



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina  
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## Our Obedience, God's Provision 1 Kings 17:1-16

In the Old Testament, Elijah, the prophet of the LORD, towers over the religious ruins of the northern kingdom of Israel like a rugged mountain rising out of a barren desert plain. Even after nearly 3,000 years, he still looms larger than life! His fiery faith and zealous resolve still move us, calling for a deeper commitment to our living Lord who alone is God.

Time and again Elijah stood, often alone, as the LORD's prophet to show His people Israel that it was the LORD and not Baal who was the true and living God.

We can learn a lot from this great prophet as we walk together as disciples of Jesus Christ. There really are a lot of similarities between our situation in contemporary American culture and Elijah's in his day and culture. Just as the worship of Baal compromised Israel's commitment to the LORD, there are many idols that clamor for our attention today and try to draw us away from following Jesus Christ as Lord. Just as Jesus would later do, Elijah called for an exclusive commitment and absolute loyalty to God, no matter what.

So today, we're beginning a series of four sermons on *Elijah, the Prophet of the LORD*, looking at several key events in his life and ministry. We start today with a text that tells us how God cared for Elijah and for the widow who provided for him—a text that teaches us about the relationship between *our obedience and God's provision*.

### *Elijah's story*

Elijah's story begins abruptly in 1 Kings during the reign of the evil King Ahab and his Baal-worshipping wife Jezebel over the northern kingdom of Israel. Elijah declared that there would be a severe drought for several years, with neither dew nor rain, except at his word.

Then at the word of the LORD, Elijah went into hiding, going beyond the Jordan River to the Cherith Ravine, where there was a wadi—a streambed that had a brook running through it that often dried up in the dry season, but could become a raging torrent during the rainy season. It wasn't far from Tishbe, where he had come from. The LORD told Elijah that He would provide for him there. The wadi would supply him water, and the ravens would bring him food. And so it was. **The ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and evening and he drank from the brook** (17:6).<sup>1</sup>

But with the ongoing drought, in time the wadi did indeed dry up. So the LORD sent Elijah into Gentile territory, to the town of Zarephath in Sidon, telling him that He had commanded a widow there to provide food for him. So Elijah obeyed and went to Zarephath.

Now understand that in that day, a widow with no adult son to care for her was likely to be

unable to provide for herself, much less anybody else. But Elijah took God at His word and went. When he got there, he saw a widow gathering sticks. He asked for a little water to drink. Never mind the water shortage the drought was causing; she went to get him some. Then he called out to her and asked her to bring him a piece of bread as well.

The woman turned around and told Elijah that just as surely as the LORD lives, she didn't have any bread, "**only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar.**" In fact, she was gathering firewood when he saw her to cook one last meal. Then she and her young son would die.

Now you'd think that would have been the end of it. But Elijah told her,

**"Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.'"**

Now here's the amazing thing—she believed him and did it! And God provided just as He said He would! Every day there was food, because miraculously, the flour bin was never empty and the oil jar never ran dry!

It's an amazing story, isn't it? *Elijah and the widow obeyed God in troubled times, and God provided for their needs.*

### ***Responding in obedience***

Elijah was taking a stand for the LORD as His prophet. He knew that it could cost him his life. Under Jezebel's influence, Ahab had turned Israel from the LORD to go after Baal, the sky god who supposedly controlled the rain and the fertility of the land. But Elijah was willing to obey the LORD no matter what in order to show the people that it was really the LORD who was in control of the weather and the harvest. So there would be rain or dew only at the word of the LORD's prophet!

Elijah also obeyed God by going to his own homeland, trusting the LORD to provide for him. But it was an even bigger step of obedience when he did as the LORD instructed and went to the widow in Zarephath. You see, Zarephath was in Sidon—*Jezebel's homeland!*

While our circumstances are different, doesn't God call for this same kind of trust and obedience from us today, this same kind of loyalty to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior?

In our world, people have turned away from Christ—even many who profess Him as Lord—to follow the idols of materialism, or the cults, or the cut-and-paste non-descript but primarily pagan spirituality known as the New Age movement, or a narcissistic lifestyle and philosophy where everything is about the self. Just as He did with Elijah, God calls us to take a stand with our lips and our lives, calling for and living out a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Now that's certainly not popular, and it can be costly in terms of our priorities, our friendships, our finances, and maybe even other areas as well. But isn't that what it means to have *no other gods* before Him, and to love Him with *all* of our heart and soul and mind and strength? *We must obey God faithfully—period!*

But you know, Elijah wasn't the only one in this story who faithfully obeyed God. The widow at Zarephath did too! And it was costly for her. She had to give up the last little bit of flour and oil she was about to use make a last meal for her son and herself. When Elijah gave God's promise, she was willing to take God at His word and obeyed Him. She gave food to the

LORD's prophet *first!* She made a *sacrifice*, a very *costly* sacrifice to obey God.

