



It's been said, "Spectacular achievement is always preceded by unspectacular preparation." No one believed this more than Roald Amundsen. In 1911, he became the first person to lead a successful expedition to the South Pole. He was famous for his commitment to prepare. In his late twenties, he traveled 2,000 miles from Norway to Spain for a two-month sailing trip to earn a master's certificate. To prepare, he rode his bike!

He then experimented with eating raw dolphin meat to determine its usefulness as an energy supply. After all, he reasoned, someday he might be shipwrecked, finding himself surrounded by dolphins, so he might as well know if he could eat one.

It was all part of building a foundation for his quest, training his body to learn what worked. He even made a pilgrimage to apprentice with Eskimos. He learned how they used dogs to pull sleds and how they never hurried, moving slowly to avoid excessive sweat that could turn to ice in sub-zero temperatures. He prepared himself for every situation he might encounter en route to the Pole.

His philosophy: Don't wait until you're in an unexpected storm to discover you need more endurance. Don't wait until you're shipwrecked to determine if you can eat raw dolphin. Don't wait until you're in Antarctica to become a superb skier and dog handler. Prepare with intensity, so when conditions turn against you, you're ready.

I think of so many Olympic athletes who've spent the last four years preparing for what may be just a few minutes of competition. They understand what Abe Lincoln said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening the axe." All of this begs the question, How does God prepare us spiritually?

Last week we began to look at the prophet Elijah. Elijah lived in a very dark time. God's people were divided into two nations: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The northern kingdom of Israel had been on a spiritual decline for decades. They were led by the most evil couple imaginable: Ahab and his wife Jezebel. This couple plunged Israel into unprecedented sin and idolatry. Jezebel was from Phoenicia and a devoted follower of the Canaanite fertility God, Baal. It wasn't long before Ahab followed suit and even built a temple and an altar where Baal could be worshipped. Baal worship replaced the worship of Yahweh as the state religion of Israel.

In the midst of this, God called Elijah to be his spokesman. Elijah was a nobody from nowhere, but he barged into Ahab's palace

and announced there'd be no more rain in the next few years except by his word. There was a kind of blunt fearlessness to this guy. I can just imagine the adrenaline pumping through his body as he walked out of that palace. He must have wondered, "Okay, God, what's next?" On the one hand, he must have had great expectations. Maybe his pronouncement would result in Israel's repentance and return to God. Maybe he'd even be propelled into the limelight and lead a national revival with sweeping reforms. But, on the other hand, he must have some great fears as well. Ahab was a powerful man; his wife was worse! You didn't just barge into their palace and make an announcement like that and strut away. In fact, we know from chapter 18 that Ahab put a contract on Elijah's head and Jezebel began systematically killing off the Lord's prophets.

God wasn't finished with Elijah. He still had a lot of work for him to do. But for now God had a plan for him I'm sure was a surprise. God would spend the next 3 1/2 years spiritually preparing Elijah for even greater confrontations to come. He does that through leading Elijah to two different places; places I'm sure he never expected to go. Let's pick up the story right after his word to King Ahab.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."

So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

"As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive 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.”

Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf 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 sends rain on the land.’”

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing (1 Kings 17:2–17).

The Pattern of Preparation

Again, we see here two strange places Elijah will spend the next 3 1/2 years. The first is the Kerith Ravine, which we might call Elijah’s boot camp. The second is Zarephath, which was his advanced training. But in each of these scenes there’s a similar pattern to the preparation.

First, in each scene there’s a command. In verse 2 the word of the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him to leave and go east and hide in the Kerith Ravine. And then, probably about a year later, the word of the Lord comes to him again and commands him to go to Zarephath and stay there. The word of the Lord plays a very prominent role in this story. It all began in verse 1 with Elijah delivering the word of the Lord to Ahab. Then at the end of the story in verse 24, the widow says, *“Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”* In between, the word of the Lord determines Elijah’s itinerary.

Second, in each scene there’s a promise of provision. In both cases this provision would come from an unlikely place. First, God promises Elijah he’d drink from the brook at Kerith and ravens would bring him bread and meat. Later, when God commands him to go to Zarephath, God promises to provide food through another unlikely source—a widow!

