August 20/21, 2022

A Life Changing Faith

Encountering God Series

1 Kings 17:1-24

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Encountering God…what an extraordinary opportunity! Imagine what it would have been like, as Tim described two weeks ago, to be on that mountain when the wind began to blow, and the rocks began to break, when the earthquake shook the entire mountain, when the fire began to roar. And then imagine encountering God—the literal presence of God—in a whisper, a still small voice, a gentle blowing. Incredible! Imagine what it would have been like to be with Elisha, as Ryan described last week, where you wake up in the morning, and you go outside, and you realize you are completely surrounded by an army of horses and chariots, and you are in deep trouble, and you are terrified. And imagine the great prophet opening your eyes, peeling back the veil. Imagine actually being able to see into the unseen realm. And there you see an even greater army—the literal hosts of heaven—who are right there surrounding the other army, and they are there to defend, to protect, and to support you. Extraordinary! These are incredible encounters with God, and encountering God changes everything. Now, don't you wish that you and I could also have supernatural encounters with God? Well, what if I told you, we can. In fact, I believe that we can encounter God today…this very day…this very week. But what would it take for that to happen? What would it take?

That's what I'd like us to talk about together this morning. If you have your Bible with you, would you turn with me to 1 Kings, chapter 17? This is the third week in our *Encountering God Series.* Our final week in our story this morning is actually a prequel to what Tim shared two weeks ago, because 1 Kings 17, 18, and 19 are the trilogy of the Elijah narrative in Scripture. And the center is the very well-known 1 Kings 18 where Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and where God shows up in a truly breathtaking way. Now that story is very familiar to many of you, so this morning I want us to learn about encountering God by looking at the context leading up to Elijah's great victory. 1 Kings, chapter 17, verse 1:

> **Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."** (*NASB, 1 Kings 17:1)

Now we need to understand what's happening in the context of verse one, because there's a lot going on. First, this is a very dark time in Israel's history. The king is Ahab, who is weak and idolatrous. Even worse, the queen is Jezebel, who is wicked and idolatrous. And not only that, Jezebel is actually the daughter of Ethbaal, who is the king of Sidon, which is the very center of Canaanite worship of Baal. And Ahab and Jezebel, they lead Israel to forsake the LORD God, and to plunge head long into pagan idolatry. In fact, if you look back to 1 King 16:30, we're told that *Ahab did more evil in the sight of the LORD, than all who were before him.* And 16:33 says that *Ahab did more to provoke the LORD than all the kings of Israel that were before him*. That's the context of our passage. And because of the rampant sin and evil and the way Israel has forsaken

the LORD, the LORD determines to chasten His treasured people. He seeks to reawaken them, to shock them to their senses, like a prodigal in a pigsty. And He does it by bringing a horrific famine on the land. Perhaps this will cause them to turn back to the goodness of the one true God.

And so in verse one, Elijah proclaims it will not rain, and it's not going to rain for a long time. In fact, this is what James, the brother of Jesus, was talking about in chapter 5 of his epistle, when he said in verses sixteen through eighteen, "***The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much****."* Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three and a half years. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. And that's what happens in an amazing way at the end of 1 Kings 18. So, Elijah pronounces judgment on Israel, and that is not well received by the king and queen. So, in order to protect Elijah from their wrath, God sends him to an unexpected place, and provides for him in a very, unexpected way. Verse 2:

> **The word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for He went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook.** (Vs. 2-6)

Here we find the first recorded incident of Elijah encountering God in an amazing way. God literally commands the birds to bring Elijah food, as the Lord protects and provides for His faithful servant. God showed up and cared for Elijah in a truly extraordinary way.

But notice Elijah's heart. What did Elijah do? Well, first, Elijah chose to trust God, and he demonstrated tremendous courage, even when God's way could have come at the cost of his very life. Elijah obeys and confronts Ahab in verse one with God's message, even though he knows it's not going to be well received. And it wasn't. If you want proof of that, just look in the next chapter in verses seven through fourteen, which documents just how obsessed Ahab had become with finding and killing Elijah in this time. So, what Elijah did in verse 1 was to demonstrate incredible trust in God, leading him to self-sacrificing obedience of God.

Then in verses three through six, we once again find Elijah choosing to believe God. Now I don't know about you, but this whole plan for God's protection and provision, that sounds pretty crazy. "Go hide in a gorge in the wilderness where there's water and oh, by the way, I'll have ravens bring you bread and meat a couple of times a day and stay there for who knows how long." Doesn't sound very fun to me…not exactly like a holiday at the *Marriott de la Cherith*.