Obedience can indeed be costly for the Christian. God may be calling you to something that will be costly in terms of time or effort or finances. And you're looking at it and saying, "How in the world can I do this?"

### ***Obedience and provision***

This story shows us the way. *When we obey God faithfully, we can trust Him to provide for our needs.* When we're really seeking to follow Jesus, He supplies us with everything we need to do His will. Sometimes He does this in dramatic, even miraculous ways, like the ravens feeding Elijah or the widow's flour and oil never running out.

It's important for us to realize just how difficult a situation both Elijah and this widow were in. Elijah was *in hiding*. Later on in his story we learn that King Ahab was searching *everywhere* trying to find him. He was living in the midst of a drought he had called for—had there been popularity polls back then, his numbers would have been at an all-time low. This poor widow was struggling through the drought as best she could, and was down to her last meal!

It's simply human nature to want to avoid difficult circumstances. And sometimes God chooses to deliver us from them. But most often He leads us through them rather than around them. And when we faithfully obey Him, *God will provide for us even in our most difficult circumstances.*

This is what Jesus was talking about in our Gospel Lesson for today, Luke 12:22-34. As He told the crowd to trust God for food and clothing rather than making those things the aim of our lives like the pagans do, He said, "**But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.**" When we seek God's kingdom, making His rule and reign our priority, He will provide our needs *and* will gladly give us His kingdom!

Now He doesn't promise abundance, but enough, not a surplus, but a supply. Sometimes He does give us a surplus, and sometimes it's as it was with the widow—the containers never run over, they just never run out.

We may never get rich and our coffers may never overflow. Our faith may be weak and our strength almost gone. But when we take God at His word and live in faithful obedience to Him, He will provide all we need—faith, strength, resources, support—*everything* we need to do His will. Though there may never be an abundance, there'll always be *enough!* That's true for us as individual followers of Christ *and* for us as His church, the body of Christ! When we're striving to obey Him faithfully, we can trust Him to provide whatever we need to do so!

Just before I was called to my first little pastorate, Jo Ann and I experienced what was for us a major financial crisis. It was just before Christmas, and we'd been married just over a year.

We were trying to do what we believed God wanted us to do. Even before we were married, we had both been and still were committed to tithing—giving to the LORD through His church *at least a tenth* of what we earned.

We weren't sure what we were going to do. But God was already at work. As I said, it was just before Christmas. I received a \$100 bonus at work, and was grateful. I had been the supply preacher for a couple of months at the little church that a few weeks later would call me as their pastor, and they gave me a Christmas gift—a check for \$100. Throughout the summer and fall, our little home church had been without a pastor, and another young man and I had preached there several times. To show their appreciation, the church gave us both a Christmas gift—\$100. Here, unexpectedly, Jo Ann and I had received \$300, a significant windfall for a newlywed

couple in 1979! And then on Christmas Day, when my side of the family gathered at my brother's house, my grandmother handed out gift envelopes to all the grandchildren. I opened it up, and there it was—a crisp, brand-new \$100 bill!

There have been many times through the years when things were very tight, especially when we were serving small churches and one or the other or both of us were in school. But God *always* provided. When my faith has sometimes wavered, I've often looked back on that \$400 Christmas to remind myself that God will provide.

Do you remember the story in Genesis 22 when God tested Abraham, asking him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering? Isaac was the son God had promised Abraham and Sarah and had given to them when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. And now God was telling Abraham to sacrifice him.

As Abraham and Isaac made their way up Mount Moriah, Isaac had no idea he was himself the sacrifice they were about to offer. So he asked Abraham, **“Look, the fire and the wood, but where *is* the lamb for a burnt offering?”** Abraham replied, **“My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering”** (vv. 7-8).

And God did. In that powerful foreshadowing of what God would do in Christ on the cross, when they got to the top of the mountain, Abraham prepared everything. Then he bound his son and laid him on the altar, ready to obey God, no matter what it cost him. And as he raised the knife to slay and offer his beloved son, God stopped him and said, **“. . . now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”** Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. He offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son Isaac.

And do you know what he named that place, that place where he was willing to obey God, even if it meant sacrificing this son he and Sarah had longed for and waited for so long?

“The LORD Will Provide.”

Indeed, He will!

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture taken from the New King James Version.