

The Last Supper

I Kings 17:8-16

Introduction

There are people today, who are afraid of taking risks. In fact, we all are in some ways! An article in the *Saturday Evening Post* caused me to reconsider some things about risks. The article pointed out that:

- Many people are afraid to fly, but did you know that statistically, a person is more likely to be kicked to death by a donkey than to die in a plane crash? (Of course, you could say, "I'm not going to fly, and I'll stay away from donkeys." That is not the point, smart aleck!).
- The fear of being murdered is extremely high, yet a person is eight times more likely to die while playing their favorite sport than by being murdered.

The truth is, everyone takes daily risks! For example:

- drinking water from the tap puts you at risk;
- eating out puts you at risk;
- taking a drive in a car is a ten times greater threat to your health than having surgery, yet we will worry about surgery and think nothing of driving a car;
- depositing your money in a savings account is a risk;
- purchasing a home is a risk;
- buying a used, or a even a new, automobile is taking a chance;
- sitting under a roof means banking on the carpentry skills of someone that you have

never met and assuming they have constructed it well enough to hold up.

Have you ever considered the fact that walking is a series of falling and catching? Each step is banking on the fact that, as one leg pushes you beyond the point of balance, your other leg will catch your fall.

When seen from a certain perspective, life is nothing more than a series of risks. There is no way we can prepare for them all!

Perhaps you have heard the story of the knight who had to go on a long journey. He tried to anticipate all of the problems. He wore his sword and full coat of armor, in case he met someone unfriendly. He brought along an ax for chopping firewood, a tent, blankets, pots and pans, and oats for his horse, in case there was no grass along the way. He even packed a large jar of ointment in case he got poison ivy. Then he rode out of the castle and across the bridge that spanned the moat. Clanking, gurgling, thudding, and clanging, he was a moving junk pile. When he was halfway across the bridge, the boards gave way. He, and his horse, fell into the river and he drowned.

Now, you can apply this story in one of two ways; that is:

- he should have been wearing a life preserver, or
- it is impossible to play life safe.

Our discussion today is about obeying God, even when it risks everything. It is about the desperate need for the church today, to understand that we are not called to predictability; to have every angle figured out and every possible problem anticipated and covered. No!

There are times in our Christian experience when we are called to take a risk; to obey God, even when we have nothing figured out. The great commission is a call to be light on our feet; to be expendable; to be available to go wherever we are sent, whenever He chooses.

God will illustrate that truth through the lives of two individuals. They are a leathery, well-worn prophet, named Elijah, and a worn out widow who went unnamed.

Review – Elijah By the Brook Cherith

I invite your attention to the brook, in I Kings, chapter 17, that we discussed in our previous lesson. For a year and a half, Elijah has hidden beside the brook Cherith. In a matter of days, he will meet a widow, in whose home he will stay for the remainder of the three and a half year drought.

We have already discovered that risk taking is the terminology of human beings. With God, however, nothing is a gamble, it is a guarantee.

We have also discovered that God's guarantee for Elijah was food provided miraculously. It was airtailed every morning and evening by divinely appointed ravens. And, as well, water flowed in Elijah's private brook.

It was there that Elijah learned how to play God's version of hide and seek. That place of hiding became a place of holiness; that place of loneliness became a place of learning.

However, we then discovered, in verse 7, a shocking new development. Look at that verse.

It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Now that place of isolation becomes a place of desolation.

We know, from Elijah's pronouncement to King Ahab, that the rain stopped because of Elijah's answered prayer. The rain will also begin again at the prayer of Elijah.

The brook has finally trickled away over the past year and a half, and the moist river bed is hard baked by the hot sun. It seems to me that this is a perfect time to pray for rain. If I were Elijah, I would think, "Hey, I guess God's lesson for the Israelites is over.

Surely He wouldn't want me to suffer – I'm the one in the center of His will!"