You know, I think there's a reason that I do not often encounter God in extraordinary ways. Perhaps it is because I am too committed to taking care of myself and too unwilling to trust Him and obey Him even in crazy ways. What about you? We'll come back to that. Verse 7:

> **It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath,**

which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." (Vs. 7-9)

So, eventually, the brook dries up. Remember, as James told us, this whole period in 1 Kings 17 and 18 lasts three and a half years, and our chapter is the context for almost that entire time period.

Now, notice something else in these verses. Where does God send Elijah next? Zarephath…to a widow. And where is Zarephath? Well, it says it right there in verse nine. It's in Sidon…and who is the king of Sidon? Oh, yes, Jezebel's papa. Well, this can't be right. If God is seeking to protect Elijah and provide for him, why on earth would God send him out of Israel into the very heart of the beast, the very stronghold of Baal?

Well, this is a good moment to tell you another important aspect of what God is doing in this time. You see, Baal was frequently depicted holding a thunder bolt, because he was considered to be the god of the storm…the god of rain. Huh! How interesting is it that the chastening of idolatrous Israel is that there would be no rain for three and a half years? Do you think that was an accident? Or a coincidence? Hardly. Because when God's people choose to forsake Him, the giver of life and all that is good, and when we choose to trust in dead idols, God is willing to allow us to experience the fullness of that idol's provision. If Baal is god of the storm, okay, then let Baal bring the rain. And how is that working out for them?

How many times in our lives do we look to, or do we trust in something or someone other than God, to bring us life? We trust in ourselves. We look to power. We look to pleasure. We look to people. We look to possessions. We look to all kinds of things to fill our souls and our lives. But just how good are those gods at actually bringing the rain? Perhaps if our souls are a little dry, or maybe even as parched as a desert, it's because we are choosing to trust in the wrong god. And in His love, the Lord is allowing us to experience the emptiness in order to cause us to turn more fully to Him, that we might experience true abundance, springs of life. Now notice one thing in verse 9:

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

I find the wording to be interesting and surprising…**commanded a widow**. I wonder how did God do that? And notice that is the exact same wording we saw in verse four, "**I have commanded the ravens to provide for you**." Interesting. Let's keep going. Verse 10:

So he arose and went to Zarephath, 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 might drink."

So Elijah travels all the way to Zarephath, in Sidon, and a journey by foot of 85 to 100 miles. He sees the widow, and he asks her for a cup of water. Okay, that's doable. Verse 11:

As she was going to get *it*, and 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. 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.** (Vs. 11-13)

Wait, what? Stop the bus! How does this make sense? I mean, this is a widow. She's a single mom. Doesn't the Bible tell us that we're to care for widows, not to take from them? And she and her son are both literally about to starve to death. She tells Elijah directly she's going home to make a last loaf for her and her little son, and then they will await a painful death by starvation.

And how does the man of God respond? "*Okay, but first, make me a little bread and then you can have whatever is left over."* Now, moms who are in the room this morning, how is that going to go over with you? She must have thought, "Are you kidding me? Did you hear me? We have nothing left. We are going to die, and you are telling me to give some to you? And not only that, but you're telling me, commanding me to give some to you first?" Wow! Now, things have gotten completely crazy.

You know, I think God sometimes really, really wants to put us in situations that are impossible. Why? Because it's only in those situations that we get the experience of a supernatural encounter with God. After all, how do we come to know and experience the goodness and the power of God, if we're never in a situation where we have need of God?

You know, one of the myths that I hear quite often from the mouths of Christians is this: "God won't give you more than you can handle." I hear people say that all the time, and usually they think that they're quoting Scripture. But it's not true. It is a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 10:13, which says, "***God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to endure**."* So, the promise of God is a way of escape, by His power, when you're experiencing temptation to sin. But He never promises to not give you more than you can handle. God specializes in giving us more than we can handle, for that is when we learn to depend on, to trust in, and to follow Him.

And so here God uses Elijah to ask something of this dear widow, the single mom, that is absolutely too much. "Give to me first of the very, very little that you have left." But he doesn't just ask that. Elijah also says, "Oh, and trust me. It'll be okay. In fact, this is going to be amazing." Verse 14:

> **For thus says the LORD God of Israel, "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." So she went and did according to the word of Elijah…** (Vs. 14-15a)

Amazing..amazing! Who is this widow? I mean, she's not even an Israelite. She's not one of the chosen people of God. She's a Gentile and a Canaanite at that, a citizen of the kingdom of Baal. But clearly God is at work in this situation and God is at work in this woman.

