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Obedience: A Matter of Faith
1 Kings 17:1-24

Elijah, the prophet of the LORD, towers in the Old Testament over the religious ruins of the northern kingdom of Israel like a rugged mountain rising out of a barren desert plain. Even after 3,000 years, he still looms larger than life! His fiery faith and zealous resolve still move us and call us to a deeper commitment to our living Lord who alone is God.

Time and again Elijah stood, often alone, as the LORD's prophet to show his people Israel that it was the LORD and not Baal who was the true and living God.

We can learn a lot from this great prophet as we walk together as disciples of Jesus Christ. There really are a lot of similarities between our situation in contemporary American culture and Elijah's in his day and culture. Just as the worship of the sky god Baal challenged Israel's commitment to the LORD, there are many idols that clamor for our attention today and try to draw us away from following Jesus Christ as Lord.

One of most important lessons we can learn from Elijah and his story is what genuine *obedience to God* looks like.

Elijah's story . . .

Elijah's story begins abruptly in 1 Kings. He appears during the reign of the evil King Ahab and his Baal-worshiping wife Jezebel over the northern kingdom of Israel. Elijah comes on the scene and announces that there is going to be a severe drought for several years, with neither dew nor rain, except at his word.

Then at the word of the LORD, Elijah goes into hiding, going beyond the Jordan River to the Kerith Ravine, where there was a wadi—a streambed that was often dry or just a trickle, but could become a raging torrent during the rainy season. It wasn't far from Tishbe, where he had come from. The LORD told Elijah that he would provide for him there. The brook would supply him with water, and the ravens would bring him food.

And so it was. He drank from the brook, and the ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and evening.

Now we know a little bit about drought, don't we? Over the previous couple of years, we've had such a dry spring and summer that we saw crops and lawns shrivel and lakes and ponds nearly dry up. Think what it must have been like to have three solid years of that!

Well, as you can imagine with the ongoing drought, in time the wadi dried up. So the LORD sent Elijah into Gentile territory, to the town of Zarephath in Sidon. God told Elijah that he had commanded a widow there to provide food for him. So Elijah obeyed and went to Zarephath.

Now understand that in that day, a widow who didn't have an adult son to care for her was

likely to be very poor and unable to provide for herself, much less anybody else. But Elijah took God at his word and went. When he got there, he saw a widow gathering sticks. He asked for a little water to drink. Never mind the water shortage the drought was causing; she went to get him some. Then he called out to her and asked her to bring him a piece of bread as well.

The woman turned around and said,

“As surely as the LORD your God lives, I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it—and die.”¹

Now you’d think that would have been the end of it. But Elijah told her:

“Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’”

And here’s the amazing thing—she believed him and did it!

And God provided just as he said he would! Every day there was food, because miraculously, the jar of flour was never used up and the jug of oil never ran dry, just as God had said through Elijah!

It’s an amazing story, isn’t it? *Elijah and the widow obeyed God in troubled times, and trusted God to provide for their needs.*

What obedience looks like . . .

Elijah was taking a stand for the LORD as his prophet. He knew that it could cost him his life. Under Jezebel’s influence, Ahab had turned Israel from the LORD to worship and serve Baal, the sky god who supposedly controlled the rain and the fertility of the land. But Elijah was willing to obey the LORD no matter what in order to show the people that it was really the LORD who was in control of the weather and the harvest. So there would be rain or dew only at the word of the LORD’s prophet!

Elijah also obeyed God by going to his own homeland, trusting the LORD to provide for him. But it was an even bigger step of obedience when he did as the LORD instructed and went to the widow in Zarephath. You see, Zarephath was in Sidon—*Jezebel’s homeland!*

While our circumstances are different, doesn’t God call for this same kind of commitment and obedience from us today?

In our world, people have turned away from Christ—even many who profess him as Lord—to follow the idols of materialism, cults, the cut-and-paste spiritualism of the New Age movement, or a narcissistic lifestyle and philosophy where everything is about the self. Like it was with Elijah, doesn’t God call us to take a stand with our lips and our lives, calling for and living out a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord?

