



Reflections on  
1 Kings 17:1-16 [1]  
Elijah, God and the widow.

Elijah comes from nowhere. We haven't heard of him before. Now, without notice, he appears for God's purposes. God has a timing to all our callings. And its timing is not up to us, but up to Him. That is one of the dimensions of grace. You, I, we may be yearning to do stuff for Him, but the first thing we have to learn is to trust in Him to call us at his time.

Elijah appears to proclaim God's judgement over Israel due to Ahab's sin. Ahab is the king. He represents the people. So when he goes wrong the nation suffers. Just as your family suffers if you go wrong. Sin has consequences. And the greater the area of your influence, the wider the spread of your sins' consequences.

Several and many wonder if the present coronavirus crisis is or is not a judgement over our nation. How might we decide this? One good measure is this. In the scripture God does not send judgement without first sending warnings or an opportunity to repent – so the judgement becomes needless. [Standing before Elijah, Ahab could ask what could he do to avert the drought. But he doesn't.] Before this virus came upon us I can't remember any specific warnings from God to change or be judged. I can't remember any specific invitation to repent or suffer the consequences. To me then this virus is a great evil. A product of our fallen world and the dark heart of the prince of this world, who loves to hurt and harm all God's creation. It's an evil, but not, I think, a judgement.

Having faithfully fulfilled his charge from God to proclaim His judgement, God then acts to provide and care for Elijah, for He has future work for him. Whatever his fate may be, Elijah's purpose in God cannot be cut off by man. Jesus went to His cross when His hour had come, not before. For all who are faithful to God's purposes so it will also be – God will guard and keep us while we do His will.

Of course this provision may come in surprising and challenging ways. Elijah has to hide himself in the Kerith Ravine, drink from its brook and be

fed by daily delivery ravens! Something perhaps particularly challenging to a prophet, who would know that ravens were unclean under the law. Yet he does as God tells him. We should not suppose that if Elijah had decided to do otherwise that he would have been safely hidden, fed and watered. The ravens would not have searched him out – they were in God’s service not his. But Jezebel would have. It’s in our obedience that our safety lies. Disobedience takes us out of God’s provision, unless we repent. It’s better to obey in the first place – it saves a lot of suffering.

Because of the drought the brook dries up. That was no surprise to God. He had already prepared a follow-up care package. He has commanded a widow in Zarephath in Sidon to provide Elijah with food. Sidon! That’s the homeland of Jezebel, the homeland of the enemy of Elijah and God, where Baal and Asherah are worshipped as the state religion. But, even there, as in Rome and Caesar’s calling for the Christmas census, God works even through His enemies to achieve His purposes. And again Elijah obeys.

He goes and at the town gates he sees and greets the said widow woman. This is not a lucky coincidence, it is a God-incidence, for so God overcomes the human question, how will Elijah know, in this enemy town, who will be God’s provider for him?

We should not misunderstand what it means that God has commanded the widow. She was not standing at the gates waiting for Elijah to come. She hadn’t been given the prophet’s description. She hadn’t been given some means or power or signal to recognise Elijah. And when he speaks to her, she doesn’t say, “You must be Elijah. The Lord has commanded me to provide food for you.” There is no evidence in the scripture that she has faith in God. But God knows the people He has called to his purposes. He knows that she was a woman who would respond to Elijah with kindness.

Kindness is a common grace. It should flow between all people for it is part of the character of God, in whose image we are made. It should, of course be a fruit in the behaviour of the saved, but being kind to others is not a saving action – for we are not saved by our kind works but by God’s grace, God’s kindness to us. The widow, in the common grace of the milk of human kindness responds positively to Elijah’s request for a drink of a little water from, what we can assume, are very meagre resources.

But, as she goes to do that Elijah calls to her: “And bring me, please, a piece of bread”. That is not so easy a thing for her to do. And her response to him is a politely stated refusal. “ I don’t have any bread....” and she confesses that she is seeking to eat a last meal with her son, before they both die. It’s in Elijah’s response to her that we see the gospel at work.

Firstly, “Don’t be afraid. That’s God’s great word of peace and assurance. It speaks into her heart. In the midst of the famine she must have been very afraid for herself and her son. These words call her to pause. There was no condemnation in them of her refusal to share bread, but assurance. Don’t be afraid. Surely these words were anointed with the Holy Spirit who so strongly walked with Elijah.

“Go home and do as you have said.” These are not words of challenge but of acceptance. She’s not being judged but understood.

“But first make a small cake for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.” Elijah isn’t seeking a feast at her expense. Before she can reason out what to do and say, Elijah offers God’s promise. In her plight he has spoken peace. In her struggle he now speaks promise. “For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says.” She will have heard of the God of Israel and what He can do for His people. Now she hears what He will do for her and her son. ‘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.’

In her actions she shows her trust in the promise. In her trust in the promise is her coming into a saving faith. She went away and did as Elijah told her. And the word of the Lord ran true for her.

Which leaves us with the great question – does our faith in the security of our present blessing rest on such trust? Would we give up a good portion of what we have to serve the Lord?