

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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1 Kings 17:1-16

Lessons from OT Depression Times

- 1. God still needs prophets and widows**
- 2. God still used ravens and jars**

Hymns: 440 – 769

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All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

1 Kings 17:1-16 –

1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." 2 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: 3 "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. 4 You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." 5 So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

7 Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the LORD came to him: 9 "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." 10 So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" 11 As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." 12 "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die."

13 Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your

son. 14 For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.' " 15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

There might be some people in our congregation who remember the Great Depression of the 1930's. Our oldest church member is 90 years old, born in 1922. And we have some others in their 80's, meaning they lived through that difficult time. Most of you, however, probably just studied about the Great Depression in school.

One of the great difficulties that came with the Depression of the 1930's was the extended drought that occurred in the Midwest. Lack of rain baked the earth and turned everything to dust. High windstorms created "black blizzards" that carried dusty topsoil hundreds of miles and devastated farms and towns. A look at a few pictures from that time plainly show how extensive that drought was.

That, however, was not the first such drought in the world. And that was not the only drought that lasted for years, despite the fact that you might not know about many other such droughts. The Old Testament Bible account that we are focusing on today also deals with a drought, one so severe that the details of this account all center around it. We're studying the account of the great drought at the time of Elijah and the widow he encountered at a town called Zarephath. We will learn two lessons for our faith as we study this Old Testament Depression account.

1. God still needs prophets and widows

We have to know some details about those times as we study this account today. First, this account occurred when the nation of Israel was divided after the time of King David. The kingdom had split into the northern kingdom and the

southern kingdom, due to people following two different kings after King Solomon.

During that time, wicked king after wicked king reigned introducing idol worship. Wicked King Ahab of the north was no exception. His wife, Queen Jezebel, was more wicked than he was. She was a Gentile princess from Phoenecia, north of the Holy Land. Her native gods that she introduced to the Israelites were Baal and his supposed sister/wife Asherah. Baal was the supposed god of rain and crops. Since he was the god of life, his worshipers engaged in sexual immorality in their worship gatherings. Human sacrifice was also part of their worship. Asherah, the goddess of passion also evoked immoral worship.

Therefore, God in his anger sent the prophet Elijah. This account in 1 Kings 17 is the first that we hear of him. Elijah would have a difficult ministry as he had to speak up in judgment on Ahab and Jezebel and be persecuted for his message.

We hear in our reading that Elijah, through the Lord's instruction, had pronounced that a drought would come upon the land. No rain or dew would occur until Elijah asked for it. This would be quite a miracle. No rain would fall! Can you imagine if someone would pronounce that in our area of the country, and we would not have rain for an entire year?! Also, no dew would be present. If you've ever studied the climate of Palestine, you know that the morning dew is extremely heavy. In the drier times of the year, this dew would serve a valuable purpose in providing moisture. But none would be present either. Can you imagine how the land would look after months of this? This drought would last 3½ years!

In addition, do you see the meaning behind a drought at this time? Baal was the god of rain. The Lord was showing Ahab, Jezebel, and all the people who the true God was. He controlled the rain!

At the time our reading began, the Lord told Elijah to leave. He was to go across the Jordan River to remove himself from Ahab and Jezebel. This served two purposes. First, he would be safe from a king that God knew was not going

to be accepting of his message. Secondly, it was a warning and judgment on Ahab that the Lord was removing his Word and his prophet from the vicinity for a time!

Knowing those details, what lessons can we learn from the account we read? First, I'd like you to focus on the people that God used for his purposes. First, consider Elijah. God used this man to speak for him. People who thought that Baal sent rain for the crops needed to hear otherwise. People who thought that Asherah caused crops to grow, cows to calve, and women to become pregnant needed to hear otherwise. And God used a man to bring this message.

The other person that we see is the widow whom Elijah met when he later moved to Zarephath. This was a remarkable thing. When the drought continued so severely that Elijah's brook dried up, the Lord sent him out of the country to the north. He actually sent him to Phoenecia, Jezebel's home country, to hide out longer. The widow Elijah met was a Gentile woman. And the Lord chose to use her also. God needed her to provide for his prophet. He chose to use her to bake bread and supply the basic needs of his spokesman. Isn't it ironic that this Gentile woman showed great faith and trust when a famine was occurring because of the behavior of God's people?

Here we find our first lesson: God uses prophets and widows. He uses human instruments for his divine purposes. Isn't that a great mystery? Why should the almighty God choose to use human instruments and means to do his divine work? Couldn't he speak himself from the sky? Couldn't he send mighty angels to do all of his earthly work? He certainly could! Yet he chooses to use his people to play a part in his kingdom's work. It's amazing enough that God would choose to save us, isn't it? It's amazing enough that God would look down on wretched sinners who break his laws and commandments and love them enough to save them. It's amazing enough that he would send his Son Jesus Christ to suffer and die for their sins on the cross and pay the price of their guilt, and that he would rise again, assuring us of a place in his own home in heaven. *"God so*

loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16) – AMAZING! But that he would now allow us to play a part in his earthly plan for this world?! Amazing as well.

God still uses prophets and widows. We could look at many other examples from Scripture that teach us this: Moses, the unwilling prophet who became the greatest prophet of the Old Testament; Philip, whom the Lord used to climb up into the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot and explain the Word of God to him; even a donkey that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem in fulfillment of prophecy. All were used by God to fulfill his divine purposes.

