

## **1 Kings 17 – God’s life-giving word.**

### **Introduction.**

It’s a big thing to trust someone with your life. You’ll understand this at small level if you’ve ever done that trust exercise where someone says to you “turn around, close your eyes, fall backwards, and I’ll catch you.” In such a moment you have to make the call as to whether you can trust the word of that person. Is he/she the sort of person that is capable of catching me, or is they just a little clumsy? Are they sort of person who would step to the side at the last minute as cruel a practical joke?

Now, falling backyards is one thing, what about the trust required if you were to ever go skydiving where you have to jump out of a plane attached to a professional skydiver. When he says to you at a 5000 feet above the earth: “don’t worry, I won’t forget to pull the cord, you’ll have an amazing experience.” Could you trust those words when the stakes of life are so high?

It’s a big thing to trust someone with your very life. We have to know their words are reliable and true.

Well in tonight’s passage God is wanting you to see that He is someone you can trust with your life. In fact this passage shows us that God is someone who you can trust to *give* you life in a broken world marked by sin and death. I’ve titled this new sermon series “God’s word for a broken world.” And tonight we, in this first talk, we are going to spend some time thinking about how reliable God’s life-giving word is.

In today's passage, we see God essentially saying to both His prophet Elijah and a no name Widow: "trust me with your life." I'll save you, I'll sustain you. Both people, hear God's word, believe it and ultimately reap the blessings. As we look at these examples and then to the life-giving words of Jesus which they point to – God is wanting you to cry out along with the woman at the end of this chapter: "Now I know that the word of the Lord is the truth." I too can trust my life into God's hands.

### **Context**

But first, some context. Where are we in the biblical storyline? Who's who and what is happening?

The account we are reading today comes in a time in Israel's history in which God's people were divided into two kingdoms – The northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah. These two territories had once been united under the rule of King David and then His son King Solomon, but the kingdom had divided following Solomon's death and, as a result, you now had two lines of kings each ruling one of these kingdoms. Now, while the southern kingdom did have a few pretty-good kings among a host of bad ones, the northern kingdom (Israel) basically had no good kings. Israel was a sorry story of one bad king after another - all simple refused to honour God and worship him in the devoted way He called for. And in fact, King Ahab, the northern King at the time of Elijah, is actually described as the worst of all of Israel's kings that had come before him. In 1 kings 16 we read this about him:

*<sup>30</sup> Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. <sup>31</sup> He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat (the first bad king of the north), but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and*

*began to serve Baal and worship him. <sup>32</sup> He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. <sup>33</sup> Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.*

The king of God's people was supposed to be the one who would lead the people in trusting God and living in His way in the land. Ahab does the complete opposite. He establishes a pagan god known as Baal as the god who would now be worshipped and served in Israel. What little acknowledgement of the Lord that had been around previously was now completely removed through a religious revolution in Ahab.

During the French revolution the atheistic revolutionary leaders outlawed Christianity and turned many famous Catholic cathedrals into what they called "temples of reason". In the Notre-Dame Cathedral for instance, busts of philosophers were placed along the nave of the building and an alter dedicated to reason was erected in the prime position. Crowds would gather in these former churches and pay homage to an opera singer who personified the goddess of liberty. **The word of "human reason" replaced the word of God's revelation.**

Can you imagine living as a Christian in French society at that time - amidst that kind of idolatry? Now imagine, being sent by God to call out the main idolater and revolutionary leader. That was Elijah's lot in idolatrous Israel. Elijah was a prophet of God from a back-water Israelite town called Tishbe and he was used by God, to get God message across to His people Israel – to proclaim judgment on their idolatry so they would wake up from their sin and start trusting God again. Verse 1 starts on that note:

*17 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe<sup>12</sup> 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.”*

A nation rejecting God would now be a nation judged by God – “no rain, except at my word”

Now if verse 1 gives us a picture of the *misery* that results from rejecting God, the rest of this chapter gives us a picture of the *life* and *security* that flows from trusting in God and his word. So let’s look at the first picture we get of God’s life-giving word to Elijah.

