

1 Kings 17 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

III. The Kingdom Divides • 12:1-24

In the early days of the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, Israel broke into 2 separate nations;

Judah to the south with its capital at Jerusalem and continuing under the reign of the house of David.

The 10 northern tribes formed a confederacy called **Israel** with its capital at **Samaria**.

Israel was ruled by a succession of *different royal dynasties*.

Want to do just a quick recap of the kings we've seen so far.

In Judah; Rehoboam, Abijam, & Asa.

In Israel, Jeroboam, the 1st king was followed by Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, and his son Ahab, who we ended with last week.

Now, before we dive in to the fascinating story of the prophet Elijah, want to set the scene in terms of world history.

The Scriptures give us scant mention of the geopolitical situation of the Middle East at this time.

But we know from the chronicles of other nations what was going on.

While **Omri**, Ahab's father, is given brief attention here, he did *much* to restore Israel as one of the major powers in the area.

He *reconquered* Moab which had broken away from Israel when the nation split in 2.

He was the one who first made the city of Samaria the capital of the northern Kingdom.

Excavations there reveal a large city with intricate fortifications & a prosperous culture.

Israel's emergence at this time under Omri was due to the alliance he forged with the Phoenicians along the western border.

That alliance was cemented by Ahab's marriage to the daughter of the King of Tyre, Jezebel.

The Phoenicians were a seafaring trade based economy that needed secure access to the rich grain-producing lands east of them in Israel.

Israel needed the lucrative trade routes controlled by the Phoenicians, so it was a mutually beneficial relationship that enriched both kingdoms.

But as Israel's power grew, the Syrians to the northeast saw an emerging threat to their holdings on their southern border.

An intense rivalry between Israel & Damascus ensued that lasted until a greater threat from farther north began to loom, the *Assyrians*, which drove Israel & Syrian into an alliance to stave off the Assyrian challenge.

XIII. Ahab (Israel) • 16:29-22:40

A. Ahab's Wickedness • 16:29-34

Last week we wrapped it up with a look at King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king of Tyre & Sidon.

Jezebel was no passive woman, she was a determined promoter of pagan religion.

Before becoming king, her father **Ethbaal** was a priest of the fertility goddess Astarte.

He assassinated the previous king Hiram whose royal dynasty had been long time allies of the house of David.

Ethbaal killed Hiram & stole the throne of Tyre & Sidon, then recommitted the Phoenicians to pagan religion.

His daughter was devoted to **Baal**, the god of weather & war.

Baal was a violent, capricious deity whose worship was a sadistic, brutal abomination.

Jezebel was an unabashed apologist for evil.

When her moving van pulled up to Ahab's palace in Samaria, she unloaded more than her baggage - she also unloaded her Baals; not "bales" as in piles; I mean "B—A—A—L."

She also unloaded her idols to Asherah, Baal's female consort & the goddess of fertility.

I won't describe the unimaginable perversions by which these gods were worshipped by the Phoenicians.

Let it suffice to say what's considered XXXX smut & criminal by today's standards was normal fare among the Phoenicians in the worship of Baal & Asherah.

History tells us the Phoenicians had launched out from their bases at Tyre & Sidon & had **colonized** the shores of north Africa; the colony was called **Carthage**.

Years later when the Romans came into contact with Carthage, they were appalled by the horrific practices of the Phoenicians.

Listen when **Romans** find something sick & immoral, it **HAS** to be bad!

Jezebel brought all this with her & soon, what had been the practice of the Phoenicians became the practice in the cities of Israel.

Ahab & Jezebel were at the **forefront** of this parade of debauchery.

From her own purse Jezebel built a huge temple to Asherah in Jezreel & hired 450 priests to service the altar of Baal.

She led in the destruction of the worship of Yahweh by demolishing His altars wherever she found them.

Ch. 16 ends with an example of just how far gone the moral & spiritual condition of Israel was under Ahab's reign.

34

Ahab gave permission to Hiel of Bethel to **rebuild Jericho**, no doubt intending to use it as a fortress keeping control of the troublesome Moabites that were vassals of Israel.

When Jericho was destroyed by Israel when they entered the Promised Land 500 years before this, Joshua laid a curse on it & said whoever rebuilt it would do so at great personal expense

Joshua 6:26 • Then Joshua charged them at that time, saying, "Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds this

city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates."

Here in 1 Kings 16 is the *literal fulfillment* of Joshua's words.

The author tells us of the rebuilding of Jericho to give us a picture of just how spiritually corrupt the nation had become.

