

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Kings, Lecture 11

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Elijah, the Widow of Zarephath, and redemptive History, 1 Kings 17

Text of 1 Kings 17:7-24

Alright, let's go onto 1 Kings 17, verses 7 to 24. Let's read this so we have the text in mind. "Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him: Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food. 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?' 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."

"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? Did 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, 'O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this

widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?’ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, ‘O 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.’”

2. The Principle of Replacement Set in Operation – 1 Kings 17:7-24

Okay, 1 Kings 17:7 to 24; the theme is: “The Principle of Replacement Set in Operation.” What we have just read in 1 Kings 17: 7 to 16, the first part of that where Elijah goes to the widow of Zarephath, is cited by Jesus in Luke 4: 25 and 26 where Jesus says, “I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land, yet Elijah was not sent to any of them but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed: only Naaman the Syrian.”

Now when Jesus sites that in Luke 4, he indicates that what happened in Elijah’s time will happen again if God’s people--the Israelites--reject his message. That is, the principle of replacement will again come into operation as it had in Elijah’s time. What that means is the heathen will be called to the obligations and privileges of the covenant that the Jews rejected. So that’s the idea of the principle of replacement: the heathen will be called to the obligations and privileges of the covenant that the Jews reject. That happened in Elijah’s time, and Jesus indicates it will happen again in his own time if the message he brings is not listened to.

3. Elijah’s Relocation from the Kerith Brook to Zarephath

Now, we can see that principle in 1 Kings 17: 7 to 24, I think, in three

things. The first is the significance of Elijah's relocation from the Kerith brook to Zarephath. We saw in verses 2 to 6 that the concealment of Elijah was of revelatory significance. This is just review of what we looked at. The significance was that God's word in the person of the prophet had departed from Israel. God was isolating his people from the administration of his word. Then God sustained a prophet independently of the people. That demonstrated that the people were dependent on God's word and that the word was not dependent on the people. Then the Lord himself provided for Elijah. His preservation in that way meant his work was not finished. That is what we talked about before. So that the concealment of Elijah was of revelatory significance in those senses.

But now God's word comes again to Elijah, verses 8 and 9, with a command and he's told to change his location from more of concealment at Kerith to the home of a widow in Zarephath. The word of the Lord came telling him to go to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there, "I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food."

This period of Elijah's life is divided into two phases. First, the time at the brook at Kerith and second at the home of the widow in Zarephath. When God says to change his location, the significant thing is that the location of God's working through the administration of his word is also changed. The location of God's working through the administration is thereby also changed. In other words, God's word is now going to go to Zarephath and the home of that widow in Zarephath.

It seems to me you miss that point all together if in preaching the stress is laid only on the consideration of Elijah's circumstances and Elijah's personal needs. You look at the significance of what is going on here as far as the administration of the word: it is moving that way.

Now, go a bit further than that. The significance of Elijah's move to Zarephath is first not simply that God took care of him when the brook dried up and that he waited patiently and faithfully for new instructions when that

happened. Sometimes that is the emphasis that is given. That may be true that he waited patiently and faithfully for new instructions. Elijah may be an example for us in his character traits and his faithfulness, but there's more involved.

If the message is simply God cared for Elijah when the brook dried up then what you are doing is subordinating God's command to go to Zarephath to the flow of water in the stream. I think you can say that flow of water in the stream is what led to Elijah's departure, but I don't think you can say it's the reason that explains it. God could have provided for Elijah in other ways. So what is important is not just Elijah's circumstances, but rather the change in place in the context of God's redemptive work.

F. B. Meyer's Book on Elijah

That idea of looking at Elijah's circumstances is often where you will find preachers will focus. One commentator, for example, says that about this narrative; this is F.B. Meyer. F.B. Meyer has a little book on Elijah. He says, "Take heart ye who are compelled to be constantly on the move. Pitching the tent tonight summon by the moving clouds and trumpet calls to strike it tomorrow. All this is under the direction of a wise and faithful love, which is educating you for glorious destiny. Believe only that your circumstances are those most suited to develop your character. They have been selected out of all possible combinations of events and conditions in order to effect in you a highest finish of usefulness and beauty. They would have been the ones selected by you if all the wide range of omniscient knowledge had been within your reach." That's page 29 of Myer's book on Elijah.

While all that may be true, I think there's more to be seen here than just the example of Elijah's own life and circumstances. Undoubtedly, when the brook dried up, that was a test of Elijah's faith. I wouldn't argue against that, but there's more going on. The significance is first not simply that God took care of him when the brook dried up and he waited for instruction.