### **1. God’s word of life to His prophet.**

And you see, it is a life-giving word isn’t it? God doesn’t say to Elijah, “thanks for passing on my message to that evil tyrant who will now want to kill you, good luck and all the best.” No, God doesn’t leave Elijah to fend for himself, He tells him, “trust me with your life.” “Go and hide out in a remote location east of Israel (v.2) and I’ll look after you when you get there. How? Delivery ravens. Look at verses 4:

*<sup>4</sup> You will drink from the brook, and I have directed **the ravens** to supply you with food there.”*

Think about that for a moment. “trust me with your life, I’ll send you the ravens.” Do you trust God’s word, or do you try and think up a more reasonable plan?

Elijah trusts God's word with his life and it pays off. Verse 5 tells us that "he did what the Lord had told him, goes to the hide out location, and just as God had said (v.6):

*<sup>6</sup> The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.*

Elijah gets his first recorded taste of God's surprising and wonderful faithfulness here. These delivery ravens were a reminder morning and evening that God's word is trustworthy.

A quick word about miracles. If you're not a Christian here tonight, you might here about miracles and simply think: "okay I'm checking out at this point." Miracles in the Bible never happened. I believe in science. If that's you, let me encourage you not to check out. If it's true that God exists, (and I think there is good evidence that He does), and if it's the case that He desires to make Himself known to our world in particular key moments of His choosing, wouldn't it make sense that He (as God) could easily do so in a way that is beyond the physical laws that govern our world. Don't be too quick to dismiss the miracles that you will be reading about throughout this series.

Now God sustains Elijah for quite some time in this spot, enough time for the effect of the drought to reach his hide out. You see that in verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup> Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.*

Now, if I was Elijah I'd be starting to feel a little anxious at this point. Bread and meat is good, but I'm going to need something to wash it down with or I'm in trouble. But, notice,

it's at this moment, when his life is on the line again, that God's life-giving word interjects into the story again. Look at verse 8:

*<sup>8</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: <sup>9</sup> "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed **a widow** there to supply you with food."*

Now you need to appreciate just how shocking this word may have been for Elijah. God was not promising him that he would be looked after by a secret God-fearing, well-to-do Israelite. He was promising him that a pagan widow in the Baal worshipping territory of Sidon, would be his help! A widow. A person, who in ancient times, would have been among the most impoverished – unable to provide for herself let alone anyone else. God is essentially saying to Elijah, "trust me with your life and go to that widow!"

Elijah trusted God when it was ravens, he trusts God now when it's a widow! Verse 10 tells us that he goes to her town of Zarephath (v.10) and there his life is further sustained just as God had said it would be.

Through the unexpected means of ravens and a widow, God is showing us here with Elijah that His word is powerful and reliable to give and sustain life.

And I think we need that reminder now more than ever. If we want true life and lasting security we will only find it in God. I've been reflecting on the covid19 vaccines and the way in which most of our world think about them. What I often hear from many news commentators when these vaccines are talk about (particularly in the early days) was the language of miracle – "isn't it miraculous that a vaccine has been developed so quickly! But

in the minds of most it's not a miracle that has come from God's kindness, but a miracle that has come from humanity's intellect and power. The wisdom of our scientists, the wealth of our governments, the service structures in our community. That's how we pulled off a miracle to save ourselves.

But God is showing us here that his word has a power to save and sustain life that is so much better than the best efforts of our world.

The vaccines are great and we should be thankful for them, but they can only ever delay death, not reverse it. God's life-giving word has the power to defeat death itself if we will listen to it and trust it. And that's what we see in his dealings with a no name widow. So let's look at her story now. Point 2 – God's word of life to a destitute widow.

## **2. A Destitute widow**

Read with me from verse 10 and try and get a sense of how desperate her situation is:

*<sup>10</sup> 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?" <sup>11</sup> As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."*

*<sup>12</sup> "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 olive 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."*

Do you get the sense of how helpless and fearful she is at this point? She is staring starvation directly in the face. She is convinced that once that half cup of flour and oil in her cupboard

is gone, she will soon be gone. But it's not just her is it? She is experiencing every parent's nightmare in the thought of her child dying as a child. She knows that he too will soon starve to death also. The grief and horror she must be going through! And into all of this, a prophet from Israel walks into her front yard asks for bread! Now I'm sure in normal circumstances, she would have obliged, but at this point, to give that last bit of food away would essentially be give away her last few treasured days with her son. How could she give away something so precious?