Elijah does not pray for rain, however. Look at verse 8 and note that it is not until the brook is completely dry that God speaks to Elijah.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying,

You could circle the word, "Then". "Then" – when?! After the brook was completely dry! Now, talk about waiting until the "midnight hour"! Surely Elijah is wondering, "What's next?!"

The greater question for you and me is this, "Knowing you have the right to reverse the severe conditions by one simple prayer, how long would it take before you prayed for rain?"

I have good news for you, lest you think a lack of an answer is a disqualification. According to I Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 13, God will not test you above that which you are able to handle, but with the testing will make a way of escape that you may be able to endure it. Every one of our clocks are different. The wonderful news is, God knows how each one of us tick.

I want to be like Elijah. He did not need a new directive from God until the brook ran completely dry.

Now notice verse 9. God is speaking to Elijah.

Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.

Now, wait a minute! Let us make a couple of observations about this directive.

Elijah Risks His Safety

1. First, God is commanding Elijah to risk his safety and leave his secret place.

Zarephath was a suburb of Sidon in ancient Phoenicia; it is modern Lebanon. If you look back at chapter 16, verse 31, you discover the name of the king of the Sidonians, whose capital was Sidon. That king was none other than EthBaal – and EthBaal was Jezebel's father. God is telling Elijah to leave his hiding place and move to Jezebel's hometown!

Furthermore, Zarephath derived its name from its primary industry. It was in Zarephath where huge furnaces had been built for the smelting of metals. Zarephath literally meant, "smelting". The Phoenician word "Zarephath," is translated to mean, "a workshop

for the melting and refining of metals”. So, Zarephath was the primary producer of the molten images to Baal and his mistresses.

We know, from other resources, that the prophets of Baal wore golden medallions about their necks. These were designed in such a way that they reflected the light of the sun. The sun was the primary form of their god, Baal. There is little doubt that these medals were fashioned primarily in Zarephath. What Detroit is to the automobile, Zarephath was to the worship of Baal.

Now, after two years of drought, these flashy medallions were probably being sold at half-price. All the other idols were probably going at “bargain basement” deals; like, zero percent interest with no payments until May.

Think of the irony and of the danger – Elijah is to move his hiding place from a solitary brook to the home of a widow who lives in the midst of his enemies. This is going from the frying pan into the fire!

This can be interpreted two different ways:

- The first way is from Elijah’s point of view. He was risking his safety by moving into the heart of Baal’s headquarters. It was as if the Lord was telling him, “Elijah, do you see that lion over there?”
“Yes, Lord.”
“Well, the next time he yawns, I want you to stick your head in his mouth.”
- The second way is from God’s perspective. God was saying, “Elijah, I am going to reveal the powerlessness of Baal and his servant Jezebel, by protecting you while you live in her hometown surrounded by the mass production of images dedicated to a dead god.”

There is a second observation I want to make about God’s directive to Elijah.

Elijah Reverses His Natural Inclination

2. God is commanding Elijah to reverse his natural inclination and seek assistance!

Helped by a widow

Elijah is about to be helped by a widow. Instead of Elijah going and providing for a widow, he is told to go and be provided for by a destitute widow.

As I try to read between the lines and create a caricature of Elijah, I think he would remind me somewhat of my wife’s grandfather. He was big, rough, proud, and hardened by physical labor, having lived during the days when everything was done by hand. His hands were in fact, thick with calluses. He was raised in a generation of people that cleared their land and built their own homes. Nothing was too rough to handle; nothing was too hard to tackle. That same man would give you the shirt off of his back, if you needed it. All that anyone needed to do was just say the word, and he would be there. Three words that never crossed his mind were, “I need help!”

That is Elijah. The last thing in the world that I can imagine Elijah doing is asking for help. He is no panhandler. I think Elijah would rather have died of thirst by the brook than ask an impoverished widow for help.

However, Elijah is being refashioned. You may remember the model of the Messiah, who had come to give the gift of salvation, yet in Luke, chapter 8, verses 1 through 3, we read that certain women, who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, ministered unto Him of their substance. Sometimes it is a greater man or woman who can receive rather than give.

