

## THE LIFE OF ELIJAH PT.2 5-23-10

### *The Provider God*

(I Kings 17) Last Sunday we and King Ahab, met Elijah the Tishbite, a man of boldness and

prayer. This time we read more of the story of what God did with him and for him and by him. **1-16**

*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 2 The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 3 "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 "It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." 5 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. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. 7 It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. 8 ¶ Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." 10 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." 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." 12 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." 13 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. 14 "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. 15 So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days 16 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.*

Before we get to our main point today I want to go down a short side road and talk about dieting.

Now, there is a subject of popular interest. Diets, of course, are for people who are thick and tired of it. At any given point about a third of you would regard yourself as being on a "diet." It is something you do religiously, meaning that you eat what you want and then pray you don't gain weight. But, you know, there are all kinds of diets out there to be on. For some of you a balanced diet means you have a cookie in each hand, but others are on a more serious diet plan. Some will go to great lengths to change their width. There is the Save Your Life diet, the Dr. Phil diet, the South Beach diet, the Atkins diet, the grapefruit rind diet, and the total tapeworm diet. Get this, I am actually on two diets right now. I wasn't getting enough to eat on just one. Well, for a few minutes today I want to introduce you to the Elijah diet, a diet by which you are sure to profit. Get it? Profit? That was another joke - wake up out there. There are two versions of the Elijah diet. One allows you to eat bread and meat twice a day. The other form of the Elijah diet allows you to eat

only what is brought to you by wild animals. This latter version is proven to be more effective at weight reduction but the bread and meat approach offers greater long-range benefits. I would point out that when Elijah was sent away to live by the brook God provided his meals twice daily. Two meals a day, not three, seems to be the biblical norm. When I was in college and working on my own life disciplines I made the decision to not eat first thing in the morning and to wait to have an early lunch. I made the move from three meals a day to two, only to find out later that this was the Elijah plan. Nowadays however, I am being told to eat 5-6 times a day. God only knows what they will be telling us in a few years. But, on the Elijah diet you eat twice a day.

Secondly, on this diet you eat two things: bread and meat – the two basic food groups, right men? Some of you will be delighted to find that there are no vegetables on this diet. Some of you will be perplexed - so let me speak to you vegetarians among us. There are two types of vegetarians: those who think it is morally wrong to eat the flesh of other animals, and those who think it is not healthy to do so. And, as you may know, some vegetarians are quite devout in their convictions. My former pastor, Jimmy Young, once invited a college-age girl to our youth group and she felt led to warn him that she was a vegetarian. Jimmy said, "that's okay, we're an interdenominational group." Maybe you've met vegetarians who see it like a religion. But if you want to be a Biblical Christian we must recognize that there is nothing unethical about our carnivorous habits. God said to Noah in Genesis 9:**3** *Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant.* Now as for it being unhealthy - too much of anything may be bad but I am hard-pressed to believe that God would knowingly pollute the system of his servant by sending him food that was bad for his health. Remember, God invented the Elijah diet. Meat and bread must be okay although I suppose we could argue about free-range and processing and all those other issues that keep us up at night.

There is one more thing to note about the Elijah diet. On it you eat twice a day, you eat meat and bread, and thirdly you eat simply.(R) No jelly doughnuts and casseroles and turtle cheesecake. Simple meat and bread and the indication is that when he went to live with the widow Elijah did without the meat. Now to a modern American who can choose every day between 1000 different menu items this would be a real change. This would be different and the lesson here is contentment with simple fare. Fine dining within a reasonable budget is just fine but don't let yourself get spoiled, and watch out that you don't complain to God about what's on your plate. Did you hear that kids? I said, don't complain about what you are having for supper - odds are it beat what Elijah got both in quality and quantity. I Timothy 6:**8** *If we have food and covering, with these we shall*

*be content.* You parents speak to your kids about this - and speak to yourself. I heard Elizabeth Elliot talk about sitting in a hut in South America where she was served some soup that had a small claw floating in it. At times like that you have to ask yourself if you are ready to die for Jesus. Elliot said that what got her thru some of her missionary meals was the old line that said, "*where He leads me I will follow, what he feeds me I will swallow.*" Elijah had to learn that and its good for us to be content as well with the provisions we have no matter how plain.

