

1 Kings 16:29-17:24 // The Lord who Provides

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[0 : 0 0] This is 1 Kings chapter 17, verses 17 to 24, and we're on page 358 of the Church Bible. Sometime later, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill.

! He grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, What do you have against me, man of God? Would you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son? Give me your son, Elijah replied.

He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, Lord, my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with by causing her son to die?

And then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, Lord, my God, let this boy's life return to him. The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived.

Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, Look, your son is alive. Then the woman said to Elijah, Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

[1 : 1 2] This is the word of God. Thanks, Rosalyn, for reading that for us. If we've not met, I'm Martin Ayres, the lead pastor here.

And we're looking together at this portion of the Bible. So if you could keep your Bibles open, page 358, that would be a great help. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet or on the back of the notice sheet that would help you.

But let's ask for God's help. Let's pray. Our Father, we don't take it for granted today that you have spoken words to us, words of grace, words of power, words of life.

And so we ask that you will open our ears to hear those words, open our minds to understand, and open our hearts to respond rightly to you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, last month, season three ended of The Capture. I don't know if you've been watching this, the BBC drama.

[2 : 1 9] It is gripping. It's brilliantly unsettling. Because by the end of watching an episode of The Capture, you find yourself thinking, I don't think I can trust anything ever again. The whole plot revolves around a technology called correction, which is a sort of deep fake technology.

And it turns out the plot is of the drama that the British authorities are using correction, where they think someone is guilty of a crime, to add them in to CCTV footage.

So it looks as though they were there and they can be found guilty. In one episode of the latest season, a terrorist gunman breaks into a Westminster event attended by the Home Secretary, and he shoots the Home Secretary.

And everyone in the room throws themselves on the ground in fear, this terrorist. But there are journalists there who kind of hold up their phones to take a photograph of the shooter.

But every phone has been hacked. So every image on the phones is of the same man. And it's not the man who shot the Home Secretary. He's an innocent man.

[3 : 2 6] And there's a great manhunt going on for him. Meanwhile, the heroine of the series, Rachel Carey, the key whistleblower about correction, she actually saw the real man. And it's her boss, the head of counter-terrorism.

And so she knows the truth, that her boss is this killer, but nobody else around believes her. And all the images say something else. So the drama taps into an anxiety that lots of us feel these days in today's world.

A world of fake news, a world of fact-checking, of scepticism. How do we know what is true anymore? How do we know what's real? How do we know what is trustworthy? We know that

images can get manipulated.

News stories can be fabricated. Truth can get distorted. Memories can fail. Narratives can be engineered. Whose words can we genuinely depend on in a rock-solid way?

Well, in 1 Kings, everything hangs on the word of Yahweh, the God of the Bible. And his name that he's given us for himself, Yahweh, is translated in our chapter and in the whole Bible, whenever we see the word Lord, the Lord, and it's in capitals.

[4 : 43] That is the translation of Yahweh, the name of God. And our first point in today's chapter is we see the sobering withdrawal of Yahweh's word.

We've seen in recent weeks in our series in 1 Kings, that this has become a very dark time for the world and for the people of God. We're after Moses and Joshua, after great King David and his son King Solomon and this golden age for the people of God.

And now the kingdom has been torn into two kingdoms. And in the northern kingdom of Israel, the ruling king is Ahab.

I don't know how you would describe the church today, if you think about the state of the church in Scotland or in Europe, the state of our world today. Lots of us might feel that it's dark times.

It's a depressing picture. Well, it's hard to imagine how dark things were under King Ahab at this moment in history for the people of God and so for the world.

[5 : 43] Here is the king of the people of God leading them in state-sponsored worship of false gods. It's that bad. And if you can't imagine somebody worse than Ahab, you should meet his wife, Jezebel.

She's from up north beyond Israel in the region of Sidon, which is the heart of worship of the storm god Baal. Her dad, the king we hear at the end of chapter 16, her father was named after Baal. He's called Ethbaal. And Ahab marrying Jezebel is a disaster. So what does God do? Well, look at verse 1 again of chapter 17.

Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbi 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.

Elijah's message for the king is devastating. We know the images today, don't we, of places in the world where they have no rain. Places like the Horn of Africa, where we see rivers and wells drying up.

[6 : 58] People walking for hours for water. Failed harvests. Dead livestock lying on parched grazing land. That's the emotional world that we enter into when we relive 1 Kings 17 and 18.

Elijah's announcement to Ahab is a sentence of economic collapse and human desperation. Why? Israel has turned to worship an idol they think brings the storms and can bring fertility.

And they need to learn a great theological lesson. And they've shown they will only learn it the hard way. As God reveals to them, The clouds and the rain belong to me.

One thing I love about this chapter is how suddenly verse 1 comes. That we don't get any background to Elijah at all.

And we might have thought all was lost for Israel at this moment. And then God's response is reassuringly sudden. Nothing takes him by surprise. And he's going to fight to win the hearts of his people back.

[8 : 09] Look at Elijah's words in verse 1. He's standing before the king. And he says, The Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve. So the Lord, Yahweh, he's the God of Israel.

Baal is not the God of Israel. He's a fiction. He's not real. Yahweh is the God who lives, verse 1. And Yahweh is the God whom I serve, says Elijah.

Literally, before whom I stand. As he stands before the most powerful man he'll ever meet. There is one greater than you, Ahab.

And I stand before him. And then Elijah is led by the word of the Lord to leave that land and go to modern day Jordan. Out of reach of King Ahab.

Why? This is God taking away his word from his people and his king. By the time we get to the next chapter, we find that for three years it didn't rain.

[9 : 13] And Ahab has searched everywhere to get Elijah back. But since the king and his people have rejected God's word, God responds in judgment by taking his word away.

And his word that rules is also his word that brings blessing. It is a terrible thing not to have the word of God. It's sobering for us to think of that in Scotland.

That when the people of God have his word, but over time they stop listening to it. They treat it lightly. They don't pay attention to his voice. When they hear it, but they're not building their lives on it.

An appropriate judgment from God is to take that word away from those people. And conversely, do we appreciate what a wonderful gift it is for us that we have God's word?

Could we each ask ourselves, how does my own pattern of life demonstrate that I cherish that gift? That the Bible is the most valuable thing that this world affords.

[10:18] God's gift to me of his word. How could you demonstrate better this week that you appreciate that rich gift day by day? That's our first point.

The sobering withdrawal of Yahweh's word. But as Elijah moves on from Ahab, our second point is the searching invitation of Yahweh's word.

While Israel is left without any rain, Yahweh provides for his faithful prophet Elijah. From surprising places. In verse 6, we read, The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

God provides daily for Elijah in the same kind of way as he provided for his people, the Exodus generation, in the wilderness with bread and manna.

Oh, sorry, with manna and meat when they were in the wilderness. And we see something here about the character of our God that he delights to provide for his people in the most surprising ways, the most unlikely ways.

[11:24] Ravens and then a widow. Ravens. Ravens were unclean birds. The writer Dale Ralph Davis makes the point, What kind of food do ravens actually bring you?

Don't ask. Just cook it very thoroughly. Widows were vulnerable and needy. In a famine, you would never go to a widow's house to ask for provision.

But God is using both to keep his prophet alive. And we don't know how long Elijah was there, but eventually the brook dries up because God wants to move Elijah on to meet this widow in Zarephath, a particular widow.

Zarephath is northwest of the promised land in Sidon. And we know another woman from Sidon, Jezebel. So this is the epicenter of Baal worship territory where Elijah is being sent.

And he finds this widow, destitute, at the town gate, gathering sticks. He asks her to give him a drink and she gives him a drink. But then he also asks her for a piece of bread.

[12:36] And then her desperation emerges. Verse 12, There's no bread. She says, I don't have any bread, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I'm gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it and die.

But then this woman is challenged to put her trust in a promise from God. If you have a look at verse 13, Elijah said to her, Don't be afraid.

