

Limited Resources, Limitless God

Session 4

December 28, 2025

When Your Provisions Fall Short

The Point: God provides what you need when you need it.

Session Passage: 1 Kings 17:5-16

1 Kings 17:5-7

Connection to the Point: God provided for Elijah through ravens.

The Setting. In the opening verses of 1 Kings 17, the writer introduced Elijah as he proclaimed a word for the Lord to the new king of Israel. The prophet hailed from Gilead east of the Jordan River, near an obscure village called Tishbe. Coming from the rough, mountainous region known for its high peaks and deep valleys, Elijah came from the backwoods. He displayed the sophistication and tact of a mountain man. His name meant “Yahweh is my God,” a fitting name since he focused mainly on proving the superiority of the Lord over the local Canaanite storm god and bringer of rain, Baal.

Israel’s new king, Ahab, under the influence of his wife, Jezebel (16:29-33), installed Baalism as an official state-sponsored religion. Baal’s followers believed this god to be the one who restored life to all living things after the hot summer months. Elijah pronounced a drought on Israel lasting for years (17:1) which exposed Baal as impotent and set the stage for the next few chapters. This pronouncement served as a direct claim of Yahweh’s authority over Baal because the drought and subsequent famine would last for as long as the Lord directed. The agricultural-based economy made Israel heavily dependent on the seasonal fall and spring rains for the success of their crops. Not all the famines and droughts had connections to divine judgment, but this one during the reign of Ahab definitely came from God. Many times in the past, God had warned His people that disobedience through the worship of idols would result in judgment (Lev. 26:3-4,18-19; Deut. 11:16-17).

So he proceeded to do what the LORD commanded (v. 5). Immediately following his pronouncement of the drought to Ahab, God told Elijah to go and hide at the Wadi Cherith (1 Kings 17:4). Here Elijah could stay out of Ahab and Jezebel’s sight while they dispatched search parties in order to wipe out as many of the prophets of the Lord as possible (18:4-13). God promised to provide for him with water from the brook and sustenance provided by ravens (17:2-4). Elijah immediately obeyed God’s command to demonstrate his faith that the Lord would provide for His prophet as the entire land sunk into the extended drought.

Elijah left and lived at the Wadi Cherith where it enters the Jordan (v. 5). The prophet acted as the Lord led him—one step at a time—leaving the spotlight in Samaria and waiting in obscurity near a rocky creek bed. He had delivered God’s message to Ahab and immediately left for the Wadi Cherith and stayed there until God told him to move. Numerous wadis, or rocky watercourses, slash through various areas in the Middle East. Wadis generally remain dry until rainy seasons, when they can transform into raging torrents. While no one can identify with certainty the exact wadi, many favor a location east of the Jordan. Such a location would have returned Elijah to his home territory in Gilead.

The ravens kept bringing him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening (v. 6). God not only controlled the rain but also made the ravens subservient to Him by bringing food to Elijah twice a day. The Hebrew participle, translated “kept bringing,” expresses a continuous state of activity, meaning that the ravens would do the Lord’s bidding until He ordered otherwise. Ravens, known to roost in desolate rocky areas, had a habit of stashing excess foods in the craggy outcroppings along the wadi. Certainly God’s hand in these provisions for His prophet included having the ravens bring a more fresh supply of meat rather than their normal diet of carrion, or decaying flesh. Still, in order for him to survive, Elijah would have had to overcome any hesitation of taking food that came from the beak of an unclean animal, otherwise he would have died of starvation. He did not dine on the finest of food every day, but God taught Elijah that he could trust in His provisions.

He would drink from the wadi (v. 6). The command for Elijah to get his drinking water from the wadi further highlighted that the Lord controlled nature for His prophet’s provision. These miraculous provisions of food and water point back to the provisions of water, manna, and quail for Israel during the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites (Ex. 16:1–17:7).

