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God and Elijah: Outside the Box

Kings and Chronicles

Series: In the Days of Elijah

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The Village Church

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I. Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath

- A. Story is remarkable on a number of counts
 - 1. Story of God's provision for Elijah during a time of drought, famine
 - a. Already provided for him by Ravens and the water of the brook Cherith
 - (1) Brook had dried up due to drought; had to find other sustenance
 - b. Now God sends him to a person to provide for him
 - c. Geography tells us something different than God providing for Elijah in a different way
 - (1) Cherith flows into the Jordan River between Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea from east of the Jordan (not the Israel side, but the transjordan side)
 - (2) While Cherith was dry, the Jordan was not; easy thing to find water at the Jordan
 - (3) Or even north to the Sea of Galilee, or to the North Jordan above Galilee where there was abundance of water from the source of the Jordan due to snow and rainfall runoff from Mount Hermon
 - d. But God sends Elijah far away from Cherith for this provision, bypassing all sorts of opportunities to get water and food
 - e. So while this is a story of God providing for Elijah, it's much more than that
 - 2. Story of God operating outside the box
 - a. God doing something unexpected, unusual
 - (1) In an unexpected place
 - (2) With unusual, even surprising, people
 - 3. In the end, it's a story about evangelism, outside the box
 - a. A story about how a lost person is found and comes to faith in Jesus
 - b. A story designed to break down our own preconceptions about how God works in evangelism
- B. **Outside the box – Elijah**
 - 1. Of all the OT prophets, Elijah seems to be the most unique

- a. Nothing is mentioned of his background and parentage; kind of unusual as prophets go
 - (1) Almost like Melchizedek, without father or mother
 - (2) Not like most of the named prophets, of whom we have some note of their tribe or family background
 - b. **Tishbite** – from the town of Tishbe; family settled in Gilead
 - c. **Gilead – Transjordan**; other side of the Jordan from Israel proper
 - (1) Home of Gad and half tribe of Manasseh
 - (a) Those tribes opted to stay in Transjordan instead of entering promised land during time of Joshua
 - (2) Separated from Israel proper; though still Jews
 - (3) We still don't know which tribe he was from
 - d. Most of the other named prophets spoke and their works are recorded in books which bear their names (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.)
 - (1) No such book of Elijah
 - e. In spite of having no such magnum opus, he is still esteemed highly
 - (1) Only one since Enoch in Genesis to be translated to heaven without dying
 - (2) Prophet expected to return according to Malachi before Day of the Lord
 - (3) Empty chair still reserved for Elijah in the homes of Jews today during the Seder meals in Passover
2. **Elijah and John the Baptist**
- a. John the Baptist – another out-of-the-box guy
 - (1) Ate locusts and wild honey
 - (2) Solitary existence – Lived in the wilderness
 - (3) A walking fashion liability, wearing garments of camel's hair
 - (a) (No teenage daughters)
 - b. NT – John the Baptist appears to be the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah
 - (1) Not sure whether that John was literally Elijah, or just the fulfillment of the prophecy
 - c. No surprise that Elijah is seen to be an unconventional character
3. When God decides to work through Elijah, you can be sure that the unexpected will occur
- C. Story begins in 17.1
- 1. **1 Kings 17:1** (ESV) —
 - a. 1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."
 - 2. Elijah comes in out of nowhere; speaks to Ahab, king of Israel
 - a. Predicts drought
 - b. Does more – associates the drought with his own command
 - (1) "except by my word" this drought will continue

- c. Certainly makes him a liability to Ahab
- d. Elijah then flees from Ahab's presence
- e. Kings in those days, and Ahab in particular, didn't like bad news
 - (1) Inclined to kill the messenger
- 3. Elijah ends up on the other side of the Jordan in Gilead where he is cared for by water from the brook Cherith, by ravens
- 4. Eventually, brook dried up and it was time to move again to stay away from Ahab
 - a. Where story begins to get really interesting
 - (1) (As if being fed by unclean birds (ravens) alone in the wilderness isn't interesting enough)

II. Provision by the Widow

- A. 1 Kings 17:8-9 (ESV) —
 - 1. 8 Then the word of the LORD came to him,
 - 2. 9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you."
- B. Sent to Zarephath
 - 1. Far north, in Sidon
 - a. Cross Jordan
 - (1) Past Sea of Galilee
 - (2) Past the northern water sources
 - 2. Location is significant for evangelism
 - a. Sidon – Outside of Israel
 - (1) God didn't let him hide in Israel
 - (2) Not even in Judah
 - (a) Eventually, Elijah would end up in Judah and far south hiding from Ahab
 - (3) God sends him away from Israel – north
 - (4) Principle – if you want to do evangelism – go to where the unbelievers are
 - (a) Plenty of unbelievers in Sidon
 - (b) Center of Baal worship; pagan religion reigned supreme
 - (5) Away from Israel – Though they knew about Yahweh, the God of Israel, they had largely rejected the reign of Yahweh
 - (a) Often been the story of missions, evangelism
 - (b) Areas that have been saturated with gospel (Europe, increasingly, North America), no longer the primary location where God is moving
 - (c) Areas where Christianity is growing – Latin America, Africa – are well outside cultural Christianity
 - b. Sent away because of persecution within Israel
 - (1) Fleeing from Ahab because of the negative prophecy
 - (2) Similar to what happened in the NT