Archaeologists have discovered in the ruins of *many sites* urns containing the remains of an infant.

Not in cemeteries, they're built in to the foundations & walls of buildings.

Ancient texts tell of how people would place a *live baby* inside an urn, seal it up & place it in a wall.

They thought the *lifeforce* of the child would make the wall impervious to outside forces.

Other texts refer to the practice of slitting a person's throat, like a slave, draining their blood into the mortar then using that to build a wall.

When Joshua uttered his curse over the ruins of Jericho, he spoke *prophetically* of Hiel's abominable practice of sacrificing his children in building Jericho.

He place his firstborn son in the foundation and some time later placed his youngest son in the gateway. SICK!

What's *stunned* archaeologists is the *vast number* of such urns they've found.

It was a common practice *throughout* the ancient Middle East for hundreds of years.

Before we rush to judgment on their abominable practice, let's not forget that some 4,000 abortions are performed in this country *every day*.

The ancients killed their babies for what in the end was personal gain; they thought it would make their homes more secure & prosperous.

Why do people seek abortion today? The reasons in most cases are little different.

It was in to this spiritual & moral chaos that the prophet Elijah stepped.

B. Elijah's Career • Chs. 17-19

1. He proclaims drought • 17:1-7

1

Elijah is one of the *most dramatic figures* in the entire Bible, & there's no *easing* into his story.

He *pops* onto the scene in an *explosion* of boldness.

Picture the scene . . .

Ahab & Jezebel are firmly in power & have transformed the religion of Israel.

With ancient Middle Eastern rulers, it was *extremely dangerous* to speak harshly to the king.

The king was supposed to be so good at his job of ruling he made everyone's life a delight!

So if you showed any kind of displeasure or unhappiness, it was the same as saying, "You stink at being king."

Kings tend to not like hearing that so they'd just give the guy a neck crew cut.

But Elijah strides in to Ahab's presence & announces bold judgment.

Because of the his and Israel's wickedness, there will be drought.

Just who was Elijah?

Well: He's a nobody from nowhere!

While most people in Scripture are introduced with the formula, "So & so, son or Such & such" Elijah's background is so humble, it isn't even mentioned.

Tishbi where he hailed from was so obscure we have no idea where it was.

Apparently it was somewhere in Gilead on the eastern side of the Jordan.

This is a wild, rocky wilderness inhabited by none but impoverished shepherds.

That's what Elijah was, a keeper of sheep whose described as hairy with a modest garment of camelhair.

It's almost as though scripture goes out of its way to describe him as an average Joe.

There's nothing in his background or natural ability that marked him out as any different than anyone else.

In fact, in the NT, James goes out of his way to speak of Elijah as a *normal guy*.

James 5:17 - Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.

He had a nature like ours.

Later we'll see Elijah in a bout of depression so great he asks God to kill him. Though he possessed incredible faith, like all of us; he had times of weakness & doubt.

Here at the beginning of his story, we see him standing before Ahab with a bold announcement.

Elijah was *distressed* over the moral & spiritual state of Israel.

He knew with whom the responsibility lay.

So he prayed, & as he did so Moses' words in Deut. 11 came to mind.

[If you turn from the Lord and worship other gods,] the Lord's anger [will] be aroused against you, and He [will] shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you [will] perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you.

Elijah knew the time had come for this word to be fulfilled so armed with a conviction based on God's promise he prayed it would *now* come to pass.

Then, compelled by the Spirit, he left *his rough hills* of Gilead & entered the *sumptuous halls* of Ahab's palace in Samaria.

The coarse shepherd of Tishbi confronted the refined shepherd of Israel.

Elijah's words were nothing like what were expected of an awe-struck country boy.

There's *another* reason why Elijah announce a drought as the sign of God's judgment.

Baal & Asherah were gods who supposedly controlled the weather.

Worshipping them was supposed to ensure plenty of rain & a good harvest.

What more fitting way to reveal the silliness of worshipping these idols than a drought?

There's an **urgency** to this command – “Get out of here now, and head east into the wilderness.”

Cherith [Kerith] is a narrow wadi/ gourdge on the east side of the Jordan.

It's a desolate area & great hiding spot, which is why God sent him there.

When Elijah issued his announcement of judgment to Ahab, Jezebel was probably NOT there.

She'd already embarked on a campaign to root out the worshippers of Yahweh & would have ordered Elijah's arrest & execution for defying her authority.

So God told Elijah to beat it before Jezebel came looking for him.

Though the drought would surely come & the p[lace where Elijah was to hide out was near desert, God would make sure he'd have plenty of food & water by both natural & supernatural means.