Alright, some of that, you know was tongue-in-cheek. Some of it solid biblical meat. Now let's get to the heart of our meditations today. Let's learn from Elijah's story about the God who provides. As I said last week, God sent his prophet on a spiritual growth retreat. He wasn't going to hear any sermons. He wasn't going to attend seminary, but he was going to learn about being dependent. There are some things that are hard to learn thru a book and dependence is one of them. But this is an oh-so-vital lesson for the servant of God to learn. And although I say you cannot learn it in a seminary class many have learned it by going to seminary because a required course in the seminary experience for many is Poverty 101. Many there are who have laid aside lucrative careers to pursue God's call and they have had to learn dependence upon the Lord and the Lord's people in a way that others have not. Some people find that very hard to do. They think if you depend on others you are a moocher. Well then Jesus was a moocher. Elijah was a moocher. He mooched off the ravens; he mooched off the widow. He didn't even have enough class to mooch off the wealthy did he? He took from the poor birds and a poor widow. Many are too proud to do this kind of thing and proud is the right word for it. It is pride, sinful, self-exalting vanity that tells us we are above this kind of dependence. There are certain personality types that are too quick to let others serve them and pay for them and provide for them but there are some of you who err on the other side. Oh, you like to give to others; you like to do for others but can't stand to have people give to you and serve you. That is not a Christian attitude. Jesus let folks serve him and give to him. And it takes a certain grace to receive and be thankful and be dependent. Jesus called us to be child-like didn't he? Partly that means being dependent. It's humbling to be on the receiving end of grace isn't it? You bet it is and that's hard on the ego - but that is how we are saved, right? Salvation means we are humbled by the Lord enough to say "I can't make it on my own, Lord I need your help, I need your grace." Dependence is a root value of the Christian experience.

Now some would say, "Oh yes, I want to be dependent on God but not on people." Do you see how that is, in a way, a false dichotomy? God provides for us, but he normally uses instruments. He uses parents, and teachers and employers and even birds. It is true that I am dependent on you for

my livelihood. You quit giving to this church and I'm in trouble. I'm dependent on you, but in the ultimate sense I am dependent, all of us are dependent on God. That was true of Elijah. In the ultimate sense Elijah was trusting God not the ravens, God not the brook, God not the widow. God alone deserves our trust. Are you trusting **Him** to meet your needs? Are you really? Or are you trusting your skills? Are you trusting the economy? A few years back I had a memorable conversation with Jimmy Young, whom I mentioned earlier. It was about his daughter's wedding. I asked him what Gracie's new husband did and he said the young man managed a foundation. Managed a foundation?! How does a new grad from college get a job like that? Turns out it was his family's foundation and it was obvious to me that Jimmy didn't like this. He explained that his daughter married a wonderful guy, but a guy who inherited some major money. Now most of us would not mind at all if your daughter married a wealthy man. My dad liked to remind me that it's just as easy to fall in love with a rich girl as with a poor girl. Most of us would prefer our children marry into money. But it was clear to me that Jimmy Young was bothered by his daughter marrying into money. And he explained to me that his experience in seminary, when he and his wife had to trust God for provision week by week, was the greatest lesson on trust and dependence he had ever had. He looked at me with a sigh and said, "My daughter will never know that kind of blessing or learn that lesson." And he was **very** serious.

Well, that is a different perspective isn't it? But it is a biblical one. We find out where our trust is when certain supports are pulled out. Woody Allen says that money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons. But financial struggles do teach lessons that money cannot. When the economy goes bad our trust is tested. That has happened for many of us in recent years, especially some of you senior brothers and sisters who have seen your investments go south in a big way. It happens. So, do you think we Christians ought to start worrying? If we put our trust in the economy yes, but not if we trust in God. We have no license to be foolhardy with our money but we also have no permission to worry or to hoard. God has said He will take care of us. Things may get much rougher in the next 20 years. Who really knows. Things were certainly bad off in Israel during this drought but God finds a way to provide for his servants. In Psalm 37:25 David says **25** *I have been young and now I am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread.* So, he also says in verse 37: **5** *Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in Him, and He will do it.*

Now the story of Elijah is a great reminder to us of how God provides for his own, even in the midst of economic adversity. It is also a great example of the sovereignty of God at work. When we

speaking of the sovereignty of God we speak of his absolute control over all things. Here we see that he is in control of the ravens. In verse 4 God says **4b** *I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there*. That doesn't mean just that he told the ravens to do it. It means that he has so ordered it that they will. Elijah does not hang his hopes on the faithfulness of ravens but on the faithfulness of God who controls the ravens. Then God says in **9d** *I have commanded a widow there to provide for you*. Again the same thing. I don't believe this widow ever heard a voice from heaven telling her to feed Elijah. She decided, without any coercion, to do it, but the sovereign God predetermined her to provide for Elijah. God decreed the cooperation of the ravens and the widow. Question: could the woman have refused to feed Elijah? Could the birds have refused? (pause) Well, yes and no. Both providers had the choice I suppose, the ability to refuse, but neither was going to because God inclined them to do His will. Their cooperation was predetermined by God, but note this: when God predetermines an act it is a free act that He predetermines. Did this woman freely choose to pick up sticks at the city gate at the particular moment Elijah strolled into town? Certainly, but you know God was behind that choice. You see, in the wisdom and power of God, His control and man's choice are joined together. And we must affirm the reality of both. The nice thing for us is that when we do right by the foreordination of God we receive the reward. God does not violate our wills, but He works thru them for His own purposes and the good of His chosen ones.