That’s certainly not popular, and it can be costly in terms of our priorities, our friendships, our finances, and maybe even other areas as well. But isn’t that what it means to have *no other gods* before the LORD, and to love him with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength? *We must obey God faithfully—period!*

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

But you know, Elijah wasn't the only one in this story who faithfully obeyed God. The widow at Zarephath did too! And it was costly for her. She had to give up the *last little bit* of flour and oil that she was about to use make a last meal for her son and herself. But when the prophet gave God's promise, she was willing to take God at his word and obeyed Elijah. She gave food to the LORD's prophet *first!* She made a *sacrifice*, a very *costly* sacrifice to obey God.

I've had some friends who made some big sacrifices to obey God. One gave up being the sole heir to a large beer distributorship not long after he began following Jesus. Another gave up a lucrative career in broadcasting because God was calling him to be a pastor.

The fact is, obedience can be costly for all Christians. God may be calling you to something that will be costly in terms of time or effort or finances. And you're looking at it and saying, "How in the world can I do it?"

Elijah's story shows what real obedience is, what it looks like. *We obey God faithfully when we trust him fully.* In other words, *obedience is a matter of faith.* It's a matter of believing God, taking him at his word. We obey him because we believe he will do what he says he will do, even when we can't see or understand *how* he'll do it!

When we're really following Jesus, he supplies us with everything we need to do his will. Sometimes he does that in dramatic, even miraculous ways, like the ravens feeding Elijah or the widow's flour and oil never running out.

Isn't this what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:25-34? As he talked about trusting God for food and clothing rather than making those things the aim of our lives like the pagans do, he said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." When we seek and strive first for God's rule and reign, making *that* our top priority, he'll provide all our needs.

Now he doesn't promise an abundance, but enough; not a surplus, but a supply. Sometimes he does give us abundance and surplus, and sometimes it's as it was with the widow—the containers never run over, they just never run out.

We may never get rich and our coffers may never overflow. Our faith may be weak and our strength almost gone. But when we take God at his word we will live in faithful obedience to him, and he will provide all we need—faith, strength, resources, support—*everything* we need to do his will, to obey him. There may never be an abundance, but there will always be *enough!* That's true for us as individual followers of Christ, and it's true for us as his church, the body of Christ!

I think it's important for us to realize just how difficult a situation both Elijah and this widow were in. Elijah was hiding. Later on we learn that Ahab was searching everywhere trying to find him. He was living in the midst of a drought he had called for—had there been popularity polls back then, his numbers would have been at an all-time low. This poor widow was struggling through the drought as best she could, and was down to her last meal!

It's simply human nature to want to avoid difficult circumstances. And sometimes God chooses to deliver us from them. But most often he leads us *through* them rather than around them. And when we really trust him, we'll find strength and grace to help us faithfully obey him, even in those dark and difficult situations.

Faith/Obedience . . .

A. W. Tozer once said:

The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are at opposite sides of the same coin.²

We obey because we trust God; our obedience demonstrates our faith.

Do you remember the story in Genesis 22 when God tested Abraham by commanding him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering? Isaac was the son God had promised Abraham and Sarah and had given to them when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. And now God was telling Abraham to sacrifice him.

When they got to the mountaintop where God had told him to go, Abraham prepared everything, then he bound his son and laid him on the altar, ready to obey God, no matter what it cost him. And as he had his hand raised with the knife, about to slay and offer his beloved son, God stopped him and said, “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. He took it and offered it as a burnt offering.

How in the world could he go to that point of obedience? The writer of Hebrews tells us in 11:17-19—

He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead . . .

In other words, his obedience was a matter of faith.
And so it ours!

†MEG

² Quoted in *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 4; cited at <http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/search.html?query=obedience+and+faith&type=word&filter=&x=0&y=0&tone=&start=1>.