when we thought everything was fine. You soon find yourself in a situation that seems hopeless. Something else we see is:

2—A servant that feels HELPLESS (17:19-21)

“And 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. And 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?’ Then 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.”

If ever there had been a moment when Elijah felt helpless, it is here standing over the lifeless body of the widow's son. She is in distress, she blames Elijah for the circumstances that have led to this, then she blames herself and sees it as some form of punishment for her sins. Elijah doesn't try to defend himself, nor does he try to offer her an explanation for what has happened. What does he do?

His response

In verse 19, he simply says to her, "Give me your son." He takes the boy in his arms, carries him to the upper chamber where he lays him on the bed, and he cries out to the Lord. It is a prayer of desperation on Elijah's part, one in which he wrestles with why God had allowed the calamity in their lives. And he prays in verse 20, "O Lord my God, have You brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn by killing her son?" His words are in the form of a question. And it reveals that he doesn't understand God's purposes any more than the widow. Earlier, when Elijah had prayed to God to withhold the rain from Israel, his petition is based upon the promise of God. This time, however, he doesn't have a particular promise to rely on. He is praying in faith and on the basis of what he knows to be true of God. The point is that he taking his problems and confusion to God in prayer. And prayer is the great privilege of the believer.

Crisis is the fuel of prayer. I can't help but wonder if God allows crisis in our lives for no other reason than to bring us closer to Himself. Spurgeon once said, "I've learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages." Think about that. Nobody enjoys the waves. Nobody welcomes the storm. But sometimes, the very thing that threatens to drown us becomes the means by which we discover that God is our only refuge. Try to imagine what Elijah is feeling in this moment. Things seemed to be going well. God has provided for his needs

through unusual ways. Blessings had come to the widow's home. But now the situation is different. Her son has died, and she lays the responsibility at the preacher's feet. He only had a congregation of two, and now it's down to one and the other half is attacking his ministry!

Elijah does not try to defend himself. He does not attempt to offer her an explanation. He responds to her grief with a tender, compassionate word. He does what anyone should do when unexpected grief comes our way—he enters into his prayer closet and takes the problem to the Lord. Elijah is a man who prioritizes prayer.

His request

Verse 21 says, “Then 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.’” Notice Elijah says ‘O Lord my God’ two times in these verses. It is an expression of his faith. This same phrase was the meaning of his name, for Elijah means ‘the Lord is my God.’ Keep in mind what the book of James says about Elijah’s prayer life:

James 5:16-18—“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”

Elijah is an example that illustrates the power of prayer in the life of a believer. Not for some super-saint, not for an extraordinary Christian man or woman, but for an ordinary person like me and you. Elijah has something to teach us about the importance of prayer. And let me tell you how:

First, he reminds us that prayer is powerful because of the One who hears it. The implication of James 5:16 is not that prayer has inherent power all by itself, but that it makes its appeal to the God who has all power. Here, we see Elijah pouring out his heart to God, asking that He let the child's life come into him again. Elijah is praying for a miracle as he asks God to do the impossible. It is the prayer of faith.

Second, he shows us how effective prayer doesn't depend on the greatness of the person doing the praying, but upon the greatness of the One to whom we pray! In other words, prayer is available to ordinary people like you and me. It is not simply for the pastor or the church leader, but it is for a busy mom. It is for the man who works with his hands for a living. It is for a high school student, the teacher, the senior citizen, and for the unemployed. Prayer is the privilege of all who know the Lord. The same God who Elijah called on is the same God who invites ordinary believers like us to boldly approach Him.

A third thing that Elijah teaches us about prayer is that we ought to be earnest and persistent when we pray. James says that Elijah prayed 'fervently.' The idea is emphatic. He didn't just approach prayer like some religious formality. It wasn't a magic formula or a few rehearsed words. Elijah prayed fervently and persistently. We see that in verse 21 which says he stretches himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." An older generation of Christianity called this praying with 'importunity.' Think of it as a 'holy boldness.' It is the persistent act of repeatedly asking for something in an urgent way. Have your children ever done that to you? Mom...mom...mom...And you say, "What!?" That's importunity. The word suggests pressing a request with such determination that we refuse to be easily turned away. Jesus taught His disciples to pray this way:

Luke 11:5-10—“And He said to them, ‘Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him;’ and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything?’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

Jesus said this is how we ought to pray. Not because God is reluctant to hear, but because asking is reflective of our faith. It expresses unwavering confidence that God alone can provide what we desperately need. When is the last time you prayed for something with ‘importunity?’ We’re all too quick to cease praying for something because we don’t get an immediate answer. We assume the answer is ‘no.’ The answer you received to your prayer may cause you to think that God did not take your prayer seriously. But could it be that the answer you received to your prayer indicates that God thinks you didn’t take the prayer seriously? Elijah prays, and he prays in desperation and with persistence. A final thing that I want you to see is that Elijah’s prayer is directed to:

3—A Savior whose power is LIMITLESS (17:22-24)

“And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And 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.' And 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.'