For Elijah, however, it only gets worse!

Assisted by a foreigner

In addition to the fact that Elijah’s helper is a widow, she is also a foreigner.

Elijah, the Israelite prophet of God, sent to challenge the people of God, could have been sent to an Israelite widow! Instead, however, he is sent to an outsider; a pagan widow. Why?!

For that question of “why,” I actually have an answer. It is found in the New Testament book of Luke. Turn to chapter 4, verses 24 through 26.

And He [Jesus] said, “Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but

only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.”

The bottom line was, as God surveyed the scene, the widows were the chief among those who disliked Elijah. Frankly, the widow would be the first to run out of food. She was dependant, in the Israelite economy, upon the mercy of her neighbors and family. As their food began to run out, the first thing they would do would be to stop giving to those in need. So, if Elijah had shown up in an Israelite village, the first person to throw a rock at him would have been a widow.

Now, go back to I Kings, where Elijah immediately obeys God and leaves Cherith. Look at verses 10 through 12.

So he arose and went to Zarephath, . . .

(This spells out for us that Elijah was willing to take the risk. He obediently walked into the jaws of the lion’s mouth.)

. . . and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, “Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink.” As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.” But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

Can you imagine? “Lord, You said there was going to be a widow who would provide for me?”

If I were Elijah, I would pull out my Rand McNally road map and make sure I had taken the right exit. There was something wrong with this picture. But, he was right in the middle of God’s plan! He was indeed, in God’s will.

By the way, how do you determine God’s leading in your life? How do you determine the answer to a major decision that you are really praying about it? How do you know you are following Him?

I will tell you how we tend to determine God’s leading. When everything works out beautifully, that is when we know we are following Him.

I have never had one person say to me, “Pastor, I knew it was God’s will for my family and I to move to this town, because . . . well, the company agreed to move us, but then, at the last minute, said that we had

to pay for the move, then our car broke down on the way here, and the house that we closed on, burned to the ground the next day! Is this God’s will or what!”

I would probably look at them and mumble something like, “Uh, glad you’re here.”

Would you notice, though, that Elijah’s confidence was not in circumstances. Let us read verse 9 again.

Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to . . .

(“. . . bury you.” Is that what He said? No.)

. . . provide for you.

Elijah had impossible odds because widows do not have food during a famine and a Phoenician widow is more likely to hit him with the skillet than fry bread for him. *Elijah had one thing* and that is, the word of God! With the word, Elijah could take a chance; he would risk everything!

A man who is a pastor in Houston, Texas, wrote the following true story that happened to him some time earlier:

I love motorcycles. Not long ago, I was in a Honda shop drooling over a 750. A 750, for the uninformed, is Honda’s most beautiful 4-cylinder bike. Its 68 horsepower engine is so large it sticks out on both sides of the bike. It will do a quarter mile in 12 seconds, and will top out at over 125 miles per hour. The one at which I was looking was a dream in metallic gold, with all the chrome trimmings.

The salesman came up to me and said, “Some machine, ain’t it?”

“Sure is!”

The salesman said, “It’s not like driving a car you know - go through town and nobody notices. But on this baby, it’s a different story. Man, you pave the road with a hundred yards of rubber when ya burn out . . . great bike! By the way, what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a minister.”

(long pause)

“Well, uh, Reverend, uh, you know, these machines get good gas mileage.”

(even longer pause)

“And you have many advantages – good visibility; and they are very maneuverable. You can stop on a dime, that’s for sure.”

(another long pause and by now, the salesman is almost whispering)

“I know you people aren’t supposed to be interested in this sort of thing, but they really are a lot of fun to drive.”