The significance is also not to be found in the suggestion that the particular widow of Zarephath to whom he went was of such qualities of character and piety that she deserved a visit from Elijah above all widows of Israel and elsewhere. Meyer says, I quote, “There must have been something in her which could not be found in the many widows of the land of Israel. It was for no arbitrary reason that God passed them over and went so far afield. She must have possessed qualities of character, yarns of better thanks, sparks of heroism and of faith, which distinguished her from all the sorrowing sisterhood and made her the bohemian hostess of the prophet and the glad carrier of him in his Father’s bounty.”

Now, I think again there’s an element of truth there. Certainly a person who longs for the word of God, longs to serve and honor the true God, I think will have that longing satisfied. I think the Lord will honor that. But in this narrative what I think we are to see is the working of a sovereign God who says, “Behold, I have commanded a widow there to sustain thee.” The stress isn’t what the woman was before Elijah came, but it’s on what she had to do and what she did in obedience to the request of Elijah and response to hearing the word of the Lord.

This is the second time a command was given to Elijah concerning his location. The first is in verses 3 and 4 to go to Kerith and hide there. “And the Lord said I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” When you go to verses 8 and 9 the Lord says go to the widow of Zarephath, “I have commanded a widow to supply you with food.” Now it’s true that there’s a difference between a command to a raven and a command to a woman. But when the widow obeys the command; thus, the real basis for her response is not to be found in the inherent qualities of the woman but it’s in the grace of God who is at work in her life. Yes, his redemptive historical preaching is theocentric rather than anthropocentric in its characteristics. Now that can be carried to extremes. But usually you find it extreme the other way--the anthropocentric direction.

There’s another thing that comes into play here. Anthropocentric preaching is easy to apply just by nature of what it is. Theocentric is not easy to apply. The

message is the application that it exalts God. You get a vision of who God is that elicits a response to worship and praise him. But you see the application is much easier to do with anthropocentric preaching.

In any case, to go back to this, Elijah, as the bearer of God's word, must be sustained, and a heathen woman is now chosen to do that in place of Israel. For a while he had been sustained directly by God's own hand through the ravens and the brook, but now, when God chooses a human instrument, he goes outside Israel. He purposely bypasses his own people. That's this principle of replacement set in operation, in Elijah's relocation from Kerith to Zarephath.

So the significance of Elijah's move is not to be seen simply as God's care for Elijah; it's not to be seen in this particular widow's qualities, but rather that God tells him to go to a particular widow in Zarephath--underline Zarephath! Notice what the text says, verse 9, go to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. Zarephath belonged to Sidon. Sidon was the city that Jezebel came from. 1 Kings 16: 31: Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. Jezebel's father ruled in Sidon. So Elijah is told to go to the very place where the threat in Israel had originated. Sidon in Elijah's day was what Egypt, Babylon, or Rome in other times in history of revelation of redemption were: the center of opposition to true faith. Sidon embodied the antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan at that particular time. But God says go to Sidon; go to the heart of the enemy; dwell in the midst of Satan's kingdom because I have prepared a place for my word there. See that's what's going on.

Promise Given to the Widow

So what the Lord is saying is: I have given the task, which should be Israel's, to this widow of Zarephath. So you see the principle of replacement set in operation first in the significance in the relocation from Kerith to Zarephath. Second, you see it in the significance in the command and promise given to the widow. The widow is in a bad situation. The drought had gone beyond the borders

of Israel. That's an interesting idea, too, where the disobedience of God's people not only affects them, but other people, too. The drought had gone beyond the borders of Israel.

The widow had nothing left; she is ready to die with her son. But what's Elijah do? Verses 10 and following: "He went to Zarephath, and 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.' When she was going to get it he called and said, 'And please bring me a piece of bread.' 'Surely as the Lord your God lives, I don't have any bread: only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I'm gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son so we may eat it and die.'" So Elijah comes and asks, that was verse 13, I should have gone on. "He 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 of what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.'" So he asked for the last of her food. And he persists in that. He's really asking for everything she has.

Going Beyond Imitation into Redemptive History

Now, I think here we're clearly not dealing simply with an act with a believer and servant of God whose behavior is given to us as an example for imitation. Do any of us ask someone to give us the last of what they have for our needs? What you see here in Elijah is the act of a prophet of God in a certain time and situation who is not just seeking to have his own needs met, but he's speaking the word of God. The word of God, when it comes to us either here or anywhere in Scripture, it demands one's entire life and all that a person has as well. And that's what the word of God does here to this woman. It demands all that she has. That's really not a new idea. That's the same demand God gave to Israel. The demand is all or nothing as far as Israel was concerned.

Go back to Deuteronomy 26 where you have the regulations of bringing the

first fruits to the Lord. As Israel did that, she confessed that all they had belonged to the Lord, but Israel forgot that, turned away from the Lord, and now you see this demand of all or nothing being given to this widow of Zarephath. The task of providing for the bearer of God's word is given to her as well.

