

Bad Days for Baal

1 Kings 17

Although I would love to open my sermon with a quote from the greatest Western movie of all time, *Tombstone*, I am not going to do that today. I am going to open it with a real, historical quote about the Old West boomtown of Tombstone, Arizona. In a letter written in the year 1881, Judge Wells Spicer said about the town, “Tombstone has two dance halls, a dozen gambling places, and more than 20 saloons. Still, there is hope, for I know of two Bibles in town.” Judge Spicer was a man who understood the power of the Word of God, even in the most dire of circumstances.

As we come to 1 Kings 17, we are in a dire situation. The northern kingdom of Israel is under the rule of King Ahab, who married a Sidonian princess named Jezebel. Under her influence, Ahab has made the worship of the Sidonian god Baal official policy in his kingdom. It is a dark time in Israel, when there seems to be little knowledge of the Law of God and certainly very little desire to obey it. And yet, even when the king himself has put the full force of the crown behind pagan worship, the Word of the Lord continues to be the driving force in this story. In the twenty-four verses of this chapter, the author five times refers to “the word of the LORD.” One time Elijah refers to “my word,” which is the word of the Lord in his mouth. Twice the Lord says he has “commanded” someone or something to feed Elijah. And once Elijah says, “For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel.” That makes nine references in 24 verses to the word of the Lord.

In fact, even the way the author arranges the book of 1-2 Kings highlights the centrality of the Word of God. You may recall that in chapters 15-16 we saw very rapid accounts of kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, followed by accounts of kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Now in chapter 17, the story slows down and focuses, for about 18 straight chapters, on the northern kingdom, and primarily on the ministries of two prophets: Elijah and Elisha. The author has arranged the narrative as a chiasm:

- A. One kingdom: Israel at its high point (1 Kings 1-11)
 - B. Two kingdoms: Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12-16)
 - C. Elijah, Elisha, and Ahab’s house (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 12)**
 - B. Two kingdoms: Israel and Judah (2 Kings 13-17)
- A. One kingdom at its lowest: Judah (2 Kings 18-25)

This arrangement puts the Elijah-Elisha stories, and their confrontations of Ahab and his house, right at the center. Why? Because these two prophets represent the power of the Word of the Lord, specifically in confronting the godless powers of this age. The author wants us to see that the God of Israel is supreme, and he rules all things by his Word. Why is that an important message for us today? Because going all the way back to the serpent’s question in the Garden-- “Did God really say?”—we have been prone to doubt what God has said. In our sin, we are quick to trust our own feelings, our own interpretation of reality, instead of trusting what God has spoken. We underestimate the power of the word of God and instead assume that we must seize

control of our own lives, or we are prone to discouragement when we see dire situations unfold, forgetting that God is always up to something. May this story remind us that, even when our circumstances look bleak, or when the cause of the gospel seems to yield little fruit, the power of the word of God continues to reign supreme over all.

I want to walk through this story today and make two main points of application that I see arising from this text. These two points overlap quite a bit, but I think they are worth distinguishing, and both are implications of what the author is telling us about the God of Israel. First,

1. You can trust the Word of God (vv. 1-16).

The context of this story is a drought that afflicts the land of Israel, causing water sources to run dry and crops to fail. This drought was not a random weather pattern. It was the judgment imposed by God against his people for their idolatry, in fulfillment of his covenant curse. In Deuteronomy 28:23-24 he had warned Israel that if they disobeyed his Law, “the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.” Elijah the prophet came out of nowhere to announce to King Ahab that there would be no dew or rain on the land except by his word (v. 1), and then the Lord told him to leave town, which made certain that the drought would continue indefinitely because Elijah wouldn’t be around for a while to end it (vv. 2-3). Both Luke’s Gospel and the book of James tell us that this drought continued for three-and-a-half years (Luke 4:25; James 5:17). By leaving the land, Elijah symbolizes that God is giving Israel the silent treatment for a time. They have refused to listen to him, so he is no longer speaking.