- (a) Church was forced to flee Jerusalem and Judah
 - (b) Ended up in Samaria, ends of the earth
 - (3) Was not because a rational strategic decision made by the church; God pushed them there using the persecution of the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea to spread the gospel
 - (4) God was using the threat of Ahab to send a missionary to the Sidonians
 - (5) **Elijah was the first prophet to the Gentiles**
 - (a) Before Jonah (sent to the Ninevites; against his will)
 - (6) Principle – sometimes the best evangelism takes place when we're forced out of our comfort zone, into a place we had no intention of going
 - 3. Sent away to Sidon while he thinks God is doing something else
 - a. Elijah thinks he's simply running away from Ahab
 - (1) While he's running, God has something else to do
 - (a) He's going to bring a Gentile woman to faith in Yahweh
 - (2) Much evangelism takes place while we're doing other things
 - b. Great Commission
 - (1) **Matthew 28:19** (ESV) — 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...
 - (2) Verb form is misleading
 - (a) We evangelicals like to see it as a command, imperative – Go!
 - (b) Imperative – make disciples!
 - (3) But “Go” – voice-passive deponent, mood-participle
 - (a) Literally, “While going, make disciples”
 - (4) “While you are about your business, doing what you do in life, make disciples”
 - c. Elijah – makes a disciple while he's hiding from Ahab
 - 4. **God's ironic use of location**
 - a. Not only does He send a missionary to the pagans while he's hiding him, He sends him to hide in Ahab's wife's own country
 - b. Jezebel was the princess of the Sidonians
 - (1) She, even more than Ahab, wanted Elijah dead
 - c. So where does God send Elijah?
 - (1) Into the heart of enemy territory
 - (2) Sends him there to hide!
 - (3) Ahab and Jezebel are looking all over Israel for Elijah
 - (a) She'd have a better chance of finding him if she went home to visit her folks!
 - d. That certainly is ironic
 - (1) Even more that God would find a pagan and convert her to Yahweh from the midst of paganism
- C. **1 Kings 17:9** (ESV) —

1. 9 “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”
2. God uses a widow to provide for Elijah
 - a. Widows are the least capable of providing for anyone!
 - (1) Ancient near east – little means of self-support, easily taken advantage of
 - b. God uses the least to achieve the greatest; the weak things of the world to shame the wise
 - (1) Why?
 - (2) So God would get the glory for the provision
 - c. God could have used others of greater note
 - (1) Remember Obadiah, head of Ahab’s household
 - (2) Hid prophets when Jezebel was trying to destroy them all
 - (3) He had resources and a track record
 - d. No, God sends Elijah to a resourceless widow deep in enemy territory
- D. **1 Kings 17:10** (ESV) —
 1. 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath.
 2. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks.
 3. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.”
 4. Sounds like Jesus’ encounter with Samaritan woman!
 - a. Certainly Sidonians had no more affection for Jews than Samaritans had for them in Jesus’ day
 5. Like Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus initiates the interaction, asking for a drink of water
- E. **1 Kings 17:11** (ESV) —
 1. 11 And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”
 2. Willing to comply, she stops her stick gathering and heads off to get a drink
 3. “While you’re up...”
 - a. Asks for bread
 4. Counterintuitive for evangelism
 - a. We think we should go try to help people
 - (1) When they see we love them and are helpful to them, they might be more willing to listen to the gospel
 - b. Elijah does the opposite
 - (1) Finds a pagan and asks her to help him!
- F. **1 Kings 17:12** (ESV) —
 1. 12 And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug.
 2. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

3. That last requests finally prompts a reply
 - a. Why she didn't respond similarly to his earlier request for water, we don't know
 - b. Doesn't appear that she was going off cheerfully to get him a drink
 - (1) Maybe she just said to herself, "whatever..."
 - (2) "I don't care anymore"
4. Now he asks for food and two things become evident
 - a. She doesn't really have any
 - b. She's depressed about her situation
5. Elijah has found something in this interaction that assists in his evangelism
 - a. Discovered a need
 - b. Like Jesus and the Samaritan woman: "Go call your husband"
 - (1) Woman: "I have no husband"
 - (2) Jesus: "Right. You've had five... the man you're living with is not your husband"
 - c. Piper – the way to the heart is through a wound
 - (1) Jesus had opened a wound in the Samaritan woman
 - (2) That enabled Jesus to produce a believer
 - d. Elijah had opened the wound in the widow's heart
 - (1) She doesn't have food
 - (2) She has a child to care for
 - (3) She's at the end of her rope
 - (4) She's going through the motions
 - (5) She just wants it all to be over