So why did God send Elijah all the way to Sidon, to this widow, to be God's instrument of provision and protection? Well, did you know that Jesus, Himself, actually talked about this woman during His earthly ministry, and His comments give us great insight. In Luke chapter 4, we read of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth, what should have been ground zero for an amazing impact

on earth. But guess what? He is rejected, and He says, "***A prophet is without honor in his home***." But He also makes it clear that God's purposes will not be thwarted. God is on an all-out mission to bring His love and His goodness to the world. And if His own will not have it, He will bring it to anyone whose heart is open to Him.

And in Luke 4:25 and 26, Jesus says, "***But I say to you the 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.***" Jesus' point: if Israel would not follow God and live in obedience to Him, experiencing His radically gracious provision and protection, then God would bring His goodness to those whose hearts are willing to trust and to follow Him, just like this amazing woman. This single mom risks everything, because of a promise given to her by God, through Elijah. And we have hints that her heart was already inclined toward the one true God. She is Sidonian, yet she is the first one in the conversation to mention God. Did you notice that? Look in verse 12. She recognizes Elijah is an Israelite, and she says, "**As the Lord your God lives.**" She doesn't speak of Baal as god; she speaks of the Lord as God. But notice, too, she doesn't yet know the Lord herself, because she refers to the Lord as Elijah's God, the Lord **your** God.

But all of that is about to change, because God is moving heaven and earth and taking Elijah one hundred miles to a country outside of Israel, in the heart of the land of Baal, which Israel is now worshiping, to bring the goodness of the one true God to a hurting and desperate widow and single mom. Wow! And what an encounter with God she has! Verse 15:

> **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 which He spoke through Elijah.** (Vs. 15-16)

She chooses to believe God. She chooses to trust God. She chooses to obey God. And she experiences an extraordinary encounter with God. But make no mistake, the choice wasn't easy. Did you notice Elijah's immediate words to her after asking her to give him bread first. Look again at verses 12 and 13. She said, "**As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread**." Then in verse 13, Elijah said to her, "**Do not fear**."

How many times when God prompts us to some crazy step of faith, do we say, "I can't, Lord? That's just too much. There's, there's just no way. Are you kidding me?" The Lord says, "*Do not fear. I am God and I am good. It is an easy thing for Me to provide all that you need. Just trust Me and follow Me."* And oh, when we do, exercising true faith and desperately depending on and trusting in God, He shows up, and we get to encounter God sometimes even in extraordinary ways. But when we say, "Huh uh, Lord, no way, I'm not going to do it," and we refuse to trust Him and follow Him in dependence upon Him, I think God just says, "Okay." He will never force us to trust Him. He just calls us into His goodness. But it's up to us to choose.

But remember, again, what we read in verse nine. The Lord told Elijah that He **commanded a widow in Zarephath to provide for him**. How did he do that? Well, it was through the opportunity God put in front of her, and through the words that Elijah spoke to her. Elijah asked

her to do what he knew God wanted her to do, even though she didn't know it. And Elijah speaks God's promise to her that it will be okay, "God will take care of you," to encourage her to trust and obey God. And she does. Thus we see an extraordinary picture of the sovereignty of God, working hand in hand with the choice of a person, and what a beautiful outcome it is, when we choose to trust and follow God! Oh, and by the way, sometimes when we trust and follow Him in great steps of faith, He invites us into even more challenging circumstances in which we get to trust Him and encounter Him in even more amazing ways. Look at verse 17:

> **Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!" He said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. He called to the LORD and said, "Oh, LORD, my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I'm staying, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "Oh, LORD, my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive."** (Vs. 17-23)

How I wish we had time to totally dig into these verses. But let me just touch on a couple of things. First of all, did you notice what happened in this woman when her son died? Look at verse 18. She says, "**What do I have to do with you, oh man of God? You have come to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death**." It's like Elijah immediately goes from being a gift from God, to being an enemy that she wants absolutely nothing to do with. From being an angel of God to being the angel of death, she is hurt and angry and confused. And who wouldn't be? After all, why would God bring Elijah all this way and deliver her and her son from death for what may have been two years of miraculous provision and then have her son die anyway? Is this some sort of a cruel joke?

And isn't that sometimes how we see God when things go wrong in our world? "See, I knew it. I knew You're not good. I knew You're out to get me. I knew I couldn't trust You." How many times do we respond that way when our lives spin into the ditch? And notice what she says after that. She says, "**You have come to bring my iniquity, (**my sin) **to remembrance and to put my son to death**." You see, there was something in her past. She had some skeletons in her closet, just like every one of us. And when tragedy strikes, what are we prone to immediately think? "I knew it! God is out to get me! I knew grace was too good! I knew He would punish me for that sin!" You see, in the story of this precious widow, this single mom, we can see ourselves.

