

The Living God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 February 2024

Preacher: Jack Gamble-Smith

[0 : 00] We're going to read together from 1 Kings chapter 17. Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishby in Gilead said to Ahab, as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

And the word of the Lord came to him, depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook, Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook and I've commanded the ravens to feed you there.

So he went and he did according to the word of the Lord. He went and he lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening.

And he drank from the brook. And after a while the brook dried up because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him, arise go to Zarepheth, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.

Behold I have commanded a widow there to feed you. So he arose and went to Zarepheth. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink.

[1 : 18] And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, bring me a morsel of bread in your hand. And she said, as the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour and a jar and a little oil and a jug.

And now I'm gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son. That we may eat it and die. 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 afterwards 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.

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.

After this, this 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. And she said to Elijah, what have you against me, O man of God?

[2 : 32] You've come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son. And he said to her, give me your son. And he took him from her arms and carried him up in the upper chamber where he lodged and laid him on his own bed.

And he cried to the Lord, oh Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn by killing her son? And he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, oh Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.

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.

This is God's word. Well, as Corey said, we are beginning a series on, it's called the Gospel According to Elijah and Elisha. And this evening we'll be in First Kings 17, which we just read.

[3 : 37] And there are probably five or six sermons that could be preached from this passage.

There are so many things going on. And so you're bound to feel like we are missing so much by the

end of this sermon.

But there's always more. And so we'll begin here. And this series and the Gospel According to Elijah and Elisha will play out in the book of First and Second Kings.

And the story of Kings, just to begin to introduce this series is really a tragic one. If you've, I'm sure you've read it. It begins, if you remember, chapter after chapter of the construction of the temple under Solomon's reign.

And you see the intricate details going into the construction of the temple and you feel this sense of delight and that God will be with his people. This is what we've been waiting for.

And it ends if you were to flip to tell you the very end of the series. It ends if you were to go to the last chapter of the book of Second Kings with the siege of Jerusalem and Judah and the destruction of the temple and carrying off all of these things that you watch be built into the temple into exile, the temple being torn apart.

[4 : 44] And the last chapter says, and he burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem. It's a story of dismantling, of dismantling the temple, dismantling what feels like the people of God and the covenant God had with his people, of the story of the covenantal curses God brought upon the people.

You see, if you were to rewind, God gave the people of Israel a land, as I'm sure you, we all know, and Moses warned them in the book of Deuteronomy, he warned them that their greatest blessing would also be their greatest temptation.

They would get a land, but weirdly enough, that land would still be inhabited by peoples and their job would be to drive out the nations as they pushed into the land that God was giving them and to establish the worship of Yahweh in this land.

And the temptation was they had to resist being drawn into the religious rhythms of the people they would be pushing out. They had to drive them all out to inherit the promises of Yahweh.

And as we entered the New Testament, we realized this was ultimately in some ways a shadow of the Christian life, of sanctification for us, of ridding ourselves of our, the besetting temptations of our hearts, of freeing ourselves from the sin that clings so closely to us.

[6 : 06] Just like we might leave little thoughts, we don't go to war with them and expunge them from our minds. We leave little sins that we don't think will cause too big of problems.

So also the Israelites left little things they didn't think would cause too big of problems. And slowly those little things became bigger things and worked their way into their hearts and their affections and their worship.

First Kings is a story of Kings, as the name sounds, but also prophets. Kings and prophets. And the Kings plunged the people into deeper and deeper and deeper covenant disloyalty as they let those little things grow into bigger things.

As one ruler after another ruler after another ruler is enticed by the foreign people and their foreign gods and their foreign successes. And yet in the face of that king always stood a prophet calling the king and the people back saying, remember who your God is, remember who gave you this land. He loves you, don't chase after those foreign gods. At the center of this story is the word of God. The word that the Israelites have abandoned by the time we get to First King 17.

[7 : 24] And it's the word that's still working even here in First King 17. Behind the ground drying up as we read about in the first verses and the ravens bringing this bread and the brook flowing and feeding Elijah.

Behind the jar of flour that just would never run empty and the jug of oil that just always had enough oil in it stood the word in the hand of the Lord.

Behind the resurrection even of a boy was the word of God. So let's begin by looking at Elijah as a prophet of that word. So the first point is the prophet's word.

The role of the prophet, this is a series centered around prophets, the role of the prophet goes back ultimately to the book of Deuteronomy at least. And it was an office established to remind the people of their covenant with Yahweh and to guard them against wandering into the practices of the people that was around them to tell them, don't chase after their gods.