We see an important lesson here = The life of faith is lived **one step at a time**.

We might think that for a **giant of faith** like Elijah it was different.

But a close look at his life reveals that **his walk was just like ours**.

It wasn't till Elijah gave the message to Ahab that God gave him the **next part** of the plan.

It wasn't Elijah's **entire** future; it was just the next step “Go east to Cherith.”

Then he gave Elijah just enough assurance to get him moving, “You'll drink from the stream and the birds will feed you.”

This is the way God directs us.

He shows us the **next** step.

Knowing our limitations & where we are in our trust in Him, He gives us the guidance we need; not a particle more or less.

It's ever His goal to **increase** our faith.

So He always brings us to some **new place** where our faith is stretched.

Look at v. 2 –

Then the word of the LORD came to him . . .

Elijah did not have to go find it.

At the point of need, when the time was right, the word came **to him**.

When it is **critical** & you **need** direction from the Lord, it **will come**.

God does not play Hide & Seek with us.

How contrary human expectation this direction of the Lord for Elijah is.

Once he makes his public debut as the mighty prophet of God, we expect him to stay in the center of things.

Once *Elijah Drought Ministries* has it's grand opening, why doesn't it stick around & issue press releases to the media, & hold big rallies trying to build a political power base for social & religious reform?

Why doesn't this great man of faith & power stick around to become a rallying point for the faithful, leading them in revival?

The answer is simple - Elijah has **more personal growing** to do.

He will soon be called on to stand on the top of Mt. Carmel in one of histories greatest showdowns of good versus evil.

But he isn't ready yet. He has some lesson about the faithfulness of God to learn.

And the *only place* he can learn them is in the solitude of the wilderness.

Every one of us needs to learn the value of the *hidden life*.

Notice what God told Elijah – “**Hide** by the brook Cherith”

God could easily have protected Elijah from Jezebel’s strategies, so his withdrawal to Cherith wasn’t just to find seclusion from her.

It was also meant to be a drawing away from *public life* to be *alone with God*.

FB Meyer wrote, “*The man who is to take a high place before his fellows, must take a low place before his God.*”

The person used to adulation by others can lose sight of their dependence on God.

But time alone in the wilderness is an effective deterrent to the effects of pride. God has often used the wilderness as the special place of whittling down His servants for more effective service.

Both Moses & David spent prolonged periods in the wilderness being refined by the Spirit.

The Apostle John spent years in wilderness exile on the island of Patmos, and it was there he received the visions that comprise Revelation.

After their mission trip thru the villages of Galilee the disciples returned to Jesus who said to them, “Come *apart* with Me into a desert place.”

Even Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness before launching His work.

The Gospels say that even after, He would often depart from others into a secluded place to be alone with the Father.

The *hidden life* is important because we need to withdraw from the hustle & bustle of this world for real time to just be *alone with God*.

There is little that is more *corrective* to our hearts & minds than that.

Besides, it is when we are alone with God that we have the chances to be most intimate with Him.

In marriage, a couple spend most of their time in the company of others, in public; at work, in the marketplace, with friends.

But when do they get to most enjoy each other? When they are alone, in private.

In fact, the deepest intimacy is something that is hidden, private.

Usually when we use the term “hidden life” it refers to some kind of shameful double-life; where a person professes to be one thing in public but lives a completely different & contrary life in private.

The believer ought to have a hidden life that is even more spiritually intense & real than his/her public life.

The fact is, the strength of our public life will be directly related to the reality of our hidden life.

Before Elijah could climb to the top of Mt. Carmel & call down fire from heaven, he first had to descend into the vale of Cherith and pour himself out in total dependence on God.

Another thing Elijah learned at Cherith was to *trust God completely!*

He was told to rely on both natural & supernatural sources for his food & drink.

The supernatural supply was to come through the most *unlikely of all manners* - the beaks of ravens.

Ravens are carrion birds that do *not* feed others. But God said it would be so, and it was!

Notice that this provision from the Lord would come to only one place

V. 4 – “I have commanded the ravens to feed you *THERE!*” At Cherith God supplies the needs of His people - but He does so at the time & place of His choosing.

If God directs you to go some place or to do something, follow Him & trust Him to take care of you - no matter how impossible it may seem.

A little German boy & his poor widowed mother read this story one cold winter night in the fireless room of their humble little cottage. When the mother finished reading, the little boy jumped up & opened the front door. When his mother asked why he was letting out what little warmth there was, he said it was so that God's ravens could fly in & bring them the dinner they were too poor to purchase.