And two of the greatest challenges that we face on the road to having overcoming faith and experiencing extraordinary encounters with God, first, is our *fear*. Most of us are terrified of trusting anyone other than ourselves. And thus we take life into our own hands, and we live on our own terms, and we cling to worthless idols. And then as Jonah says, "***We forfeit the grace that could be ours.***" So, our first key this morning to a life of encountering God, is being willing to trust Him, to follow Him, to depend upon Him, in spite of our fear. First is our *fear*.

Second, is our *failure*. How long will we live with our heads on a swivel, looking over our shoulder, wondering when is the axe going to fall? When will we finally entrust ourselves to the good, good grace of God, accepting Him as Lord and Savior, and resting in His mercy and forgiveness as sufficient? No matter who we have been, or what we have done, God is not out to get us. He's just not. But until we are willing to take Him at His word, and believe that, we will not encounter Him much.

Yet here in the home of this single mom, God shows up in an extra, extra, extraordinary way. He literally uses Elijah to bring her son back to life. And listen to her response. Verse 24:

> **Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."** (Vs. 24)

"Now I know." Now, I know? Are you kidding me? Wow! That's just like us. Our faith and our trust grow in God little by little, by choosing to accept Him and His forgiveness and love, even for our failure, by choosing to overcome with faith, by choosing to believe that He is God, and He is good. And thus, choosing to trust Him, to depend upon Him and to be willing to follow His path.

You know, I've always found the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness in the exodus to be fascinating. Fascinating and tragic! For how many times do they encounter God? How many times does God show Himself amazing and faithful over and over and over again? And yet still they doubt. They grumble. They complain. They rebel…just like me. You see, it's the manna in the wilderness that's supposed to be the central lesson, the lesson of God's daily bread. But somehow, it's just not enough for them…and somehow, I also fail over and over in the same way.

How good has God been to me? I cannot even begin to quantify the blessings of His loving hand. But so often I still fear, and I still trust in me more than I trust in Him. And every time I do, I miss out on the opportunity to encounter God. How about you? When you get home from work at the end of a long day, and the kids want you to play ball in the yard, or your spouse or your roommate wants some help, and God quietly whispers, "Play with the kids," or, "Help with the house," do you literally feel like you don't have the strength? You just…you just can't. Or maybe you and your spouse are struggling to be on the same page, and you're so hurt and frustrated by them. And God quietly whispers, "Forgive," again. "Love," another time. "Die to self," again. You feel like, "I just can't." You don't have it in you, and you're right, you don't. You don't have it in you; you aren't able…but He is able, and He can, and He will actually enable you supernaturally, if you will but trust Him and follow Him.

Maybe God has put a need or an opportunity in front of you to love the least of these, to build His kingdom in some way, to give like you have never given before, to speak and to share His love and His gospel with someone you know, to take a step to grow in your walk with God, or your community with other believers. Maybe He's calling you to turn from some sin in your life that you have chosen to love and look to more than Him. Maybe you feel like, "I just can't. It's just too much." Maybe it even overwhelms or terrifies you.

But what, what if like this amazing single mom, you were to trust Him, and believe that He is all powerful, and He is all good, and as a result, you were willing to follow Him however He

commands or calls? Well, you just might encounter God and experience firsthand Him giving you the empowering grace you never imagined, abundantly providing and making you more like Him as you seek to trust Him, to depend upon Him, and to follow Him in ways you were never before willing.

Now, maybe some of you here this morning, are already living full of faith. Praise God for that! But consider that even Elijah needed to grow in his. I believe part of the reason God allowed this boy to die, was not only that the widow might encounter God in another way, but that Elijah might encounter Him as well. For what lies ahead in the next chapter will require faith from Elijah like few people in history have ever seen. Read it this week. It is amazing. And I believe this incident at the end of chapter 17 is as much about God showing His amazing power to Elijah, as it is to the widow.

You see, God is always at work on multiple levels. The entire three chapters in the Elijah narrative is primarily about what God is doing in this period in the nation of Israel, His wayward, chosen people. But even in the process of chastening Israel, God is able to care for the individual who trusts and follows Him. Even when their entire world is in darkness because of sin, God is able to bring unbelievable light, love, strength, and hope to all who will believe and follow Him.

I believe every one of us can encounter God today, this very week. What would it take, though, for that to happen? Well, let me close with His words, not mine. Hebrews 11:6, "***For without faith it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him****."*

Heavenly Father, how we thank You that You desire for us to experience the wonder of Your goodness, how we thank You that You are God, that there is nothing impossible for You. Oh, and how we thank You, that You are good. You are not out to get us. You are for us, not against us. Help us, Jesus, to believe that truth. Help us then to trust You and follow You in every way. In Your name we pray, Amen.

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