Third, in each scene there’s an obedient response. In verse 5 we read, *“So he did what the Lord told him.”* In verse 10, *“So he went to Zarephath.”* No questions. No procrastination. No arguments. Just obedience. We even see an obedient response in the widow. In verse 15 it says, *“So she went away and did as Elijah told her.”*

Finally, in each place there’s fulfillment of God’s promise. God comes through just as he said he would. In verse 6 the ravens bring him bread and meat in both the morning and the evening. Gosh, that’s even better than the Israelites had in the wilderness! They just had bread and meat in the morning and that had to do them for all day. Elijah gets fed twice! And then, in Zarephath

Elijah and the widow make flapjacks from the bowl of flour and the jar of oil which don’t run dry *“in keeping with the word of the Lord.”*

The Purpose of Preparation

It’s obvious one of the things God was doing during this time was keeping Elijah safe, hiding him from Ahab and Jezebel. This was God’s witness protection program. But that’s not all God was doing. God was doing a deep work of preparation in Elijah’s heart. The question is, What was God trying to accomplish in his life? Preparation is never pointless. There’s always a goal in mind. There’s always a target. What’s the target? I ask this question fully convinced that God’s purpose and methods are no different for us than they were for Elijah. I believe the target (purpose) of this time was to teach Elijah to trust God and not himself. That sounds pretty simple, but we’ll unpack that idea more in a minute. The methods God used to accomplish that can be seen in the two places he was sent: Kerith and Zarephath. Kerith means “to cut.” It can mean to cut off or to cut down. It has the idea of whittling away at an individual or an object. This is what would happen to Elijah at Kerith. God would whittle away at his life; cut him down. The other place was called Zarephath. That name means “to refine.” God was also refining Elijah, burning away the dross.

There it is: Kerith—to cut. Zarephath—to refine.

Preparation isn’t always a lot of fun. It means work has to be done now that won’t pay off until later. We live in a society that wants the goodies **now**. When it comes to our spiritual lives, we want to see growth and impact **now**, but God isn’t in a hurry. God will often choose to slowly whittle away and melt all the things we would depend on but him. This is what he’s doing in our lives and this is what he was doing in Elijah’s life.

This process of cutting and refining is designed to teach us several lessons with the purpose of building trust in God and distrust in ourselves. What are those lessons?

Trust is built on listening to and obeying God’s word

Elijah didn’t just do anything; *“He did what the LORD had told him.”* Sometimes we’re so busy he can’t get our attention long enough to tell us what he really wants us to do. We have to learn to hear God’s voice.

The first and most authoritative way God tells us his will is through the Bible. The Bible offers us the good news that God loves us and sent his Son to die for us, but it also teaches us how to live. There are some things you don’t have to pray about. You don’t have to pray if God wants you to do this or that because it’s very clear in his word. Just do what it says. As a new Christian, I said to my friends, “I’m interested in growing as a disciple, but I don’t want to break up with my girlfriend who isn’t a believer. Can’t I still hold on to the lifestyle I’m used to living?” I was trying to convince myself, but I knew I was wrong because God’s word

was clear. When you say, "I'll call Jesus Lord and but I'll only follow him if I agree with where he wants me to go," you don't understand lordship. Lordship means we surrender our will to God in a life of trust.

Along with the Bible—but never in conflict with it—God will sometimes tell us what to do through the leading of his Spirit in our minds and hearts. As he did with Elijah, God whispers what to do. He doesn't just speak this way to the great heroes of the Bible. He does so for anyone willing to listen. The same God who spoke to Elijah will speak to us. The key to hearing God is opening the Scriptures, praying for guidance and taking time to listen. John Calvin said, "There's no worse screen to block out the Holy Spirit than confidence in our own intelligence."

Trust is listening to God and doing what he tells you to do. What's difficult about this is sometimes what God says to do doesn't make sense. Trust may have to live with a lot of questions, and God often does not give a lot of explanation. Think of the crazy things God told Elijah to do. First, God tells him to go hide in the desert and sit by a brook and wait for ravens to come and feed him. Ravens! Ravens are scavengers. They don't share food with anyone. Sometimes they don't even feed their own young. Not only that, ravens were among the unclean foods God says not to touch or eat in the book of Leviticus. How could God use ravens?