He uses:

- Pastors, who serve as prophets to deliver his message to God's people
- Professors, who teach in our seminary and schools
- Teachers, who teach children in our classrooms
- Elected laymen, who organize and lead our congregation
- People who serve in various ways in congregations
- Encouragers, who bring a bright word to people who are down
- Prayers, who bring requests, needs, and thanks to him daily
- Maintenance men, who keep God's house and property in good repair
- Witnesses who bring the message of the Savior or an invitation to church to friends and neighbors
- Cooks who prepare food and refreshments to God's people
- And so many more! What a privilege that God would allow us to have a part in his work, as he still uses prophets and widows!

Today is a good day for you to ask yourself, "What is my part in God's kingdom right now?"

- Could you be considering whether God could use you as a public

prophet in his kingdom as a pastor or teacher?

- Could you be considering how you can use a gift or talent you have to serve our congregation?
- Could you pray more for our church and synod?
- Are there ways you could help keep God's house here in looking good by assisting our property committee?
- With the departure of Evergreen Lutheran High School, there is a tremendous amount of big and small jobs to do as some reconfiguring and repairing happens this summer. Is there something you could do?
- Or as the high school departs and has work that needs to be done before their school year begins, is there something that you could do?

Or not? May you never say, "I cannot or will not play a part, for **God still uses prophets and widows.**

2. God still uses ravens and jugs

Our account gives us one other lesson to learn today. We don't learn it from the people involved, as much as we learn it from the things that served these people: Ravens, jugs, and jars.

After all, miracles had happened at that brook where Elijah camped for a time. We read that the Lord said, "*You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.*" So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook." We see miraculous ways that God provided for Elijah at that brook. Ravens brought him food in the morning and in the evening! This isn't the normal way we get our food, is it? After all, what would you do if someone dropped a hot dog on the ground and your dog brought it to you? What if a big black

bird landed on your picnic table with a piece of bread in its mouth? You might be tempted to say, "Yuck! Get out of here!" But this was a great blessing to Elijah, as God preserved his life by giving him daily bread during the drought! We see quite a miracle as ravens, who are usually scavengers in the garbage or road kill, now share their food with God's prophet.

Miracles also happened in Zarephath. We heard, *"When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, 'Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?' As she was going to get it, he called, 'And bring me, please, a piece of bread.' 'As surely as the LORD your God lives,' she replied, 'I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die.'"*

Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'" *She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."*

This widow had a bleak outlook for living at this time. Being a widow put her life in jeopardy as it was. And this famine was putting her and her son in danger of dying. She had virtually no more food. Perhaps you have thought that there was "nothing to eat" in your home at some time or another. Yet a look at your pantry area would prove otherwise, I believe. Have you ever been down to literally your last morsel? Elijah's request of this woman was like asking a starving person that you might see on one of those commercials from a third world country for some of their food!

In an amazing way, this Gentile woman even showed great faith in the way that she provided bread for the prophet first. As the days went on and on, and the jar of flour and the jug of oil continued to have just a little more each day to bake bread from, can you imagine the lessons that this woman and her son learned? Psalm 37 says, *"Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart... I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed."*

When I was a child and learning about this account, I remember how I felt when Elijah asked for that little loaf first. I remember I always was saying inside myself, "Do it! Do it, because God will provide!" Do we need to hear that again today? Are there times where a miracle is needed at your house?

Tough times can come in droughts and depressions today. Jobs can be lost. Salaries can be cut. The economy can take its toll. Investments can decline. Homes can be foreclosed on. Brooks can dry up. It can seem bleak that ends will meet. But the lesson is, **God still uses ravens and jars**. In fact, God can allow brooks to dry up where you were perfectly happy and provided for. But as in Elijah's life, circumstances can change. **Yet God still uses ravens and jars**. He still provides daily bread for his people. He has promised!

There might be people here today who could tell us of times that God has miraculously done this in their life: Unexpected gifts or blessings that they hadn't counted on, checkbooks that miraculously balanced at the end of the month, or bills that weren't as much as they seemed they would be. A car that kept on going, hand-me-down clothes that kept on getting handed down, a drop-off load from a church friend, or a treasure found at a garage sale. **God still uses ravens and jars**.

This truth still holds true when we give of our blessings to support God's kingdom through our offerings, as that widow supported God's prophet. In fact, we learn lessons about giving

our offerings to the Lord from that Gentile woman:

- Are you giving of your firstfruits to the Lord, or just your leftovers? Are you tempted to say, "I can't give firstfruits until I know what my leftovers are to give God." If so, learn a lesson from this widow woman.
- Do you give sacrificially to support your church? Would you consider supporting God's work to the extent that you would miss out on a luxury or convenience? Have you ever given an offering to our church or school that had made you miss out on something extra? Learn a lesson from this widow woman!

It's fascinating that in our own synod in the 1900's, the decade where the offerings of God's people were given at the highest percentage was... the 1930's! Also, this was the decade where our synod became debt free. Isn't that amazing that during a difficult time of unemployment and poverty that God could open hearts to see that they were still well provided for?

- Do you worry that God will forget you in the future? Will he let you starve? Will he leave you alone? Learn a lesson from this widow woman and also from our Lord Jesus who said, *"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?... So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be*

given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Based on the fact that you're here and alive today, I'm assuming that Jesus has spoken the truth to you personally. **God still uses ravens and jars.** As the Apostle Paul wrote, *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)*

Lessons at a time of drought! It certainly is true that some of the deepest spiritual lessons can be taught to us during hard times. **May we learn these lessons well today:**

1. **God still uses prophets and widows**
2. **God still uses ravens and jars**

May we rejoice in these promises today, as we see the hand of the God who has saved us from sin and death active in our lives! Amen.