

“The God Who Provides”

Introduction: This evening, many of the children from our church, along with a good number of adult leaders, as well as a number of children from our community, will embark upon a week-long adventure that is known as Vacation Bible School! This summer will be a true adventure as the theme is “Everest: Conquering Challenges with God’s Mighty Power.” Well can you imagine all of the mountain images that will be used throughout the week, not to mention the fact that the people of Nepal are continuing to go through real-life challenges of their own even as we speak.

So I want to encourage you to take your sermon outline home with you today, and put it on the refrigerator or wherever you’ll see it. Then, to keep company with those who will be here during the week, read the passage listed for each day and allow it to lead you into prayer, for yourself others, and for all who will be involved in VBS. What you’ll be reading about is the following:

- God’s power to provide, when circumstances seem grim (1 Kings 17:1-16)
- God’s power to comfort, when we feel all alone (1 Kings 19)
- God’s power to heal, when no one else can (2 Kings 5)
- God’s power to forgive, when sin seems so strong (Luke 23)
- God’s power to love us forever, when we wonder what’s next (John 14)

We’ll look at the first one together this morning, God’s power to provide. We’ll begin by exploring the context in which we meet the great prophet Elijah and the poor widow from Zarephath. Then, we’ll consider what they both discovered: that to experience God’s provision, we often need to take a step of faith.

I. Ahab – The Nastiest of Kings

A. You may recall my mentioning last week, when we were considering Jesus’s declaration to be the light of the world, that Israel was to have been that light—a light to the Gentiles, as Isaiah has it (42:6)—but that instead she grew dim and dark. Well, Elijah comes on the scene when things in Israel had become their darkest. Things had become “wicked daak,” as a New Englander would say, and in this case, we could take that phrase literally! While the first three kings of Israel—Saul, David, and Solomon—were less than perfect, for the hundred years or so of their combined reign things went relatively well. The twelve tribes had been united into one entity and a measure of peace had been achieved with the neighboring Canaanites. But Solomon had taken a fancy to pagan women, married a bunch (700! cf. 1 Ki. 11:3), and began worshipping their false gods. Civil war eventually broke out and the kingdom split (930 B.C.). The north continued to be called “Israel,” while the south became known as “Judah.” In both kingdoms, the people continued to be led astray and into idolatrous, immoral, and unjust practices until, in 722 B.C. for the north, and 586 B.C. for the south, foreign invaders defeated these kingdoms, taking the Israelites out of the Promised Land and into exile. The books of 1 and 2 Kings were in fact written for this people in exile so that they could look back and see where their disobedience had led them.

B. Now here’s a sobering fact. From the time of their civil war until the period of exile, seventeen kings ruled in Judah, and only eight were said to have followed the Lord. And in the north, in Israel, nineteen kings reigned and *all* of them were wicked, all “did evil in the eyes of the Lord!” More to the point for our purposes this morning, Ahab was the worst of the bunch. As 1 Kings 16:30 has it, “Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those

before him.” And one of the more evil things Ahab did was to marry a woman named Jezebel, who worshipped the fertility and rain god Baal. This moved Ahab to then build temples in Israel in which to worship Baal and his female counterpart Ashtaroth. Ahab just didn’t bring in other, false gods for the people to worship alongside of and in addition to the LORD; he sought to have the LORD replaced. Those whom God had called to be a light to the Gentiles had themselves become enshrouded in darkness.

II. Elijah and the Widow: Steps of Faith

A. But, as is the gracious way of our God, into this muddle, into the middle of the darkness, broke slivers of light in the person of Elijah, and a widow from a town named Zarephath, in the region of Baal-worshipping Sidon (from which Jezebel had come). Both experienced the power and provision of God as they took steps of faith. This, I think, would have been of tremendous encouragement to those who now found themselves languishing in exile. If we take a big picture view, there are four verses which imply or describe such faithful steps, vv. 1, 5, 10, and 15.