Go home and do as you've said, but first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me and then make something for yourself and your son.

That's the challenge. And then the promise. 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 sends rain on the land.

So this woman might never have met one of God's people before, but she knows two things at this moment. She knows that death hangs over her. She's going to die.

[13:47] And she knows that Yahweh, the Lord, has made a promise to her. And the question is, will she trust him with what little she has?

And in that dilemma, this woman is like every one of us today. Death is a reality for you and me. Whatever you choose to build your life on, death is going to spoil it.

And eventually everyone you've ever known will die. And nothing we possess or achieve can beat death. But secondly, we know that the God of the Bible, Yahweh, has made promises to us.

It's true of everyone in Scotland today. People might not believe them, but they are undeniably there in the Bible. Jesus says to you and me, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. And the searching challenge for you and me is, will we trust what Jesus says?

[14:52] Will we trust the promises in the Bible? Well, the woman does trust, verse 15. She went away and did as Elijah told her.

And then it's extraordinary. The promise is fulfilled. In verse 15. 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.

That's the searching challenge of Yahweh's word. Death hangs over us. God's word promises life. Day by day, what are we doing with that?

Will we trust the word of God? But then, devastation. Our third point, the perplexing pain of Yahweh's ways.

Look with me at verse 17. Sometime later, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing.

[16:00] It's devastating, isn't it? And through the tears, she swipes out at Elijah, verse 18. She says, what do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?

So you can see the anger. Why did you ever come into my life like this? Why did you come here and give me life only for this to happen? And then the guilt she feels.

Is it my fault? Am I being punished here that you would challenge me to have faith and it would keep me and my son alive? And he's died. And for Elijah, you can see from the way he prays, it must have been perplexing as well.

What on earth is my God up to here that he's brought this into this widow's life? But for us today, what a comfort to know that the Bible deals with real life like this.

With life in this world that for all of us can be full of disappointment and tragedy and confusion. And it does us good to reflect on how this moment in the story would have felt.

[17:03] Sometimes the experience of living by faith in God's word can leave you struck down, perplexed, just as this widow and Elijah were.

That God would invite the woman to trust him, provide for her and then let her son get sick and die. And here in Zarephath we have some Bible realism about what life following God can actually feel like for you and for me.

The writer Dale Ralph Davis says this, it's a long quote so I've got it on the screen but I'll read it for us. He says, we may think we would have been kinder than God. Here is a widow having just escaped from Baal worship who had only begun to taste and see that Yahweh is good and he crushed her.

Why didn't he wait until she was more mature in her faith? Why shatter a new convert with the dark mysteries of his way? We cannot answer such queries.

We can only say that this woman discovered early on that Yahweh both sustains and bewilders, both delights and devastates and as you watch and hear her in the text you know that you have been there.

[18:18] just as perplexed, as much in a maze, in just as much darkness before God, in knots about what sin God was punishing. Why, you've lamented, did he light my way with tokens of his favour and then crush me with such a grievous distress?

And yet there is a sort of backhanded comfort in the rugged honesty in the Bible. It hides nothing but warns clearly that Yahweh both blesses and baffles his servants.

That's the perplexing pain of Yahweh's ways and isn't that helpful for us to forewarn us and forearm us? I think of a friend whose dad, who'd raised him to trust Jesus, lost his stability as a Christian and started saying, Christianity makes promises it doesn't keep.

And as I talked to my friend about it, what we talked through was that his dad's whole belief in the goodness of God was grounded in his experience of life.

And because life was going well, he had no problem believing God is good. But he was left completely unprepared by that worldview for when life was very painful. And so he wouldn't make room for God to be good and wise with a hidden plan that he couldn't see and he turned away from God.

[19:44] Well, the experience of the widow here forewarns us so that we don't lose our stability when we are left baffled by what could God be doing here?

I can't see the good in this. And then our fourth point is the death-defying power of Yahweh's word. Elijah doesn't turn away from God in his distress.

He turns towards him. He takes the dead son from the woman. He carries him up the stone stairs and into the upper room where he's staying as a guest and he lays the son down on his bed and he

pleads.