So that is the lesson of dependence on a sovereign God. Next we look at the lesson of obedience to a sovereign God. I want you to see in our text the biblical pattern of command and promise. Command and promise. When God makes a command to us it is usually connected to a promise of what He will do as a reward of our obedience. Ben Patterson says this: *A great demand is laid upon us when we are called, as Abram and Sarai were, to leave our past and present to travel to God's future, waiting for His promise. But God's great demand, his "you must," is completely overshadowed by His "I wills."* I love that! He is saying that the promises are bigger than the commands. And they are. Much bigger! In our story God gave the command/promise to 2 persons: Elijah and the widow. **2-4** *The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 3 "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 "It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.* The command is to hide at the brook. The promise is that he will be fed. Then in verse 13 the command/promise comes to the widow thru Elijah. **13,14** *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. 14 "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.* The command is to make Elijah a breadcake. The promise is that she won't run out of food during this drought. What I want you to see is that to collect on the promise one has to do what? (pause) Obey the command. Failure to obey negates the promise because it is a conditional promise. Most promises of God's word are conditional. There is some obedience required. What I hope you see is that the way of divine provision is the way of obedience. God provided for Elijah, but only in the place God sent him. Where God sends, He supplies (R). He doesn't promise to provide when you go off doing your own thing. What if Elijah had not done what God said? What if he had gone elsewhere - might he have starved? Could be. God sends bread where he sends you and if you don't go there, if you are in rebellion, then don't count on God's support. This explains why so many people, not all – certainly not all, but why so many are enduring hardships spiritually. They aren't where God sent them and they lack His supply. Many are spiritually barren because they made rotten, self-willed choices and have missed the pathway of promise. And the sad thing is that so many of these get angry with God. They aren't doing well relationally, or financially or spiritually and they think God has let **them** down when in fact God has been holding great riches for them in the place of obedience. Do you see? The problem isn't with God's provision - the problem is that you didn't follow orders. Some there are who are upset because they have no friends -but they didn't obey God by getting involved in church and being a friend. Some complain that they aren't motivated, when they haven't obeyed God by consistent time in his word. Some are distressed over the conduct of a spouse, but it's a spouse they had no business marrying. Again I say, the way of God's provision and blessing is the way of obedience. That was true of Elijah and the widow. Had they disobeyed they both might have starved. Praise God, they obeyed, and were cared for. We go back to the great promise of Matthew 6:**33** *Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.* (R) But the all things are added when you are doing what? Putting God first.

Now, you are concerned to meet your own needs - I know that, and that's okay, but you must learn that you do that indirectly many times. You must learn that the connection between obedience and provision will not always be clear. In fact, they may look quite the opposite at times. When God promised the widow that she wouldn't starve if she gave Elijah her last bit of food she couldn't see the sense of that. Where is the cause and effect between feeding a prophet and feeding her own son? The two seemed mutually exclusive, but that is the challenge of faith - to see the connection in heaven. How does my tithing result in my gain? How does taking a Sabbath get more done than

working every day? How does telling the truth keep me out of trouble? Obedience is sometimes counter-intuitive because we don't see the connections between obedience and prosperity. But those connections are obvious in heaven and the challenge for us then is to believe God when His ways are hard to figure or to follow. When you do that, you eat and are satisfied; when you don't - well... I remember an occasion in college when I faced a challenge of faith. I had gone to Gainesville and signed a lease for a trailer with the intention of finding someone to share it with me and pay half the rent. I advertised for a roommate in various places but the time for classes to start drew near and no one responded. About four days before classes I got a call from a fella who was interested but was not a believer. I knew enough Bible to know that God says not to be bound to an unbeliever. I knew it said evil company corrupts good morals, but hey, I couldn't make ends meet without someone to help with the rent and the time was short and for all I knew I was the only Christian at the University of Florida, so I agreed to let this guy move in with me. Bad move! God was gracious and he moved out after a quarter but for four months I paid the price for failing that test of faith. And to rub my nose in my own failure of faith, the first Sunday I worshipped in Gainesville God sat me down next to a Christian student who was looking for a place to live. God had provided in the path of obedience but I had doubted and taken a side road.

I admire Elijah for how he trusted God and obeyed. I admire the widow of Zarephath just as much. She believed God, obeyed his order and as a result what happened? Her bowl of flour and jar of oil just overflowed - is that what happened? It doesn't say that. For all we know this woman used the last of her oil and flour for Elijah every day. God tested her faith and she passed. 15,16 *So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days* 16 *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.* Friends, God is faithful to his word whether you are a mighty prophet or a lowly widow. The message of our text is that you can depend on him as you do His will. What are you worried about that you need to give over to God and trust him for? Your employment, your children, your retirement account? Learn the lesson of dependence. What is God calling you to do that you are reluctant to do - you are afraid of what will happen if you obey? Trust Him and do it. Obedience may look risky, but its the only safe way to go. The results are in the hands of a sovereign God, so you don't need to understand the whys and the hows - only trust and obey, just trust and obey. That is our simple lesson of faith - to learn dependence and to learn obedience. Let's wrap up by addressing our Teacher. (Prayer for the oil of the Spirit)