

I Kings 17:8-16; Luke 4:18-30 “The Widow’s Only Hope”

I. The Significant Location II. The Lowly Recipient

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what are the first 3 things that you are told to consider when buying a house? Location, location, location. In our story for today, the location of this miracle is vitally important to understand the conflict. We must keep in mind where Elijah has just been, and where he is sent by the Word of the Lord. Last week we saw round one of the battle for the hearts of the people. We noted that those who trust Baal for rain find out he cannot provide as the last languishes in drought; and those who worship Asherah for fertility and children end up losing their sons as Heil of Bethel learned in 16:34. Those who trust in idols end up losing the very things that the idols promised to provide! In our text for today, the LORD sends Elijah out of the Land of Israel- to a new location. He goes into a pagan land to be purified for God’s service and to provide for one in need. We consider this theme: Jesus Christ sends Elijah to the Gentile widow to prove His love and provision for the nations.

### **I. The Significant Location**

In verse 8, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah again and he is sent from the Cherith brook by the Jordan to Zarephath of the Sidonians. From the area east of the Jordan where Elijah was before, Zarephath of Sidon was about 80 miles Northwest. Zarephath was the area that Queen Jezebel had come from and it was the very heart of Baal country as we learned back in 16:31. It was on the Mediterranean coast and it was outside of the land of Israel- located between Tyre and Sidon in modern day Lebanon. The name, Zarephath means smelting pot or refiner’s furnace. It was in this place that the LORD uses an unlikely means to provide for His prophet- but also provide for a Gentile widow. Jezebel’s father, who was the high-priest of Baal worship, ruled in this area. So in our story, God is sending Elijah into the very territory of the enemy. The Battle between the LORD and Baal began in Israel, but now the battlefield is on the enemy’s home turf. Being the land of Sidon- Baal would have the home court advantage- but the famine is raging here as well. God is effectively proving to all that He is not the God of Israel alone, but He is the God over all the earth.

He alone is the True God and is Lord over all nations and lands! God has power to control all things, even on Baal's territory. And Elijah is sent here, to this wicked land, to do an act of kindness for this widow. No nation is so wicked that God cannot work in it- no people so perverse that God cannot have His people there! God is not the God of the Jews alone- He is the God of the entire world! Nothing is outside of His control and all things are in His hand. Like Jonah of old, even the wicked city of Nineveh can receive the gospel. But unlike Jonah, Elijah goes where the Lord sends Him! And sometimes the church will be found in Sidon, Babylon and in Rome!

When Elijah was sent to Zarephath, he would have had to travel across the land of Israel. Yet God did not send Him to a widow in the land of Israel, rather he was sent to a widow living among the nations. As we read Luke 4, God could have sent this messenger of hope to Israel, yet God chooses to send Elijah to the nations. By this act, God effectively passes over Israel. Israel had failed to be the light in the darkness. Israel was supposed to be city on a hill, shining as a witness to the world. Instead, Israel was acting like the world and worshipping idols. Elijah's country-men had driven him out. Ahab, Jezebel and the nation of Israel rejected the LORD and His prophet. As Jesus applies to His own ministry in Luke 4, Elijah was a prophet without honor in his own town. His own people had no place for him- so the Lord sends His prophet to the nations! He came to his own- but His own did not receive Him! Through the ministry of Jesus, He first went to the lost sheep of Israel. He even raises the widow's dead son in Luke 7 as we will find again next week. But the gospel will go out to all nations! This applies to the spread of the gospel- since the Israelites judged themselves unworthy of the gospel in Acts 18 the apostles would go to the Gentiles. Therefore, God sends Elijah and this word of hope not to Israel, but to the nations. We catch a glimpse of Pentecost! When God's people don't offer the fruit of obedience as they ought- the LORD will go out and find others who will! Israel was under the judgment of God because they refused to listen to God's messenger. This is a stern warning and rebuke to all who have heard the gospel message. If we do not embrace the message- if we harden our hearts against the gospel of Jesus Christ- that word might pass us over and be brought to another! But this also means that

God can bring His message to His people- wherever they might be! The book of I Kings was probably written while the nation of Israel was in captivity. Imagine what encouragement this book would bring to those who were in a foreign land! The truth remains the same and the gods of the nations are nothing. To trust in Baal is to be delusional. God is powerful and mighty over everything. God says that it shall not rain, and it does not rain. Even in the land of Baal, it does not rain. Baal is impotent in every land and God is able to provide food in every land! Those in captivity were surrounded by idols and cults of every kind, yet believers know that God can and does provide for them no matter where they are. Here Elijah becomes, as it were, one of the first prophet among the Gentiles. The mercy and gospel of Jesus Christ are for the widows of Zarephath as well! His kindness is not reserved for only a few- but through Jesus, blessings are now being poured out on all nations!