The prophets were in many ways almost, you can think about them like a wedding ring, reminding them of the covenant they were in. And so the king of Israel as he was in the land would have two voices that seemed always whispering in his ear at one time.

[8 : 38] In one ear he had the nations enticing him after their gods and after their habits and their practices. And the other a prophet crying out to him, you're in a covenant, remember who your God is.

You're in a covenant with Yahweh. And so as we look at first king 17, we see a king arise at the end of chapter 16 if you look in your Bibles and his name is Ahab.

And you see Ahab takes a foreign wife and verse 31, what does it say? After he took this foreign wife, he went and he did, but all the other kings have done, he served Baal and he worshiped him. Baal whispered into his ear, come, the foreign nations whispered, come, be like we are. And he came running after them and it angered the Lord. And Baal was calling out to him in verse one of chapter 17 says now Elijah also cries out to Ahab.

And Elijah says, as the Lord, the God of Israel lives before whom I stand. And you can see the role of the prophet in Elijah's words.

[9 : 49] The picture of a prophet is one who stands before a ruler, before a king and he hears a message and then his job is to go and convey that message to someone else.

He is nothing really but a mouthpiece for his ruler. It's his job to stand and speak the message of the one who's in charge. So Elijah, we see him standing between two kings ultimately, between the creator of the universe on one hand and on the other side, the ruler of the land, Ahab.

And it's his job to take this message and proclaim it to this king. And his message because of that has a profound authority to it. But it's not his own authority.

The prophet is just a man. And the text of chapter 17 wants to make that very clear. Elijah has a hometown, Tishba.

He had a childhood, he grew up somewhere, he's a man. But this man also, the text says, stands before God himself. So he is both a man and he conveys an authority that tells the most powerful men on earth.

[11 : 00] He used to walk into the most powerful men of earth's courtrooms and say, bow down to your maker. As kings rise, so do prophets.

To stand before them and say, you are just a man. And you are also accountable to the God of the universe. There's a reason that the prophets didn't have the longest life expectancies.

And Elijah speaks and he says, the Lord, the God of Israel lives. In other words, you may have tried to forget God in what you're doing.

You may have tried to drown him out with the noise and the smoke of your Baal worship that you've plunged into. But there is still one God of Israel. No matter what you may be doing, there is one God of Israel.

You can try to move on to Baal, but God hasn't moved on. He hasn't forgotten his covenant that he made with his people. There is only one ruler over Israel.

[11 : 57] It's not Baal. It's not your wife, Jezebel. It's not you, Ahab. Yahweh is still the God of Israel. And this God is alive. In other words, you have to deal with him for what you are bringing this people into.

And look at Elijah's words in the last line of verse one. He says, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

Why did God stop the rain and the dew? Why did he do this? Why bring a famine upon the land? Why not do something else? We see Baal was God of the storms.

He was God of many things, but one thing he was God of was the God of the weather, the storms, the rain and the clouds. His worshipers believe that he brought the rain, the storms upon the land to cultivate the earth.

And so what did the Lord say to Ahab? No rain, not until my prophet decides. What is he doing? He's saying this is a challenge.

[13 : 01] This is Yahweh versus Baal. Who is the true God? Who actually brings the rain at the end of the day? And you can see how the prophet's role isn't just to speak generally, but it's speaking to the heart of the matter immediately.

He puts his finger on the pulse of the issue. Just as Isaiah would say, you honor God with your lips, but your heart is far from him. Elijah speaks directly into the heart of Ahab's false worship.

In other words, what you look to Baal for, what you looked for him in the rain, in the crops, God's saying that thing comes from me. That thing comes from my hand.

And until you realize that, until you let go of Baal, until you worship me for all of my glory, this land will dry out, you will starve.

The Lord puts his hand right upon their heart and says, don't trust in Baal for that thing. Trust in me for that thing. Rain comes from my hand. And by doing that, he was being kind in the strongest way possible.

[14:13] And if we just pause for a moment, doesn't the Lord often do the same thing to us? Whether it's approval we worship or comfort or success or control or whatever it is that we look to, it always just feels out of reach.

We can never quite get our, we can never quite grasp it. And it makes our hearts hunger and thirst after it. And we feel almost like there's a drought in our souls. We're starving for that thing.

And we just can't get it. And it's in his kindness that the Lord crushes our idols like that. That shows you, you will never find what you're looking for in that thing.