Verse 20. Then he cried out to the Lord, Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I'm staying with by causing her son to die?

Then he lies down on the boy as though he's saying to God, let my life pass into this dead body. He does it three times and then he prays again.

[20 : 48] He has no magic words to say. At this point he's just an ordinary man on his knees perplexed and pleading before a great God. Yahweh my God, let this boy's life return to him.

He's got no promise from God. It's just audacious prayer. At this point in Bible history nobody has ever risen from the dead.

But look at verse 22. The Lord heard Elijah's cry and the boy's life returned to him and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house.

He gave him to his mother and said, look, your son is alive. It's a wonderful moment and you realise here that Yahweh let the woman's son die so that he could demonstrate to her and to us that you can trust him not just for your present but for your eternal future.

You can trust the God of the Bible when you're in distress in life today but more than that you can trust him even when the jaws of death have firmly closed over your life.

[22 : 09] And for centuries after this event generations went by of people who lost their loved ones parents whose children died grandparents at the funerals of their grandchildren and you can imagine every time them thinking with all my heart I wish beyond words that we lived in the time of Elijah.

If only Elijah was here and we could be like that widow who got her son back I wish that could have been me. Until Jesus comes and he sees a widow whose only son has died coming out with the funeral procession from the town of Nain and he says to her don't cry and he puts his hand on the bier and he commands the son to wake up and he raises him from death and he raises Jairus' daughter to life and he raises Lazarus to life and they kill him on a cross and he says in Revelation 1 don't be afraid I am the first and the last I am the living one I was dead and now look I'm alive forever and ever and I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Three months ago we moved house we moved rectory and the golden moment you're waiting for on moving day is when they release the keys.

The removal men were sitting in a lorry with everything we own in it and the moment came when I could phone them and say I've just left the estate agents I've got the keys Operation Move is a goal keys open doors and when the risen Jesus says he holds the keys of death he means that he has defeated death and he is now in complete control over it so that he can unlock it and set his people free from it.

so picture with me for a moment the tears in that widow's home that day in Zarephath the tears of joy and relief as the son was back with his mother again and let's just ponder that it's a glimpse of the joy we will feel on the last day when Jesus alive forever restores all things and says to us as his people there will be no more grief anymore.

[24 : 41] so the woman responds in verse 24 with great words of faith if you have a look at verse 24 she says to Elijah now I know now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

So in our events here we've got one woman from Sidon Jezebel and she has all the worldly power and the people around her are starving to death and this widow from Sidon has learnt that the God of the Bible is a marvellous provider and she resolves to build her life on his word and so she encourages us to ask ourselves how am I responding to God's word today?

In Luke chapter 4 Jesus uses this event as a challenge to his hometown to warn them because they were being sceptical about him and God's word and he says to them there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time but Elijah wasn't sent to any of them but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon what's he saying?

He's saying what makes you a person of God is what makes you blessed by God and given life by God is that you're responding rightly to his words it's not enough to be in church do we trust the word and obey the word?

Some of us here today will be worried about death others of us are grieving from the sting of death others of us are worried about life what's going on in your life today this coming week this month well the widow of Zarephath is our model here of living by faith what did she do?

[26 : 38] she knew almost nothing about God she had almost nothing left but she took what little she had and she risked it all in trusting God's word she stepped out at great risk in faithful obedience of God and the outcome for her speaks to you and me that God is a marvellous and generous provider you really can trust him for your present life every day you really can trust him for your future and his words are trustworthy and true let's pray together Lord Jesus we praise you that you are the living one the first and the last that once you were dead and now you are alive forever we praise you

Yahweh that you are the great provider for all who trust your word we bring before you now our concerns about things going on in our life in the present and we bring before you our fears about the future about growing old about dying may we like this widow live by faith in your word Holy Spirit would you grant us her faith in our lives and may the people around us see us living lives that could only make sense if your word really is trustworthy that they too may come and share in our living hope for Jesus name's sake Amen