Into all of this desperation, God (through His prophet) tells her "trust me with your life."

Look at verse 13:

*<sup>13</sup> Elijah said to her, **"Don't be afraid."** Go home and do as you have 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. (You see the call to faith – let go of your little, and God will give you a lot) <sup>14</sup> 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.'"*

"Don't be afraid." That is God's first message to her. "All the things that terrify you about your situation I'll look after. You'll be fine. You're not going to starve, you're not going to lose your son. I'll look after you both. Trust me with your life."

And just like Elijah, she does. This poor widow basically says, "okay God, I'm betting everything I have on you. I will trust what you say." And that's really what it is to put your trust in God in the way He wants you to – it is to say – you get everything God – my whole

life, in your hands, trusting in your promise of life. You see her trust played out in her actions – verse 15: “she went away and did as Elijah had told her.” And what was the result? (V.15)

*So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

She had gone all in with God’s word and it paid off big time.

But it’s not quite a happily ever after at this point is it? This woman goes from experiencing the glory of God’s provision to witnessing the horror of her son’s death. Read with me from verse 17:

*<sup>17</sup> Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. <sup>18</sup> 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?”*

They are some serious words of anguish aren’t they?

Maybe you have gone through a massive grief of your own and you know where this woman is coming from. The unbearable pain. The anger perhaps directed at God. All the “why” questions. Maybe like this woman, you’ve thought that your suffering is a form of punishment from a God who is perhaps *isn’t* as gracious as you first thought.

You can imagine her words to Elijah: “you told me not to be afraid. You said God would save me *and* my son, but my big initial fear has become a reality! My boy is dead. Am I such a terrible sinner that God would want to set me up so highly to be brought low so severely?!” Have you ever been in that head space? It’s like that trust exercise, the woman heard God say fall back and I’ll catch you, only to now think he has stepped aside to let her crash.

So how does Elijah respond to this woman? Well, he goes to God in prayer and pleads to God for the boy’s life. Verse 19

*19 “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. 20 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?” 21 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!”*

It’s hard to know the exact reason why Elijah stretches himself over the boy three times, but the best explanation I’ve read of is that it was a symbolic act in which Elijah is saying “please God, as life runs through my outstretched body may it run through his body again.”

Elijah is crying out for life in the horrible face of death.

I don't know about you, but I watched Prince Philip's funeral service last week, I have a big soft spot for the Queen and I have to say, I was just really sad seeing her sitting there now as a widow herself, all alone and grieving for her husband of 74 years. Death is awful. Even when the person has lived a full and long life, that doesn't take the sting away, it's still sad. And it affects each of us, whether you're an honoured Queen or an overlooked widow. Death is awful, it takes those we love and one day it will take us.

But for this widow in the passage, in this moment of time, death doesn't get the final say over her son. God does something breath-takingly wonderful. He hears Elijah's prayer and raise the boy to life. "the boys life returned to him and he lived!"

*<sup>23</sup> 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!"*

In allowing her son to die and then raising him up to life, God shows this woman that his word of life is so trustworthy that not even death itself can stop it. She had not been set up. She would not be left disappointed. She would get more than she could possibly have imagined from God. And that's why she replies the ways she does to Elijah, verse 24:

*<sup>24</sup> 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."*

The big point of 1 kings 17 is that we look at what God does for Elijah and this widow and reach the same conclusion as the woman – The life-giving word of the lord is the truth – it's reliable! If you listen to it. If you trust it, you won't be disappointed!

### **Christ connection.**

Now I suspect many of us wish we had Elijah living in our spare bedroom like this woman. I mean, wouldn't be great not to have to go the shops but simply have your house guest keep the cupboards full? Or wouldn't it be so good to have someone with you who could plead to God on your behalf to change an awful situation, the death of a loved one, a bad diagnosis, a relationship breakdown. I suspect many of us get to the end of this passage and think, wouldn't it be nice if God sent an Elijah into my life.