The mayor was making his usual nightly rounds of the village & saw the open door. He looked in & asked why the door was open. The little boy told how they were waiting for their dinner. From that night on & for many years, the mayor played the role of God's raven to that little family.

Friend, trust God, no matter how impossible His leading may seem.

7

After a time, the drought was so severe, the Cherith brook dried up.

Which was the first to be exhausted, the natural or the supernatural supply?

Many hard-boiled skeptics like to mock the faith of God's people.

They have no faith in God but they place total faith in the laws of nature.

The lesson of Cherith is that it's always *safer* to trust in God than nature.

For *even nature* is governed by God.

Now, how many of us would have begun to complain as we sat by the brook & day after day watched its level shrink?

How many of us would have *begun to worry* God had abandoned us & left us to die in the desert?

Can you picture Elijah sitting there saying, “I think the level is dropping.”

Then he takes a stick & makes a mark. He does this each day; sure enough the brook is drying up.

He makes a calculation & determines he has about 6 days left before it's dry.

So he starts making plans on what to do & where he's going to go next.

But wait! God sent him there & hasn't told him to move yet.

I've known people who've taken a major step of faith & been wonderfully provided for by God in dramatic ways.

But as time goes by, they see the supply dwindling & start scheming on how to get along on their own.

Instead of waiting for the Lord's direction they make a pre-emptive move before they have to.

It never works out well & usually means the end of their fruitfulness for the Lord.

Elijah knew God had directed him to Cherith and even though the water was running out, trusted that when he needed to, God would tell him what to do & where to go.

God does not lure His people into the wilderness to starve them to death.

He takes them there to prove that His power & faithfulness are *independent* of our circumstances.

For Elijah, the showdown on Carmel still beckoned, but there was another & greater step of faith Elijah had to take . . .

2. The widow of Zarephath • 17:8-24

a. miraculous provision • vs. 8-16

8-9

It's one thing to believe that God will feed you with ravens in the desert.

It's an altogether different thing to believe Hell use a total pagan.

For Elijah, going to Zarephath was a greater stretch than Cherith.

Zarephath was Paganville. It was near Sidon, *Jezebel's home town*.

And widows were at the bottom of the social order.

Drought & famine have devastated the land.

The *very last person* to be expected to have enough food would be a widow.

And even if she has it, a non-Jew is not going to be inclined to give it to Elijah.

God want's his prophet to realize help can come at *any* time and place if we're led by Him.

At Zarephath, Elijah was smack dab in the middle of Baal's territory.

Yet God provides for His own, even in the midst of the enemy's camp.

God wanted Elijah to know His power wasn't limited to the borders of Israel - He is God of all nations!

Phoenician Jezebel brought Baal & Asherah to Israel. So Elijah brought Yahweh to Phoenicia.

10-16

Chart Elijah's growth in faith.

At Cherith, he'd been a passive recipient of God's provision.

In Zarephath, he instructs the woman on what to do & makes a promise of God's blessing.

And because Elijah is faithful to share what God tells him, not only is he saved, so is this widow and her son.

I mean, she was out gathering firewood for their last meal.

She's at the end of her ingredients to make a last loaf of bread, then they will starve.

Elijah stumbles into town thirsty because of the drought & asks her for a cup of water; which would be difficult enough to round up.

Instead of ignoring him, she turns to fetch it for him – out of nothing more than kindness.

Elijah recognizes in her a quality of character that's good, & enlarges the request.

When she tells him all she has left is her & her son's last loaf of bread, he tells her if she'll give it to him, her pantry will never go empty.

In an amazing display of faith, the woman does as the prophet bids, and sure enough, for the rest of the drought, while others are suffering, she has enough food to sustain both her & her son, and Elijah who moves in to the room on their roof.

This woman recognized Elijah as a prophet, someone who spoke for God.
That's the only way to account for her willingness to follow his counsel.
Starvation is one of the most powerful influences over human behavior.
Good, moral, intensely principled people have been known to do incredibly evil things when driven to them by such hunger & thirst.

This woman heard Elijah's word & realized the wisest course was to trust him.
She could keep the bread and die for sure a little later.
Or she could give him the bread and find more after.
If he turned out to be a fraud, it only meant death would come a little sooner.
In light of mortality, what's a day or two?

But hold on – this isn't the only way God could have gone about this.
Elijah could have said, "Okay, go home, make your loaf of bread, then more flour & oil will appear. Once you've eaten, please make me a cake too."

Why was it necessary she give Elijah the first loaf?

It was necessary because it placed her *complete dependence* in God where it needs to be.