But why a drought? Why that specific form of judgment? It’s because Baal, the false god whose worship Ahab and Jezebel promoted in Israel, was known to be a storm god who provided rain and fertility to the land. This drought is the Lord’s way of saying, “You want to look to Baal to provide rain for you? Okay, let’s see how that works out for you.” This form of judgment not only afflicts the idolatrous people with severe suffering for lack of water and crops, but in doing so it also shows them how impotent and empty their new god really was.

In Scripture there are several times when God brings judgment on a people while simultaneously shielding his people, who fall within the orbit of that judgment, from the effects of it. Think of Noah and his family being preserved in the ark while the rest of the world drowned. Or consider how the people of Israel, living in the territory of Goshen in Egypt, were spared from the plagues that afflicted the rest of the land. The same happens here. While the land of Israel languishes under drought, the Lord commands Elijah to depart and head east across the Jordan to dwell for a time near the brook Cherith. And the Lord makes sure Elijah has everything he needs, according to verse 4: “You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” That would have been an astonishing thing for Elijah to hear. And I don’t just mean that avian food delivery was miraculous. How many birds do you know that will bring you food instead of eating it themselves? It certainly was miraculous, but what makes it even more surprising is that according to Leviticus 11:15, ravens were unclean birds. The most likely reason the Lord designated them unclean is because they are scavengers who eat the flesh of dead animals, and anything associated with death is regarded as unclean under the Mosaic Law. So of all the birds the Lord could have chosen to deliver Elijah’s food, he picked these carrion birds.

That would almost be like him saying to us today, “I have commanded that dumpster to produce food for you.” It’s a bit shocking to hear.

But in spite of the oddity, and perhaps even the offensive nature, of having to eat raven Doordash, Elijah obeyed the Word of the Lord. Verse 5 tells us, “So he went and did according to the word of the LORD.” And there for a time, by the brook Cherith, Elijah had bread and meat every morning and evening, and he had water from the brook to keep him alive while the land of Israel languished. Elijah models what it looks like to trust the word of the Lord as he is sustained during a time of judgment on the land.

But eventually, the drought dried up his water supply, so the Lord spoke to him again. Verse 9 reads, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” That verse jumps right off the page and slaps us in the face. Did you catch the significance of the city of Zarephath? Note that it is located in Sidon. Guess where Queen Jezebel came from: Sidon. Guess what god supposedly ruled over the territory of Sidon: Baal. The Lord, the God of Israel, not only humiliates Baal in Israel by causing a prolonged drought, he also sends his prophet to Baal’s homefield to embarrass the false god there as well. Note that the Lord says, “I have commanded a widow to feed you,” that is, a Sidonian widow of Zarephath. Again, this is surprising, not only because she is a widow, and widows were normally destitute in the ancient world. But she was a Sidonian widow, so she should have been one of Baal’s worshipers. Nevertheless, the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded her to feed his prophet in the same way he commanded the ravens to feed Elijah. We move from unclean bird Doordash to unclean widow Doordash, but all provision comes by the word of the Lord.

Again, Elijah obeyed, and as he came to the city gate he saw the very widow the Lord had told him about gathering sticks. He asked her to bring him a drink, and as she was heading to get it, he said, “One more thing. Bring me also a little bread.” At first, she balked: “I don’t have any bread prepared, and all I have left is just enough flour and oil to prepare a last meal for my son and me. That’s why I’m out here gathering sticks, so I can build a fire to bake it, and then we will resign ourselves to starvation.” The effects of the drought reached beyond Israel to include the land of Sidon, and this poor widow had reached the end of her supplies. So Elijah spoke to her again in verses 13-14: “And 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. For 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.”’” The word of the Lord came to her with a promise to sustain her and her son, but it asked for her faith to be demonstrated first by costly obedience. Would she be willing to go all in on feeding this prophet with the last bit of flour and oil she had and trust that what the God of Israel had spoken to her was true?