Wes, the pastor, later reflected with his pen,

Lawn mower salesmen aren’t surprised to find clergy looking at their merchandise, but motorcycle salesmen are! Why? Does this tell us something about the church? Lawn mowers are safe, slow, sane, practical, predictable, and oh, so very middle class; but motorcycles . . . they’re fast, dangerous, wild and thrilling, and they’re associated with risk and daring and adventure. Is being a Christian more like mowing the lawn, or riding a motorcycle? Is the Christian’s life safe and sane, or thrilling and exciting? We need to recapture the motorcycle spirit, for without it we cannot understand or adequately express our faith. The common image of the church these days is pure lawn mower: slow, deliberate, plodding; but our task is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas, and see what the old girl will do!

Now fellows, the application is not, “Let’s go buy a Honda,” but rather, the application may be, “Mom and Dad, you need to let your baby girl go to the mission field where it’s risky,” “Husband or wife, you need to let God have your spouse for service, even though it will uproot your life.”

Someone who is expendable for God learns, somewhere along the line, not to put down roots in anything but the will of God.

My friend, the will of God is not hard to find, if you want to obey it. The only people in the family of God who miss the will of God are those who have no use for it; people who prefer lawn mowers to motorcycles.

With the word in his heart and the wind in his camel hair cloak, Elijah rides through the gates of Zarephath. He is at risk humanly, but divinely, he is as safe as he ever was.

Now, notice that Elijah first asks the widow for water, in verse 11. We read that she immediately goes

to get some for him. Elijah must have been very thirsty! While she is going, he asks for a piece of bread. She responds to that, in verse 12, by saying,

. . . As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.

Something struck me, as I read her opening words to Elijah. Did you notice how she refers to God? She is tipping her heart of faith. In this town that is the showcase of idolatry, a woman dares to say that Yahweh, the God of this strange prophet, is alive!

Did you notice that she says the same thing to Elijah that Elijah said to Ahab and Jezebel in verse 1? He said,

. . . As the Lord, the God of Israel lives . . .

Something has been going on in this Sidonian suburb. A widow’s heart had been preparing for the one man on planet earth who could tell her about that living God.

And why shouldn’t she doubt the authenticity of Baal?! For your information, Baal was supposedly the son of Dagon. Dagon is the Canaanite word for “corn”. He was also worshiped as the god who supplied oil.

Aurthur Pink develops an interesting thought as well, as he reminds his readers that in the division of Canaan, the district of Sidon went to the Israelite tribe of Asher. In Deuteronomy, chapter 33, when Moses is blessing the twelve tribes, he says, in verse 24, paraphrased, “Let Asher be blessed with children and let him dip his foot in oil.”

This indicated the fertility of that district and the character of its principle product, which was olive oil.

Listen to this ancient Phoenician poem, which was uncovered by careful archaeologists,

The heavens rain oil, the rivers run with honey;

So I know that the mighty one, Baal, lives;

Lo, the Prince, the Lord of the Earth exists.

In other words, Zarephath, the fertile region of corn and oil, is running out! Baal is not keeping his side of the bargain! As far as this widow was

concerned, she would bake two biscuits and then, she and her little boy would eat them and wait to die.

Now, notice Elijah's request, in verse 13.

Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son."

Can you imagine?! What a difficult command to obey from this man of God – to make a cake for him "first". Doesn't that seem selfish and unkind? Here is a destitute widow with a son who is suffering from malnutrition. She has been rationing her meals carefully and has just enough for one last supper! To make Elijah's cake first is to leave less for her son and her, if there is any left at all.

What a hard command this man of Yahweh makes. Perhaps she has heard that Yahweh commands to love your neighbor as yourself, but does that mean you are to feed him first?! What a gamble! What a risk!

It is not really a risk, however, if you know what Elijah knows.

I read about a fellow in New York City who did not like cats – an insightful fellow. His wife left to visit friends for a few days, so this was his big chance. He put the cat in a sack, weighted it down with rocks, and tossed it into the Hudson River.

When his wife returned, she could not find the cat. She was upset, so he told her he would be willing to put an advertisement in the newspaper, and even offer a reward. She was amazed, as he placed the ad and offered a one hundred dollar reward.