The situation seemed to be hopeless, and Elijah no doubt felt helpless. But in faith he turned to One whose power is limitless. So that verse 22 says, “And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah.” Isn’t that an astonishing thing? That the God who spoke the universe into existence, the God who exercises sovereignty over every molecule and galaxy, the God who keeps the planets in their orbit would listen to the voice of a man. The psalmist expressed it this way:

Psalm 8:3-4—“When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him?”

The wonder of prayer is not that we can speak to God, but that He would graciously listen to us! Elijah could not do anything for the child or his mother, but he knew the One who could. Confidence in prayer doesn’t rest in the size of our faith or the eloquence of our petitions, but in the power of God. He does a miracle in response to Elijah’s praying. Notice a couple of things:

The son’s resurrection

Verse 22 says, “And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.” What happens here is a miracle, and it is the first resurrection in the Bible. We’ve already seen the power of God on display in Elijah’s story, haven’t we? God’s provision in the time of famine came by way of ravens. He multiplied the flour and the oil. And now, God will raise the widow’s son to life again. This same power is on display in the next chapter as God will send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. Elijah passes the mantle to his successor, Elisha, who asks for a double portion of his spirit. And God answered

that prayer by accomplishing twice as many miracles through Elisha as He did through Elijah. Now, I think we have this idea that miracles common in the Bible. But in general, miracles in Scripture occurred during three main periods of time. So that when we look at it historically, miracles are recorded in the ministries of:

- Moses and Joshua
- Elijah and Elisha
- Jesus and the Apostles

That's why it is not a coincidence that Moses and Elijah are on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus in Matthew 17. Moses is there as representative of the Law, and Elijah is there as representative of the Prophets. And the reason is to bear witness to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. So this resurrection miracle in Zarephath verifies the truth of Elijah's message. The resurrection of the widow's son is a testimony to the power of Elijah's God.

The widow's recognition

Verse 23 says that Elijah brings the child to his mother and said to her, "See, your son lives." And the woman said to him, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The God of Elijah has power over death, and the proof is the resurrection of her son. It was indisputable proof, undeniable proof. And she makes the declaration that the Word of the Lord is the truth, validated by the power of resurrection. Her faith is grounded in the factuality of the son's resurrection.

When you face a situation that seems hopeless, and you're a servant who feels helpless, trust in a Savior whose power is limitless. And the proof of that power is His resurrection! Jesus is the Son of God who gave His life for our salvation.

The widow thought her son had died because of her sins, but the Son of God came to die for my sins. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that the One who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Before I finish, I want to direct your attention to a verse that you need to remember, especially when you are faced with the unforeseen—Psalm 115:3.

The psalmist says:

Psalm 115:1-3—“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory, for the sake of Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness! Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases.”

God is in Heaven, and He does all that He pleases. Who am I to question Him? I may not understand why things in life happen the way they do, but I don’t have to understand. I’m not God. I’m not infinite. I’m not all-knowing. But what I can know is that He is good, He is sovereign, and has my interests in mind. And what may be unforeseen to me isn’t unforeseen to Him. He says:

Isaiah 46:9-10—“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose.’”

Faith is not believing anything you want to be true, but is believing the promises of God. Do you know the promises of God well enough to believe them? We don’t live on the basis of explanations, but on the basis of promises. God doesn’t owe me an explanation for why unforeseen things happen the way that they do in life. But He has given me the promise that He is working all things together for my good and for His glory. And friends, the ultimate proof of that promise is the

empty tomb of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is what ought to make you and me bold in prayer. If the God who raised His Son from the dead is for me, than who can be against me? That is Paul's logic in the book of Romans. He says:

Romans 8:31-39—“When then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the One who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For Your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing that we will ever experience in life—no matter how unexpected or unforeseen—can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. When we ask the same question as the widow, “God, what do You have against me?” We know the cross and the empty tomb forever answers that question. Let's pray.