Verses 15-16 tell us: “And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The 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.” Her flour and oil were like the manna that Israel received in the wilderness: the Lord provided enough to sustain them, one day at a time. The

God of Israel humiliated Baal in Israel by shutting off the rain, and he did the same in Zarephath by providing for a Sidonian widow who trusted in his word.

You can trust the Word of God. It's so easy to lose sight of that simple truth when obedience to the Lord is costly, as it was for the widow of Zarephath. If you doubt God's promises to provide for you, you will never give by faith. You will seek to control your own security by hoarding whatever you can. Let's imagine that an impartial witness was given access to all your financial records: your income, savings, investments, assets, spending, giving, etc. And let's say this impartial witness knew nothing else about you, just your finances. What would he conclude about who you are and what you value? Would he see clear evidence that you trust the Lord to provide for you as you seek to obey him? Would he conclude that you are one who seeks to lay up treasure in Heaven? Or would he conclude that you value more the amenities of this world and trust in yourself for security? You see, Matthew 6:33 really is true: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [your daily needs] will be added to you." You can trust the Word of God, and if you trust, you will act like it. That will be reflected in your finances and in the whole shape of your life.

But this applies in other areas of life as well. Perhaps you are in a dating relationship with someone who does not show much evidence of walking with the Lord, and you are well aware of what Scripture teaches being unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Do you truly believe that what God has commanded is for your good? Do you trust his Word enough to take the costly step of obedience and end that relationship? Or maybe you're in a difficult marriage, and you know that God has commanded husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church, and he has commanded wives to respect their husbands as the church respects Christ. But in your pride you are not willing to put yourself out there to obey. Maybe you say to yourself, "I'll love her sacrificially once she starts showing me more respect," or, "I'll respect him once he starts becoming more respectable and shows that he loves me." As Lee has made clear in every wedding message he has preached, these commands are not conditional. Husband, why won't you humble yourself and love your wife as God has commanded? Or wife, why won't you humble yourself and respect your husband as God has commanded? It really comes down to this: you won't obey because you don't trust the Word of God. May the widow's example of costly obedience move you to renewed faith and, where necessary, repentance.

It seems that chapter 17 could have ended at verse 16. The point has been made. And yet, we are introduced to a new plot twist in verse 17. And that brings us to another word of application:

2. You can trust the heart of God (vv. 17-24).

Obviously, this is closely related to trusting the Word of God, but it highlights the fact that the God whose word rules over creation is also the God who loves us and desires good for us. Notice how the widow of Zarephath comes to a deeper grasp of that truth. For some time life was good. Elijah stayed with the widow and her son, and every morning a fresh supply of flour and oil sustained them. They were sheltered from the effects of the drought. But then one day, out of the blue, this widow's son became severely ill, with a sickness that seems to have quickly taken his life. The very boy whose life had been sustained during the drought by the Lord's provision was snatched by a completely unrelated cause of death. This didn't make any sense, and the widow's reaction is understandable 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!” Here’s the question driving the story at this point: does the presence of a man of God with this widow represent blessing to her, or is it a threat to her? In other words, what is God’s heart toward her? At this point, she reads her circumstances and concludes, “This man of God has come to punish me for my sins. In spite of the flour and oil he has given us day-by-day, the God of Israel does not love me. He is against me.” If we try to read God’s heart toward us from our circumstances, which is our natural instinct, that is very often the conclusion we will draw. God is against me. Why else would I be suffering in this way?