## **II. The Lowly Recipient**

Now the interesting thing in this story is not only that God changes the location of the Battle, but also the recipient of blessings changes. Remember that the word, Zarephath means refiners fire or smelting pot. Zarephath was known for their foundries in which metals would be purified, but here in this story, Zarephath becomes the place in which God's servant and the widow are both tested and tried by fire. Elijah is sent to the Gentiles- to the very heart of the nations that was seeking to put him to death- the very home territory where Jezebel came from. God, you want me to go where? But more than that, he is sent to a widow. The poorest of the poor and often neglected. A widow is going to provide for my needs? Is this right? Did I hear you correctly? It would be like asking a homeless person for a meal! God is testing and trying faith with a refiners' fire- to purify our hearts. So that we learn to trust in Him alone! As I Peter 1 says, we are tested so that the genuineness of our faith which is more precious than gold can be found. Our faith when tested results in the praise and glory of Jesus Christ as we saw last week. Elijah was once again being tested to trust and rely on God's word. Elijah submits and obeys God's strange mandate. When Elijah obeyed, a widow and her son were spared and God's name is praised even to this day

because of His marvelous works of redemption and restoration. Elijah still had a job to do as a prophet and God's Word needed to be proclaimed- even if that word is to be spoken to a gentile widow! Elijah and God's Word are preserved to show Israel their sin by withholding the word from them and to bring the blessings of grace as the word of the gospel goes to the nations.

The faith of Elijah was not only tested, this widow is also tested. Going to Zarephath he meets a widow who is about to prepare her last meal (12). Consider the all-embracing request of v. 13- first make something for me. Use up what you have to obey my words- first make me a meal. It would have put this widow and her son's life in danger- but there is the promise of something more. The widow gave out of her need- and she proves her faith as she obeys. Whatever she knows about the LORD the God of Elijah- she submits to this command. It would be difficult to obey- but the LORD sees what is done is secret. And amazingly, this widow with very little knowledge of the LORD, listens to His word and obeys! To this desperate situation, the LORD brings a word of restoration and redemption (14). Test me and see if I will not open up the floodgates of heaven as Malachi 3 puts it. God meets the needs of these humble servants, and works this hardship for their good. Because Elijah was brought to this place, the widow and her son are also kept alive. If the brook would not have dried up, this would not have taken place. God first commands the ravens, and then God commands this widow to provide for Elijah. And we know that God is faithful- He will do what He has promised. So v. 16 ends with the oil and flour remaining until the drought was over. Is He not the God of the widows and the fatherless?

When Elijah comes to this widow, the widow responds with a confession of dependence in verse 12. As the LORD your God lives. It is through the words and work of Elijah, that this widow comes to know and one day soon- embrace the LORD God. This widow is asked to do what would be the most difficult thing. To give her last portion of food to God's servant. Like Abraham was told- give me your son! To obey God when it is the most inconvenient. To put her life and the life of her son in danger so that she might be faithful to the request made by Elijah. The request of Elijah is for the first and the last- give me all that you have and if you believe, your needs will be

met as well. Give everything to the LORD, and the LORD will sustain you! What a difficult and challenging request. Give first to the LORD. Obey God's Word first! We can apply this to our lives today. It is a lot easier to give when we have our own needs taken care of first! But to obey first- to seek first the Kingdom- that takes real faith! To acknowledge that there is no portion that belongs to us- that all I have belongs to Him! Everything that we receive is a gift and we will be held accountable for how we used the gifts we have been given. This widow who had little was obedient to God's command, should not we who have been given much also be faithful to God's command? And note where this widow ends up in v. 24- now I know that you are a man of God and that the Word of God Lord is in your mouth. This miraculous provision- and the resurrection that we will see next week- elicits a profession of faith! As we have seen today- those who know that God's word is true- those who have experienced the faithfulness of God- those who have tasted of His benefits- will respond with a proper profession of faith!

This prophet redeems and restores this situation. A situation that was hopeless and near death is given life . The situation is dire indeed. The widow was planning on making her last meal, and then she and her son would die. A final meal- and then a funeral Without the direct intercession of Elijah, this story would have ended in death. God worked through Elijah and brought bread-bread that sustained life. Much like the manna in the desert, this bread has a miraculous and unexplained source. And this miraculous bread brings life to God's children. Not only Elijah, but the widow and her son as well. God brings life from certain death! Elijah and the widow are challenged to rely on God's Word, and through Elijah this widow would be brought to a full acceptance and hope in the LORD. Because not only does the Lord command the ravens in v. 4- He commands the widow in v. 9. Our Lord works both through creation and man's hand to bring about His good purposes on earth.

To conclude, in our text the battle between the LORD and the idol gods of the nation's enters round two. As the battle continues between Baal and the LORD, we as the reader can immediately see who is winning this contest. In our story for today, location is extremely important, and the LORD

moves the battleground to the very heart of Baal worship. Jezebel, her father and their gods are brought to nothing, and the LORD shows His ability to control all things and every land. Yet as the battle rages on, God also provides deliverance for His children. The land of Israel is ruined, yet the LORD brings a miracle to this destitute widow in the land of Zarephath. He has his people- even in this wicked city- and not one will be lost! In this story, the widow takes Israel's place as a shelter for the LORD'S servant. The land of refining fire purifies the faith of Elijah and this widow. By this miraculous never-ending bread, the prophet, widow and widow's son are provided for until rain comes again. Elijah's obedience is tested- yet he goes and obeys. And the widow' faith is tested- yet she bakes the break and gives it to the prophet. God continues to purify our faith through trials- but He also richly provides for us in our times of need. May we learn to obey and follow Him- even when the road is difficult- because we know that the one who is Lord of the ravens and the waters is also the Lord of our lives!