He says, stop worshiping that. Rain doesn't come from that thing. The acceptance, the belonging, the safety that you long for, that comes from my hand. And that's a severe kindness that he's giving us.

But the Lord actually says something else, but not to Ahab or the people of Israel, but to Elijah. And this is the second point, the hidden word.

[15:17] It's the hidden word. The Lord, what does the Lord now do? The Lord now turns to Elijah and he says, leave them. He says, depart, go east of the Jordan.

Leave the land of Israel. And look what it says in verse three, hide yourself. And he sent him into a brook called Cherith, which means ultimately a place cut into the earth, a deep valley.

This isn't, I don't think, some people think he's Elijah's being sent away for his safety, but I don't think it's primarily for the safety of Elijah. This is about Elijah's office.

The prophet, the one who speaks on behalf of God to his people, God is saying, leave them. I'm done speaking. They've chosen Baal, let them listen to Baal.

In other words, let a famine come over the land, not just a famine of rain and the ground, but a famine of my word. And it's tempting when we read this passage, if I remember hearing this passage all the time when I was growing up, to compare ourselves to Elijah and to make it ultimately about providence, about ravens in a brook taking care of Elijah.

[16:34] So we, in some way, the Lord will take care of us. And there are plenty of Bible passages that say that exact thing, but I think this passage is actually saying something a little bit different.

It's challenging us in a different way other than just saying the Lord will take care of you by ravens or a brook or something like that. Before we too quickly compare ourselves to Elijah, we have to remember that he was ultimately the office bearer of the word.

He was the prophet in the land. And like it'll say in chapter 19, there are 7,000 other Yahweh fears in Israel at this time who haven't bowed the knee to Baal, they haven't kissed Baal, it says.

And those people aren't talented in the wilderness with Elijah. They're experiencing the famine, they're not protected from the famine. There are no ravens coming to the doorstep, there's no brook running by their house, they're suffering the full weight of the drought.

They're starving, no ravens, no brooks, 7,000 Yahweh fears. And they're probably wondering, where did the voice of God go? Where's his prophet?

[17:42] Where did his prophet go? Has Elijah left us? Has he abided? Has Elijah left us? Has he abandoned us? Has God left us? Why isn't he speaking to us?

Where's the rain? So instead of primarily thinking, this passage is ultimately about the provision of God by ravens or something like that.

What if it hit us like this? God judges his people by pulling back his word from us. By silencing his prophets, by closing Bibles, that's God's judgment upon a people.

So what do we do with that? We pray out as a church, what would we, if we think about not just individual applications, but corporate applications as a people of God, we pray, Lord, don't hide your word from us as a people.

Pray, Lord, give us more of your word. Don't hide yourself from us. Show us your glory, oh Lord, don't take it from us. Would you show us your glory and your word?

[18:47] But that isn't what God does here at this time. He hides his prophet away. He says, go, hide yourself. And he issues a famine of the word upon the land. The sky stays shut.

Bail the supposed rain God, the silent and God, the living God, silent. It's a silent game like you've never seen before and it's just waiting.

And the ground is silent. And the people would have to choose who brings the rain. Who brings the word? Who's the God of Israel at this time? And the Lord said, Elijah, go somewhere else.

Which brings us to our third point, the revealed word. And the Lord sent Elijah, if you look in verse nine, God sends Elijah to Zareph, the land of Israel, and God sends Elijah to Zarephath in Sidon. My guess is your holidays have probably never taken you to Zarephath, maybe they have. But this is deep, deep, Gentile territory. This is the very heart of bail worship.

[19 : 57] And God says, Elijah, go there. He says, go there. There's someone there who will care for you, a widow.

And if ravens were an unlikely source of provision for Elijah, a widow, someone who needed to be cared for is even less likely of someone to care for Elijah.

And Elijah goes to this widow and asks the widow for some bread. He asks the widow for water.

And then the widow tells him, my son and I are dying, the famine has hit here too.

We have nothing. We're just gonna make one more meal and then my child and I were dead. The famine has gone on for too long. There's nothing left except just a little bit more flour, a little bit more oil.

And Elijah breaks every rule of etiquette you've ever learned or ever taught your children. He says, okay, go make some, go do what you're gonna do, but first bring me a little cake of what you're gonna make.

[21 : 08] Then you and your son can eat after I'm done eating. And then he tells her why. If you look at the pastor, he says, the Lord will take care of you. He'll make sure there is just enough bread, just enough oil for you day after day.