Nothing happened, however. And, two weeks later, his wife was so upset that he told her, "Honey, because that cat meant so much to you, I'll renew the ad and up the ante to \$50,000 reward money."

She could not believe his change of heart, but he placed the ad. Later, a friend pulled him aside and said, "Man, you're crazy! No cat is worth \$50,000 dollars."

He whispered back, "Listen, when you know what I know, you can afford to be generous."

Elijah said, "Ma'am, you need to give me the best of what you have left!"

Was it a generous risk?! Not if you know what Elijah knows. He informs her of what he knows, in verse 14.

For thus says the Lord God of Israel [Elijah speaks for God again], "The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth."

Now, understand that the decision before this widow is a decision of faith. Will she have faith in Baal, the god of her village, and in the forefathers and the king, or will she place her faith in the word of a prophet that she has never met before?

Can you see this woman, with her starving son on her hip, gathering a few sticks for a final meal? Then she meets the man of God who says, "Trust me. Give me what you have first and I promise, by the word of my living God, you will never go hungry again."

She took her chance; she made her choice, as verses 15 and 16 tell us.

So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord . . .

God, the living Lord, provided corn meal and oil. It was as if to say, "Take that, Baal!"

Notice, the bowl was not filled to the top, it just was not exhausted. Also, the cruse of oil was not filled to the top, it just never ran out. The implication is that this woman seemed to have only enough for one more meal; that she was always almost out!

Now, we would rather have seen God snap His fingers and instantly fill the spare room in the widow's hut with barrels of flour and tall earthen vessels of oil. That would have been wonderful. Instead, God chose to perform a miracle each day.

Every meal was her last meal, unless God kept His word; every supper was her last supper. This was her "daily bread". And, that, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly what we are to pray for – daily bread; daily grace; daily strength; daily courage.

Application

For Elijah – In order to receive anything, he had to change everything

1. For Elijah, and for us, in order to receive anything, he had to change everything.

We do not like change, do we? We like to put down roots and get established. We like life when it is predictable; planned; punctual.

God says to Elijah, "It's time to move from the calm to the chaotic; from the serene surroundings of Cherith to the noisy village of Zarephath."

Elijah had learned to put down his roots in God alone.

God spoke through Isaiah to Elijah, and to us, in chapter 41, verse 10,

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

God says, "Elijah," and as well, "Christian," "change everything, but don't forget, I don't ever change."

For the widow – In order to receive anything, she had to risk everything

2. For the widow, in order to receive anything, she had to risk everything.

Elijah offered up his safety; the woman offered up her future and her son. And, God kept His word and provided for both!

Let me tell the story of a little girl who was saying her prayers at bedtime. Her dad happened to be standing outside her door, having arrived home late from work that evening. He overheard her reciting the alphabet. After she had finished, he went into the room and said, "Sweetheart, why were you saying the alphabet to God?"

"I really didn't know what to pray for tonight," she answered, "so I said, 'God, I'm going to give You all the letters of the alphabet and You put them together any way You want to.'"

As I was studying this week, about the way we place everything before God and let Him put it together the way He wants, a little chorus came to mind. It is a chorus that my family used to sing when I was younger. The words are as follows:

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness and all I have to do is follow;

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness and all I have to do is follow;

Strength for today, is mine all the way, and all that I need for tomorrow,

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, and all I have to do is follow.

The words to that song are good, are they not? "My Lord knows the way through the wilderness," we have that word!

And my God will supply all your needs . . .

(not greed!),

. . . according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

We have that word, in Philippians, chapter 4, verse 19.

. . . I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

As we read earlier in Isaiah, we have that word!

Take it from a thirsty prophet named Elijah; learn it from a widow who was about to sit down with her son to have their last supper – the Christian life is not really a life of risk; it is not really a gamble. In fact, the gamblers are those who refuse to obey God – they are at risk!

Those who follow God, however, can sing, "My Lord knows the way through the wilderness and all we have to do is follow."

And, tomorrow will bring tomorrow's God, and we will follow Him then too.

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