Well the truth of the matter is that God has given you someone far better who has better word of life for you. God has given you Jesus. This passage gives us a taste of God's power to bring life, but it's only in Jesus that God's life-giving power is revealed in its full glory.

You see, Jesus did not just arrive on the scene like Elijah as a "man of God." He came to the world as a man who *is* God. Where Elijah needs to plead with God to bring the boy's life back, Jesus in the gospels simply speaks and at His word the dead are raised. In fact there was a moment in Jesus' ministry where he came across a widow who's only son died. What did he do? Luke 7 tells us that He simply walks up to the dead body and speaks:

*<sup>14</sup> ... "Young man, I say to you, get up!" <sup>15</sup> The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.*

This is Jesus showing us that *He* has God's power to bring life in the face of death. You can trust *Him* with your life.

But the wonderful thing about Jesus is that he didn't just come to give us a little more of this life. You see, while it is wonderful that both the son of the widow in Elijah's time and the son of the widow in Jesus' day were raised, the truth is, that both boys would have once again started to grow old, continue experiencing the trials of this life and then still eventually die.

Now I don't say that just to be a party pooper. I say it to show you that a true answer to death has to go further. And Jesus gives that to us through his death and resurrection. You see death is ultimately God's punishment for our sin and rebellion against God. We die because we have chosen to ignore God and reject his rule in our life. But in taking our punishment of death on the cross for us, Jesus brings us forgiveness of sin, and life that is eternal – Life in which we are reconciled to the God we were separated from. Life that is spiritual. Life that will last beyond death into eternity. The widows son was raised to a little more of this life. Jesus tells us that he is the resurrection and the life and that He raise us up bodily to an eternity of life in the new heavens and new earth – where brokenness, trials, and death is no more. Which resurrection would you prefer? What What comes to the boy through the prophet Elijah, or what Jesus offers his people through his death and resurrection?

1 Kings 17 is a foretaste of the better life that Jesus offers you. Have you put your trust in Jesus and His word of life to you? Because he is most certainly saying that you will find forgiveness and eternal life if you trust him: "Trust me with your life." I love the apostle Peter's response when Jesus' asks him if he would be like so many of the Jews in His day and give up on following Jesus.

*<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup> and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

Follow Peter’s example and trust Jesus with your life. The widow shows us that going all in with God is the best decision you can make in life. If you would like to talk further about that, then come and speak to me or sign up to our CE course that begins this Tuesday.

But, finally, to those of you who have gone all in with Jesus and are trusting Him with your life, this passage is a call to *keep* trusting him when disappointments, hardships, terrible griefs rattle our trust. Because they do don’t they. Elijah had to watch as the brook dried up before his eyes, the widow had to watch as her son’s life slowly ebbed away. Both were trusting in God, both experienced hardships. And for the woman, it rattled her to the core – as I’m sure it has with many of you:

- “How could you let me lose my job like this God?”
- “Why am I suffering with this illness God?”
- “God, I’m in grief, I want my loved one back.”
- “God, life feels so lonely, do you even care? Am I being punished?”

There will be times in life (and perhaps you’re going through one now) where you wonder whether Jesus’ word of life to you is truly reliable. Has he stepped to the side in my exercise of trust in Him?

So to those of you who are walking through midst of loneliness, physical pain, grief, heartbreak, joblessness, please know that Jesus words of eternal life and love are trustworthy. Keep crying out to him, keep asking Him for strength, don't loose hope.

Like Elijah and the widow, if you keep listening, keep trusting, you will not be disappointed. Jesus will walk with you in the pain as He has promised. He will give you grace to endure as He has promised. He will keep loving you as He has promised. And whether or not he brings about temporary relief in this world, He will certainly raise you up to a life and eternity in which every broken aspect of your world is made right.

So keep that day in mind. For on that day, you will surely be singing along with the widow of this passage "I know that word of the Lord Jesus is the truth."

Trust him with your life.