What's happening here? You're always asking this widow, do you trust me? Do you trust me enough to give this stranger the last portion of your food that you were gonna give to your child? Do you trust me that much? Do you trust that I will take care of you and your child if you give the last of what you have away? Will you go against every parental instinct you have in your bones and make this cake and ignore your crying child and give it to a stranger?

One commentator simplified verses 13 and 14 to mean that God was telling this woman, give me every last thing you have, for I will give you everything you need.

And the text keeps it short, what does it say? It says, she went and did as Elijah said. It was simple, she knew how to make the cake, but I can guarantee you it was not an easy thing for her to do.

[22 : 29] She made the cake and brought it out to this stranger rather than to her crying boy. And when she returned to her house, the flower jar had just a little bit more left in it, just a little bit more than when she had left.

And the oil jug had just a bit more than when she had left, just enough probably to make so she could make two more cakes, one for her, one for her child. And the next day when she woke up, there was just a bit more flower and a bit more oil.

And the text says, she and he and her household ate for many days, the jar of flower was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty.

You see, God's provision for her was a quiet, subtle, daily, little miracle. Every morning as she woke was a new reminder that God would take care of her and her household.

She had to go to sleep each night, trusting, hoping, fearing, but believing that the Lord was now her God. When she says, your God to Elijah at first, now the God is her God.

[23 : 42] That the Lord was her God and so she would not lack, she wouldn't want. It was here in this daily bread miracle that Yahweh, the God of Israel, made himself known in just a little bit of flower, a little bit of oil.

He revealed his glory in this little thing. He made himself known. It wasn't flashy, he didn't have a huge deposit of cakes every single week, there were more than she knew what to do with.

She still had to make them herself, but it was just enough to get her to do it. It was just enough to get them through. And I think we should pause and say, isn't this how God reveals himself often to us?

And again, not talking primarily about us as individuals, but if we think corporately as a corporate body of Christ, how does God speak to us as a people?

He says, gather on the first day of the week, gather together, come, and you will hear my word, preach to you. And we're told that Christ speaks to you through the preached word.
[24 : 55] The very word of God who took on flesh and walked amongst his people, meets with us on Sundays through the preached word. And then God says, see you next week.

And we come back and he preaches to us and it's Christ speaking to his bride and it's simple, it's ordinary, if you have kids, it's exhausting to bring your kids and to make it all work. But God says, I will make myself known to you in this ordinary, subtle way, week after week, after week after week, and it'll be just enough to get you to the very end when I can see you face to face. I will make myself known to you in this ordinary way. I'll give you what you need for this week. Psalm 23, you will not lack. And that is the way that Yahweh cared for this Gentile widow. And yet silently in the background of this passage, if you think if we're reading it right, it's hard not to think that Israel was still starving. God was speaking to this widow and her son and yet he was silent, he was hidden to his people, Israel.

[26 : 05] And in Luke four, Jesus even asks, were there not widows in Israel during the great famine? There were widows in Israel that were in want as well.

And Jesus says, yet Elijah was sent to a Gentile widow. And when Jesus asked that, when Jesus reminded them, you remember what the Pharisees did, they wanted to throw him off a cliff. You see in first Kings, the people of God rejected the prophetic words spoken to them. They bowed down to Baal. God withdrew his word and pronounced the famine both on the land and of the word. And then he went and fed a Gentile woman with both word and food. And look at the difference between the Israelites and the widow. Look how they responded to the word of God. The Israelites didn't care.

They built Baal alters, they broke commandments, they rebuilt cities, they weren't supposed to be rebuilding. And the widow, what does she do? She hears one sentence from God and she says to God, I'll give you everything and trust that you'll be what I need you to be.

[27 : 12] Why is this woman here? She's a rebuke to the unbelief of God's people. Just like Elijah, Jesus too went elsewhere.

Do you remember the chapter in Mark seven after the Pharisees criticized Jesus for not following their traditions? He was upset that the disciples weren't washing their hands before they ate. And it says that Jesus left the people in Mark seven. He left the Pharisees who were criticizing him. And where did he go in Mark seven?

If you're reading it, he says he went away to the region of Sidon, which is exactly where Elijah went. And then what does it say? If you're in Mark seven, it says then Jesus hid himself in a house. Jesus goes, he leaves the people. He goes to the same region. He hides himself in a house. And who finds him in the house in Mark seven? A Gentile widow with her sick daughter.