1. The first sees Elijah, having traveled from the region of Gilead in the northeast, to the throne room in Jerusalem. It took lots of physical steps, of course, to get him here, but the step that is most pronounced is the step in which Elijah rested in the promises of God. In the past, as God’s people were being prepared to enter the Promised Land, God had spoken a word of warning:

But do not let your heart turn away from the LORD to worship other gods. . . He will shut up the sky and hold back the rain, and your harvests will fail. [Dt. 11:16-17]

It’s as if Elijah was saying to Ahab: “You want to see who the real rain God is? Stay tuned and watch.” Elijah trusted God to be faithful to his promises and so took the step of confronting Ahab on what God had said.

2. As a result of this step of faith, Elijah experienced the provision and protection of God, for God then directed Elijah to hide in a ravine where he would supply him each day with water from a brook and food delivered by ravens. These instructions made it pretty clear that this was to be no camping vacation in a national park with a cooler full of food and drink! Elijah was heading into the wilderness with nothing, and Ahab would be angry and looking everywhere for him. But verse 5 tells us that Ahab did what the Lord had told him. He took the step of faith and went. And God provided as he had promised.

3. A third step of faith that we see taken was required, interestingly, because God had answered Elijah’s prayer! As James records, “Elijah prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, and none fell for the next three and a half years!” (Jas. 5:17). Practically what this meant, of course, was that Elijah’s water supply also dried up. Be careful what you pray for, it is sometimes said! But God had Elijah in his sights and directed him to the home of a widow, and not just any widow but one who lived in the region where Jezebel was from, a 75 mile journey through the wilderness to boot! But Elijah went, he stepped out and took that journey to the widow’s home, trusting in the faithfulness of God.

4. And, through a fourth step of faith we see in this text, that of the widow, God provided for both Elijah and the widow and her son. Of course, at first glance, things didn’t look so good. When Elijah arrived the widow was out gathering sticks with which to cook her last meal. She had only enough for herself and her son. But Elijah directed her to go ahead and begin making small loaves of bread. She took that small step of faith and there was daily bread for all.

B. What we have here are four key verses, four key times when faith was exercised despite unfavorable and even challenging circumstances. Elijah went before the nasty King. Elijah went to the Kerith Ravine. Elijah went to the home of the widow. The widow went to her kitchen to bake bread. Each time, when a step of faith was taken, God responded with his power and provision. What might we learn? A couple of things primarily come to mind.

1. Faith, if it is truly faith, must be exercised. It's one of the reasons why we say, after we read God's word each week, "May God bless the hearing and doing of his word." That comes directly from the teaching of Jesus who tells us that if we only hear his words but do not put them into practice it will be as if our life was built on a foundation of sand. To have that foundation be rock requires both hearing and doing. If Elijah hadn't trusted the promise of God and confronted Ahab, he never would have experienced the power of answered prayer. If he hadn't gone to the ravine, and then on to the widow's home, and if the widow hadn't gone back to her kitchen, they never would have experienced God's provision.

2. Second, our doing need not be something dramatic but simply the next, small step. Rarely do we win the lottery. Rarely does God reveal the whole picture to us all at once. More often than not, God asks us to trust, day by day, and then he meets us, day by day, with our daily "bread," as Jesus instructs us to pray.

3. That said, third, we need to recognize that God's answer to prayer might not necessarily make things easier. In fact, it might call us to exercise our faith all the more, as Elijah found out. "God, you need to do something about wicked Ahab." "Elijah, I agree, and you're just the man!" "God, you need to provide for me," "Elijah, I agree, but its not going to be through a waiter at the Jerusalem Hilton. Go hide in a ravine." "God, the brook has dried up." "So it has. Good praying Elijah! Now go across the desert to a widow who can barely feed herself and her son." But these challenges don't mean that God is absent, just working his purposes out, and even growing our faith, as he sees fit.

So in this week ahead, as our VBS program begins to unfold, let us pray and trust God to meet us and these children with what each one needs, for each day. As he has done in the past, I trust that God will do in the future: He will meet us and sustain us and grow us, day by day.