G. **1 Kings 17:13–14** (ESV) —

1. 13 And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.
2. 14 For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.' "
3. Again, the unexpected
 - a. We would think, oh, she doesn't have enough, I'll just ask someone else
 - b. Not Elijah
 - (1) Don't worry – go ahead, make me a snack out of what you have
 - (2) You know what – you'll have enough for you and your son to eat
 - (a) Not just for now, but until the drought is over
 - (3) My God, Yahweh, promises that (**Yahweh's Promise**)
 - c. Elijah's admonition actually calls for faith on the part of the woman at her most difficult moment in life

H. **1 Kings 17:15–16** (ESV) —

1. 15 And she went and did as Elijah said.

2. And she and he and her household ate for many days.
3. 16 The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.
4. She did it!
5. Why?
 - a. Perhaps for the first time she had just a smidgen of hope
 - (1) Met someone who had given her that hope
 - b. Didn't take much
 - c. Didn't even know this man; stranger from another nation
6. Her gods had let her down
 - a. Baal was worthless
7. Here comes a man who genuinely trusts God
 - a. He calls for faith on her part
 - b. He gives her hope for her and her son
8. She responds

III. Healing of Widow's Son

A. 1 Kings 17:17 (ESV) —

1. 17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.
2. Now we have a further test
 - a. Her son – probably for whom she was willing to have hope in the first place – is dead
 - (1) “no breath left in him” – layperson's diagnostic criterion
3. How does she feel about it?

B. 1 Kings 17:18 (ESV) —

1. 18 And she said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!”
2. “How cruel can you be?”
 - a. “After all this, and look at the result”
3. Premature death of a child seen, even in this culture, to be a sign of sin
4. “You've come here just so you could remind me of my sin, and then kill my son, for whom alone I've had hope!”
5. Again, the way to the heart is through a wound
 - a. Sometimes, the greatest advances in sanctification come through unbelievably difficult trials

C. 1 Kings 17:19–21 (ESV) —

1. 19 And he said to her, “Give me your son.” And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed.
2. 20 And he cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?”
3. 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again.”
4. Elijah uses the opportunity to take the child

- a. Doesn't try to offer consolation to the woman
 - (1) Doesn't give her a lesson in theology
 - (2) Probably doesn't know what to say; has his own doubts about God's purposes at this point
 - b. In a tender moment, he takes the lifeless body from her and carries him to his own apartment
 - 5. Interestingly, the woman is not at this point without faith
 - a. She lets him take her son
 - (1) Most woman would cling to the body of their child for as long as they could
 - (2) Sometimes they would have to be pried away from them when the interval became unseemly
 - b. But she lets him take him from her bosom
 - c. She doesn't know it yet, but she will learn, that she would only get her son back if she let him go
 - 6. Prays
 - a. **Bold prayer**
 - (1) Challenges God's purposes
 - (a) Knows something about God
 - b. **Isaiah 45:5-7** (ESV) —
 - (1) 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me,
 - (2) 6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.
 - (3) 7 I form light and create darkness;
 - (4) I make well-being and create calamity;
 - (5) I am the LORD, who does all these things.
 - c. Elijah knows about the sovereignty of God; God is the cause of even calamity
 - (1) Doesn't know about God's purpose; that's what he questions
 - d. His supplication
 - (1) Let this child live
 - (2) Symbolically stretches himself on the child to invest life in him
- D. **1 Kings 17:22** (ESV) —
 - 1. 22 And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah.
 - 2. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.
 - 3. Lord hears Elijah's prayer
 - 4. Surprised that prayer would be involved in this?
 - a. Most of the time, prayer is what God ordains to accomplish His purposes
 - (1) Whether sickness or sin is the issue
- E. **1 Kings 17:23** (ESV) —

1. 23 And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives."
 2. Widow received her son back after having giving him up
- F. 1 Kings 17:24 (ESV) —
1. 24 And 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."
 2. If there was any question about her faith now, it is settled
 3. Elijah spoke the truth of the Word; she knew it
 - a. Worshiper of Yahweh had been made out of a worshiper of Baal
- IV. Wasn't done by a typical person in a typical place using typical means
- A. Done by a guy who operated outside the box
 - B. Principles
 1. Evangelized by going where the unbelievers were
 2. Evangelized by going to enemy territory
 3. Evangelized with no particular intention of evangelizing
 4. Evangelized while he was doing other things
 5. Evangelized the most weak and needy
 6. Evangelized by asking the helpless widow for help
 7. Evangelized by finding the wound in the woman's life
 8. Evangelized by giving her hope
 - C. Don't usually find these things in evangelism textbooks
 1. Elijah, the first prophet to the Gentiles, shows us how God loves to work outside the box