[28 : 16] They find him. They find the word, the word himself. And what does the Gentile widow say? It's one of the most challenging passages, but if you read it in light of first king 17, it really makes sense.

The widow says to Jesus in that house where he tried to hide himself. I know we're not Israelites, but can we still get crumbs from the table? In other words, can there just be a little bit of bread for us?

Can there be bread for the Gentiles? We're starving for the word. I have a sick daughter. And Jesus marvels at her faith and he heals her daughter.

And he says, you get bread. What is God doing in these passages? What are these parallel accounts? The first king 17, Mark seven, he's moving his blessing onto another people. He's hiding himself from ethnic Israel and blessing the Gentile world. He's bestowing grace and favor outside the boundaries of just ethnic Israel.

[29 : 17] Why is he doing that? Why is it important for us to see that? Because true children of Abraham respond to the word of God, to the word Jesus himself, in a posture of utter faith and utter need.

They say, please don't let your word leave us. Just give us crumbs of the bread of life. We have no other hope. If you leave us, we are dead. I can't say it much better than John Flavill.

He says, we must set ourselves in his way, Christ's way under the ordinances and cry to him, Lord, that my eyes may be opened. Why do we not go to God and say, Lord, did you give Christ a commission to open blind eyes?

Look at me, Lord, I am poor, dark, ignorant of soul. Did you give him to be salvation to the ends of the earth? And will I still remain in the shadow of death? Oh, that he might be a saving light unto me.

And where does the story of First King 17 end? It ends with Elijah raising her boy even from death.

[30 : 26] When the woman first met Elijah, what did she say to him? She said, your God may be living, but it doesn't matter to us, we're dying. You might have a God who lives, but we're dying.

It means nothing to us. In other words, what difference does your God make to me? What difference does your God make to us here in Gentile territory, to me and my family, and our daily needs?

What difference does your living God make? We're dying here. And his God made all the difference in the world. He cared for them day after day, put a little bit more flour, a little bit more oil, with a little quiet filling of the jars.

And he even cared for them to the extent, not just daily, but even beyond the grave. He said, I will be your God, even after death has taken hold of you. That's what the Lord does for his true people, for those who come to him saying, I need you.

Isn't there just crumbs for me from your word? So in conclusion, what do we make of this? This is a series on prophets, and the church has only really one true prophet, Jesus Christ.

[31 : 33] And he speaks, he speaks to us still as a people, as we gather together. He speaks to us in his word. He calls his people together every Sunday, and he has a minister, someone stand up and speak from his word to his bride.

It's ordinary. Sometimes, hopefully not tonight, it's boring. We have to drag ourselves here, but it's Christ speaking to his people.

It's God saying, I want to reveal myself to you. I don't want to hide myself. I want you to see my glory. And how do we respond to this word?

How do we respond? Do we respond like the Israelites? You can respond like the Israelites and first kings, and you can bow down to bail, or you can respond like the Israelites in Mark 7, and you can have traditions and legalism.

In either way, you have a heart that says, I don't need this word for myself. How do we respond? We pray, Lord, don't hide your word from us. Give us more of your word.

[32 : 35] Show us more of your glory in your word. Give us more of it. Give us more of it.

Practically, we pray for ministers in this land that their hearts would be unmoved from fidelity to Christ.

That Christ would take such a hole of their hearts, they would have the boldness to speak to the people of God every week. We pray practically for ETS students for more and more and more of them.

Beg God not to pull back his word from his people. Pray for this pulpit that 100, 200, 300 years from now, this pulpit will still be, if Christ hasn't returned, it'll still be preaching Christ Sunday after Sunday after Sunday to the people of God.

And pray for your homes, pray for your families that around your dinner tables at bedside, the word of God would be proclaimed to the people of God. Pray, God, show us your glory.

Don't hide your word from us as a people. Let me pray for us. So Father, we come to you and we do pray that you would not hide your word from us.

[33 : 42] That can be so subtle. We can have the word in our hands and reject it in our hearts. Lord, would you show us your glory as your people? Lord, would you continue to hold this land fast?

Lord, would you send out ministers into it? Would you send out your word, your spirit into the city, into this land, into pulpits? Lord, would this land be filled with your word?

Would you not hide your face from us, Lord? Thank you that you've revealed yourself in the person of Christ. The sun came down, the true prophet. And Lord, pray that each person in this room would think, what have I done with that prophet?

What have I done with the word of God himself? The word made manifest. Lord, keep these people, I pray, to encourage their hearts. I pray this in Christ's name, amen.