But what's also to be noticed is that the demand is at the same time a privilege because it's not given apart from a promise. Verse 14: "This is what the Lord God of Israel says: The jar of flour will not be used up, the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land." The demand is at the same time a privilege because the demand is not made apart from a promise. Meyer says it this way, "The Lord gives all that he has, but he asks for all which he gives." So what we see in the narrative is not a general promise of supply of meal and oil that's valid for all times. And I don't think from this story we have any basis for thinking the miracle we find in this story will be duplicated in all situations of need. But what we are to see is that the covenant demand and the covenant promise have come into the life of this heathen woman. As Elijah brings the word of God to this woman, the covenant demand and the covenant promise have come into the life of this heathen woman.

But also notice that the covenant blessing comes from her faith and obedience. You can't help but be struck by the faith of this woman. She goes and does what Elijah says. So as the word of the Lord came to her, and she had to react either in belief or unbelief. What you read in verse 15 is that "She went away and did what Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and 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." So we see the principle of replacement in operation in the significance in Elijah's relocation from Kerith to Zarephath and in the significance in the demand and promise given to the widow.

Death of the Widow's Son in Preaching

Third, is the significance of the prophetic ministry of Elijah in the widow's house. It's that last section, 17 to 24, where the son becomes ill and dies. When you read that, again you may ask how do you preach on a narrative of that sort? Is it given primarily to be illustrative, or exemplary? Do we look for spiritual and moral lessons to be derived from the lives and actions from the people in the story? It's often the way it's treated.

For example, I read one account of this that discusses verses 17 to 24 under this heading: "The test of the home life, and the things to be learned." Four points: one, contentment. The expositor says, "Group, we may be entirely destitute; our pantry bare; our money exhausted; and our means of livelihood gone. But our Father has ample resources. The cattle on the thousand hills; he has prepared a supply for our need; he will deliver it in time as long as we trust him. The bottom of the barrel may have been scraped today, but tomorrow there will be just enough for tomorrow's needs. Anxiety will not do you good, but the prayer for faith will." So, contentment.

Second is: Gentleness under Provocation. The widow in her distress spoke unadvisedly and cruelly to the man who had brought deliverance to her home. "Art thou come to call my sin to remembrance and to slay my son." This uncalled for and unjust remark might well have stunned the prophet and received a bitter reply, but Elijah simply said, "Give me thy son." The lesson: We need more of this practical godliness, gentleness under provocation.

Third, the power of the holy light. Somewhere in this woman's life there was a dark deed which dwarfed all of her memories of wrong doing. It filled her with a keen agony in mind, and that now sprang forward. Lesson: If anyone has a conscience of some hidden but unforgiven sin, let that one know that all efforts to forget will someday be unavailing; sickness may come, or bereavement, or bitter loss. Then that sin will spring up in horror and agony. Now she said, "Have you come to remind me of my sin" in verse 18. So the power of the holy light.

And the fourth, the secret of a giving life. It is a characteristic of those who are carrying the Holy Ghost: that they carry with them everywhere the Spirit of life, even resurrection life. We shall not only convince men of sin, but we will be channels through which the divine light may enter them; thus was it with the prophet. You see what happens there: the secret of giving light is that spiritualized resurrection when Elijah raises the son. It's spiritualizing and applying the power to all believers.

Now again, in all these points contentment, gentleness under provocation, the power of the holy life, the secret of giving light, there's some truth in explaining this passage this way which has some value. But I think you have to ask: Are the illustrations an example of this sort all that's in this passage? Is that what's the passage saying to you? To give us those kinds of illustrations, you see what you're doing if you say that's the meaning of this story is you're not preaching this text; you're preaching some other text and using this text as some illustration of some truth.

I want to come back to this. If that's not all that's here, and we ask the question: What is happening in the context of the movement of redemptive history? What progression can be seen in the progress in the revelation of redemption in this passage? I think then when we read it we can say that the death of the boy was a shock to both Elijah and to the widow. If you think a minute about the widow, here she had responded in faith and obedience. She then was living securely and safely and the flour and oil were evidence of God's power. They were evidence of fulfillment of the promise God had given to her through Elijah that she would be sustained. Undoubtedly, there were others in that city and elsewhere in great difficulty, but she and her son were secure and sustained.

Why did the Lord Take the Boy's Life? -- her sin?