After a while, the wadi dried up because there had been no rain in the land (v. 7). The Hebrew phrase at the beginning of the verse literally meant “at the end of days.” In other words, no precise time period before the wadi stopped flowing can be determined. Although the drought went on for more than three years (Jas. 5:17), the context suggested that Elijah probably lived at the Wadi Cherith for roughly a year. The ravens kept supplying Elijah with food, but the wadi eventually played out. The drought he had proclaimed to Ahab had claimed another casualty—his own water supply. He knew this day would come. Day by day he watched the water flow reduce from a gushing stream to a mere trickle, yet the writer never hinted of any anxiety in Elijah. Nor did the prophet consider finding another water source. He waited until he heard from God. Elijah had learned to depend upon the Lord for his water and food supply, but he still had some lessons to learn about how God would miraculously continue providing for him.

1 Kings 17:8-12

Connection to the Point: God changed the way He provided for Elijah by sending him to a widow in Zarephath.

Then the word of the LORD came to him (v. 8). After months of waiting and surviving on what the ravens supplied and the water from the wadi, God had not forgotten His prophet. Neither had his training ended because the Lord sent Elijah to another surprising location where He would continue shaping His prophet to trust Him even more. This next phase of his training would move Elijah from God providing him with his basic human needs of food and water to deepening his relationship with God to absolute trust. Elijah emerged from this wilderness training camp as a man prepared to serve God fueled by a deepening trust in Him.

Get up, go to Zarephath that belongs to Sidon and stay there (v. 9). God gave Elijah three commands. First, God ordered Elijah to leave the dried up brook—not a difficult task. Next, He told him to travel about eighty to ninety miles northeast to the Mediterranean coastal city of Zarephath, not far from the Phoenician city of Sidon. Jezebel, who came from Sidon, had imported the worship of Baal into Israel. This placed Elijah in the heart of Baal’s home turf for the remainder of the drought. Traveling cross-country through the enemy’s land meant that Elijah had to trust God for his protection from any of Ahab’s men who searched far and wide for him. The city’s name, Zarephath, came from a Hebrew word meaning “to melt or refine” and the city may have had a smelting plant of some sort. The third command, “stay there,” signaled to Elijah that this crucible period of learning would last a while. Here, the Lord would further refine His prophet for what God had planned for the rest of his life. Here on Phoenician soil, where the people worshiped Baal, God prepared His prophet to demonstrate Yahweh’s absolute power over Baal’s impotence.

Look, I have commanded a woman who is a widow to provide for you there (v. 9). Just as He had directed the ravens to feed Elijah at Cherith, God commanded an unnamed widow in Zarephath to provide for him there. God’s sovereignty extends over all people, including pagan kings (2 Chron. 36:22), and specifically it extended to this woman. However, one can only imagine Elijah’s shock in learning that a Gentile widow would provide for him. How could a widow woman feeling the brunt of a famine possibly feed him? After all, Phoenicia depended heavily upon Israel for much of its food supply (1 Kings 5:9). Therefore, the effects of the drought and subsequent famine in Israel would have necessarily challenged her ability to take on another person to feed. A poor, destitute, depressed widow facing starvation hardly sounded like a viable source to sustain Elijah through this famine. Yet, God had begun refining His prophet’s trust at Cherith and would now continue that process in Zarephath. Here in this pagan place, a widow would provide Elijah with the provisions he would need for the extended period of the famine.

So Elijah got up and went to Zarephath (v. 10). The prophet’s immediate obedience proved that he had learned the disciplines of solitude and obscurity at Cherith. He had learned to depend on God. Here the refining process would continue in the home of a widow woman. Although it made no sense from a human perspective, Elijah trusted that God could provide for him through one the poorest people in town.

When he arrived at the city gate, there was a widow gathering wood (v. 10). Perhaps Elijah hoped that in a city God would supply better provisions than what He had from the ravens at Cherith. However, seeing a widow gathering meager scraps for firewood would have dashed the prophet’s hope for something substantial. Poor people would run out of supplies first

during a famine. A widow foraging for scraps of wood meant that this woman had little to offer him. Elijah walked straight into an impossible situation, yet he handled it with faith.

Elijah called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup and let me drink” (v. 10). By the time Elijah crossed the desert and made it to Zarephath, he would have desperately needed water. He mustered up his faith and called for the widow to bring him some water.