The same is true for us – we need to see giving to the Lord as what comes first – before any & everything else.

Giving isn't what we do last or with what's left if there is anything.

We give to God our firstfruits, and by doing so, declaring our dependence on Him for the rest.

People all over this room tonight have come to the same place as the widow of Zarephath.

They've already decided, even before they get their paycheck, that the first 10% or whatever amount they've chosen, is God's.

As soon as they get paid, they write a check or deduct that amount from their account.

They don't make a decision every 2 weeks or month on whether or not they're going to give this time.

That decision's already made. They made it long time ago.

When they first made it, it was difficult, much like the challenge that faced the widow here.

"What? Give you my last loaf of bread??? Are you serious? If I do that my son & I won't make it. There isn't enough to go around. I mean, I'd *like* to give it to you, but it's not practical. Can't my *desire* to give be enough? God knows I wish I could help out, but I just can't, there isn't enough."

But they realized as did she, that all those thoughts just lock a person out of being able to see the blessing of God.

If *all* you have left is a penny & you can either buy a piece of gum or give it to God, which is the wiser move? You & I can't do much with a penny, but *God can make* a penny do a LOT.

Okay – so Elijah prayed in accordance with God's Word & the heavens have shut.

Then he followed the Lord's lead and went to Cherith where he was miraculously taken care of.

Then he went to pagan Zarephath where he spoke a seemingly insane request to a starving widow.

He's really growing in his faith and seeing the incredible faithfulness & power of God.

But he's got another trial & lesson coming.

b. a dead boy raised • vs. 17-24

17-18

The only hope this widow had for the future was her son who would mature into a man who could take care of her. With his death, her world collapsed.

Her words in Hebrew mean she thought Elijah was such a holy man, her son's death was God's judgment on her for some past sin.

It was a common assumption in the pagan religions of the ancient world that prosperity was a sign of the favor of the gods while adversity was divine displeasure.

It was all direct cosmic justice being worked out – Canaanite karma.

But her son's death was NOT God's judgment for her sin.

It was an opening for the power & greatness of God to be manifested in the very heart of a Gentile nation.

19

Elijah's room was on her roof, & accessed by an external stairway.

This kept her from bearing any kind of scandal for having a man in her house with whom she was not married.

20-24

From Elijah's story so far, we can safely say he had a lot of faith & a solid prayer life.

So much so he could shut up the heavens.

Yet despite how great his faith was, he still had some growing to do before he could face the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

So God allowed the child to die, to teach Elijah *to pray ever more fervently*.

God wanted Elijah to learn the ultimate lesson about God's power - He can even raise the dead

Because if God can raise the dead - **WHAT CAN'T HE DO?**

Though sickness was the *instrument* by which the boy died, Elijah discerned the hand of God behind it all.

It troubled him that God would provide flour & oil to save from the famine only to let disease fell him.

He didn't understand what God is doing, so he confessed his ignorance & concern to God & did the only thing he could think to do – plead for the boy's life back.

Elijah would have just held the child as he prayed but being dead, the body was limp.

So he laid him on his bed, then knelt next to it and laid his arms & head on him.

Picture it – he did this once and prayed. Nothing. Heaven is silent.

So he does it a second time. Same thing. Silence.

Elijah knows that God speaks to him and gives him direction, so there's only one thing to do -keep doing what he knows is right till God responds somehow.

The same is true for us.

Always do what's right, even if there's no visible response or fruit.

The Apostle Paul had a serious physical ailment that troubled him.

He knew God heals, after all, he performed many of them.

So he prayed, but it remained. He prayed again; and again nothing.

The third time God finally answered - Paul would NOT be healed because his affliction served a more important service – it kept Paul dependent on God daily for the strength to endure.

It was different with Elijah. It was on the 3rd prayer that the lad revived.

The result was that Elijah now realized God intended to use him for mighty things.

The woman also had any doubts about his prophetic calling removed.

CONCLUSION

2 Things as we conclude . . .

First, Why did God send Elijah to a Gentile widow in Zarephath?

Why not lodge him with one of the needy widows of Israel; there was certainly no lack of them.

We get a clue in Luke 4 where Jesus mention Elijah's presence in the widow's home.

God wants his people to understand His heart is for *all* nations, not just Israel.

Second, notice how the widow addresses Elijah in vs. 18 & 24; she calls him a "man of God."

He lived there a long time so that's a pretty *revealing* title.

If you can live with someone for months & still call them a man/woman of God, that's a pretty good sign of holiness and devotion to God.

Next week –*Showdown at the Carmel Corral*