But then the sudden death of her son presents a perplexing problem, and that seems to be the case for the widow and Elijah. Why did the Lord take the

boy's life? Why that particular boy? Notice neither Elijah or the widow doubt the Lord did it. Look at verse 18; the widow says to Elijah, what do you have against me? Man of the God did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son? She connects the death of her son with the presence of Elijah in her house. Elijah is the bearer of the Lord's word. And verse 20 with Elijah, "He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow whom I am staying with by causing her son to die?'" Both the widow and Elijah sense the Lord took the boy's life. The question is why.

The widow's answer is the Lord is punishing her for her sin. She felt that her sin had been brought to the Lord's attention because of Elijah's presence. "Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son," she said to Elijah. Perhaps she thought the judgment of the Lord on his people of Israel had gone past its borders of Israel; and just as he had judged them, he was judging her. Just as God's word had come to Israel, now it had come to her and the judgment followed. Perhaps she senses something of the holiness of God, that God is a consuming fire and judges evil. But she blames all of that on Elijah, and she says he is the cause. She thought her sin had been brought to the attention of God by Elijah. "What do you have against me, man of God?" She felt betrayed. Elijah promised life, but now she has death. She had been promised blessing for obedience, but now she has punishment for disobedience. So the widow's answer to the question of why is that she feels betrayed.

Elijah Ministers to the Widow Who Fed Him

But Elijah also seeks an answer to that question, and when the woman expresses her feelings he doesn't really reply to her. See, that's verse 18 where she says, "What do you have against me? Did you come to remind me of my sin?" His response is simply, "Give me your son." He doesn't reply directly. But he takes the boy to his room and in private he prays in a tone similar to that of the widow, as if to say to the Lord, why this widow and why this boy? He cries out to the

Lord, “O Lord, my God; have you brought tragedy also upon this widow whom I am staying with by causing her son to die?” Here was obedience, yet judgment; a life of service, yet death; a promise of sustenance, yet the boy dies.

But Elijah doesn’t stop there, and that’s the crucial point. Through this incident the prophetic ministry of Elijah is brought to service of the heathen widow. Now here’s the redemptive historical perspective: through this incident the prophetic ministry of Elijah is brought into the service of the heathen widow because now, as a prophet of God, he ministers to her need. There is progress in redemptive history. It’s another manifestation of the principle of replacement and operation. The death of the child brings Elijah to the place where he must minister to the widow. He must act in his prophetic function in the service of the widow. The widow is now the center of attention. Through Elijah, the Lord intervenes and speaks to her and intervenes in her life. Previously Elijah had been the center of focus in the narrative. It was the widow who served Elijah; it was the widow who provided for him and sustained him; the meal and oil were given primarily to sustain Elijah. The widow shared in the benefit of that provision, but Elijah was the center of focus. But now, through the death of the boy, the Lord reaches down directly into the widow’s life as Elijah ministers to the widow.

Boy Brought Back to Life

The final result is seen in verse 24 after the boy is brought back to life. Then the widow says to Elijah. “Now I know that you are a man of the Lord and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.” See, that’s the result: As Elijah ministers to the widow, she confesses that the word of the Lord is true. So through this difficult and perplexing experience the widow is brought to a confession concerning the truth and trustworthiness of God’s word.

So the shock over the death of the son did two things. First, it showed a weakness in the woman. She was not completely convinced by God’s promise. She was not completely governed by God’s word. And when the crisis came she

did not respond correctly at first. She mistrusted Elijah and his God. She faced a difficult situation. It was at a time of apparent contradiction between God's promises and his works. And when that came, she did not remain confident in his word. Remember, Abraham had a similar situation. Promise, and then God says, "Slay your son," to test of Abraham's faith. It is a similar sort of thing. So the shock of the death of the son did two things. It showed a weakness in the woman: She wasn't completely convinced of God's promise. Second, it drove Elijah to prayer for vindication of the word of God. Elijah came to God and wrestled in prayer on the basis of God's promise to the widow. He knew that God's word must be vindicated, and he saw only one way--the raising of the boy from the dead.

First Resurrection in Scripture

And so in verse 21 he said, "O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him." I think it's likely the promise for sustenance for the widow and her son, verse 14, was the basis for that prayer. The result was, for the first time in scripture, we read of a resurrection from death. And notice that that marvelous thing happened not in Israel but in a heart of a heathen world in Zarephath of Sidon. The effect is clear through Elijah's ministry: The Lord chose himself to be the Almighty God; he is the one who kills and makes alive. He is the one who is holy but gracious; he is the one whose word is true and in which men can trust. That rich revelation is given to this widow of Zarephath through the means of narrative.

The principle of replacement set in operation can be seen in the significance of Elijah's relocation from Kerith to Zarephath going to the heart of the enemy territory, in the significance of the command and promise given to the widow, and in the significance of the prophetic ministry of Elijah in the widow's life. I thought by way of illustration of this method it would be worth the time and help us focus.

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