As she went to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand” (v. 11). With her favorable response, Elijah reached down for enough faith to test the woman to see if God had appointed her to provide for him.

But she said, “As the LORD your God lives” (v. 12). These words do not prove that this woman was a worshiper of the true God. Any Phoenician would have recognized Elijah’s garb and manner, so she addressed him as a follower of Yahweh.

I don’t have anything baked—only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the jug (v. 12). The famine had reduced her food resources to a bare minimum. She had nothing to share with Elijah. Perhaps drought had decimated Zarephath’s grain and oil, given the severity of the famine.

Just now, I am gathering a couple of sticks in order to go prepare it for myself and my so so we can eat it and die (v. 12). She gathered twigs and small pieces of wood to build a small fire to prepare her last bit of food. To have a stranger ask for some water would pose no real threat; however, for him to lay claim to her last meal would have forced the issue. She fully expected that following this last meal that she and her son would starve to death.

1 Kings 17:13-16

Connection to the Point: God provided for the widow as she obediently trusted the instructions God gave her through Elijah.

Then Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid; go and do as you have said” (v. 13). Elijah put the lessons he had learned at Cherith about the Lord’s faithfulness into action. The woman could only see hopelessness if she honored his request as she looked at her handful of flour, her tiny bit of oil, and the few sticks she had gathered. The prophet’s request did not make sense to her, and her circumstances had rightly made her afraid. However, Elijah had experienced God’s miraculous provisions at Cherith so he could declare with confidence, “Don’t be afraid.”

But first make me a small loaf from it and bring it out to me (v. 13). Elijah told this destitute widow to go back home and bake him a small loaf of bread and bring it to him first. Given her extreme circumstance, this command would have come across as one of the hardest tests ever given.

Afterward, you may make some for yourself and your son (v. 13). Only after making some bread for this travel-weary stranger could she return home to make something for herself and her son to eat.

For this is what the LORD God of Israel says (v. 14). Elijah’s emerging faith led him to make a promise to the widow based on the authority of the Lord God of Israel. Having depended upon God’s provision through the ravens at Cherith, Elijah had learned that God honored His promises.

‘The flour jar will not become empty and the oil jug will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the surface of the land’” (v. 14). The prophet gave the woman the reason why she should not be afraid to take this major risk with her last bit of food. Elijah had learned that the word of Lord that brought on the drought (17:1) could also sustain the supply of flour and oil for this woman throughout the famine.

So she proceeded to do according to the word of Elijah (v. 15). Surprisingly, the woman did not flip out or run away. She believed Elijah and fed him first. The widow’s immediate obedience offered a clear picture of faith. She trusted in what Elijah told her to do, wagering everything upon the veracity of Yahweh’s word.

Then the woman, Elijah, and her household ate for many days (v. 15). God provided for the widow as she obediently trusted the instructions God gave her through Elijah. Her simple trust that the Lord would take care of her and her son overcame all the objections she could have mustered. God had chosen her to act as a channel of supply for the prophet's continuing life and ministry. Because she willingly shared what little she had with the prophet, God made her little supply of flour and oil last throughout all the days of the famine.

The flour jar did not become empty, and the oil jar did not run dry (v. 16). Throughout the long drought and famine, this woman had no reason to complain. Each morning when she arose and went over to the flour jar and the oil jug, she found just enough to make bread for one more day. God replenished the flour and oil each time she used them. Her obedience resulted in receiving a daily supply of God's blessings. She and her son learned the meaning of what Jesus taught in the model prayer, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). This quiet, daily miracle continued every morning with a fresh episode of God's faithfulness to His promise. The widow and her son did not starve because of the Lord's miraculous provision.

According to the word of the LORD he had spoken through Elijah (v. 16). This pagan woman learned that she could trust her existence to the mere word of God through His prophet. Even while the famine had dreadful consequences to the people in her country, this widow had no reason to complain about the severe test she had to endure. The Lord had spoken through His prophet, and she obeyed those instructions.

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