But Elijah knows better. Notice back in verse 1 how Elijah has spoken of the Lord: “As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, *before whom I stand...*” As a prophet, Elijah stands in the council of the Lord. He is an “insider” with God, which means he has been given special access to the heart and plans of God. Elijah knows that the God of Israel loves this Sidonian woman and her son and intends blessing for them. He knows this because of what God had spoken to this widow in verse 14, a promise to sustain her life and the life of her son until the end of the drought. The end of verse 14 says, “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.*” Well, the drought has not ended yet, so the Lord’s promise still stands. Elijah sees the mismatch between circumstances—her son is dead—and God’s promise—he will sustain their lives through the drought—as an opportunity to pray. And so he takes the child’s body from his mother, carries him up to his private quarters, and he does just that. Notice that Elijah’s prayer is both one of lament and one of intercession. Verse 20 says, “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?’” That is a lament to the Lord, the open, honest cry to God in a situation that doesn’t make any sense. But soon lament gives way to intercession in verse 21: “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.’” Taking his stand on the word of promise that God intended to sustain this child’s life, Elijah dared to ask for the impossible: that God would raise this child from the dead. The heart of prayer is pleading God’s promises back to him.

So what happened? In verse 22 we read, “And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.” Elijah had gone upstairs with a dead body. He came downstairs with a living child. He gave the boy back to his mother, and her confession in verse 24 is the climax of the story: “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.’” Her faith had been tested by this experience, but by giving back what he had taken away, the Lord showed her that his word can be trusted because his heart is a heart of love for her. The man of God did not come to her to afflict her with judgment for her sins. He came on behalf of the God of Israel to bless her.

Perhaps you have been rocked by an experience of suffering that has left you wondering about God’s heart toward you. I know some of our people have watched their spouses die. Some have buried one of their own children. Some have faced infertility for years. Some have been sexually abused. Some battle with chronic illness. Some have been through, or are going through right now, a battle with cancer. Multiply the examples. Suffering comes to us in all kinds of ways, and we struggle to make sense of it. But as singer-songwriter Babbie Mason has taught us,

God is too wise to be mistaken; God is too good to be unkind.

So when you don't understand, when you don't see his plan,
when you can't trace his hand, trust his heart.

The heart of God for all who are in Christ is expressed in such promises as Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." That promise is true, and you must learn to read your circumstances through that promise rather than try to interpret your circumstances on their own.

For some period of time before verse 17 I can imagine that Sidonian widow looking at her son everyday and thinking, "The God of Israel loves me. Look at how he is feeding my son everyday." But after verse 24, I can imagine her looking at him each day and saying, "The God of Israel loves me. I have another day with the son he raised from the dead." Her knowledge of the depths of God's love for her was strengthened through the unimaginable experience of watching her son die. Therefore, her faith was stronger than it otherwise would have been. Whatever seemingly senseless sufferings the Lord has appointed for you, you can trust his heart.

How do I know that? I know it because his heart for us has been revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. First John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us." That event is typified for us in this story. I didn't mention this earlier, but notice that in between Elijah's prayer of lament and his prayer of intercession, he performed a physical act upon the body of the child in verse 21. He stretched himself out on the body three times. What is the meaning of that action? It seems that Elijah put his own living body on the dead body of the child to picture himself as a conduit of life to him. What makes that a bit shocking is that, according to the Law of Moses, touching a dead body made you ceremonially unclean (Numbers 19). But not only does Elijah touch the body, he stretches himself completely over it three times. He trusts that, rather than himself being contaminated by death, he will instead communicate life to the dead. And by the power of God, that is what happened. Elijah and his successor Elisha are the only Old Testament prophets who raise the dead back to life.

Now fast forward to Mark 6, where Jesus has been called to the house of a man named Jairus, whose daughter was severely ill. By the time he reached the house, the girl was dead. But Jesus, along with Peter, James, John, and the child's parents, went into the room where the body lay. And according to Mark 6:41, he took her lifeless body by the hand and said, "Talitha, cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." Jesus touched a dead body, but it didn't make him unclean. It brought life from the dead. Elijah stretching himself on this child prefigures for us Jesus Christ, who by his own death descended into the unclean realm of the dead so that he might bring us out from it with him by his resurrection. And so, trusting in his word of promise that God is for us, not against us, let us eat and drink at the Lord's table in remembrance of him today. Amen.