But that's not all. After the brook dried up. God says go to Zarephath in the region of Sidon. Do you know where that is? That's in Phoenicia. That's the area Jezebel was from. Talk about walking right into the lion's mouth! We all saw how important home field advantage was last Sunday, right? Well, God tells Elijah to forget about home field advantage and go to Baal's field. No place could be more dangerous for Elijah. Not only that, he tells him to go there because a widow is going to feed him. A widow! They're the poorest of the poor. How could God provide through a widow? God's leading is often surprising. Don't analyze it; just follow. Trust is built on listening to and obeying God's word.

Trust is built in obscurity

It began in the wilderness. Just Elijah and God and a few birds. The wilderness is the best place in the world to learn to trust God. Israel spent time there. So did Moses, David, Jesus and Paul. The wilderness is a place of soul making. We don't make a mark on the world by intellect, education, humor, personal charisma, appearance or charm. Influence comes from within. It's a matter of the heart. It can't be accomplished by a five-step process or a weekend seminar. It's the result of God doing a work in your soul, and that work is always done in secret. Jesus said, *"Go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"* (Matt. 6:6).

Jesus did this. He'd often escape from the crowds to be alone with his Father (Luke 6:12). Sometimes he even invited his disciples to come with him and find a quiet place to rest (Mark 6:31). Too often we think of the Lord as so busy. It's true he had a big job to do, but he never seemed stressed or busy. "Busy Christian," John White said, ought to sound like "adulterous wife" to us. The two ideas are that incongruent. Busyness isn't a Christian virtue and spiritual maturity isn't measured by the length of our to-do list. In the wilderness we learn activity is useless apart from God. His work is done *"not by might, not by power, but by his Spirit"* (Zech. 4:6).

Being in the wilderness is humbling. You're out of the limelight. You feel like God has set you aside; placed you on the shelf; made you expendable. The wilderness is a place of disappointment, shame, temptation and absolute dependence. I like what A.W. Pink said about this: "The prophet needed further training in secret if he was to be personally fitted to speak again for God in public....The man whom the Lord uses has to be kept low: severe discipline has to be experienced by him....Three more years must be spent by the prophet in seclusion. How humbling! Alas, how little is man to be trusted: how little is he able to bear being put into the place of honor! How quickly self rises to the surface, and the instrument is ready to believe he's something more than an instrument. How sadly easy it is to make of the very service God entrusts us with a pedestal on which to display ourselves."

The very same lesson was learned in Zarephath. He wasn't alone any longer, but he spent the next two years with just two people. Not people of importance. Not people whose names you might drop at a social occasion. Just a widow with a little boy. By the end of the story you can see Elijah's impact on them would forever change their lives. But there must have been times he felt, "Lord, you've called me to bigger things than to hang out with those two nobodies. Lord, I've been gifted and called to so much more." God says, "No, Elijah. This is your mission field right now. A widow and her son. One or two isn't too few for me." Numbers mean nothing; substance means everything. That's what you learn in obscurity.

When I was in my late twenties, God directed us out of a thriving youth ministry in Pleasanton to seminary in Denver. I went to school and worked as a waiter. My wife worked at a bank. Our daughter went to preschool. I used to drop my wife off at work in my pajamas. She worked with a bunch of big shots in three piece suits and I felt like such a loser. We went to a church where no one knew me. I felt set aside by God. Little did I know he was preparing me through obscurity.

Trust is built progressively day by day

Did you notice God never told Elijah what the next step would be until he'd taken the first step? God provided at the brook and then it dries up. The Lord didn't tell him in advance the brook would dry up; it just did; and then the Lord told him what to do next. It's

like God told him what to do when it was time for him to know, and not before.

I'm learning this in my own life. I love what I get to do here at CPC. I hope the Lord lets me do it for many more years. But the reality is I'm 57. I can't do this forever. There are times I wonder, "Lord, what would I do without CPC? How would I survive?" I want God to show me now so I can plan and prepare; I want a blueprint for my whole life, but I'm learning God doesn't work that way. When it's time for me to know I'll know what to do. God will show me when I need to know, and not before. George MacDonald wrote, "We don't understand the next page of God's lesson book. We only see the one before us. Nor shall we be allowed to turn the leaf until we've learned its lesson." After a year at Kerith, the Lord says, "Okay, Elijah, you're ready for the next lesson.

Trust is built day by day, and it's a progressive thing with each step preparing us for the next. The next lesson would be harder for Elijah. In the first he was passive. He just sat there and the ravens brought him breakfast in bed! But in Zarephath he has to act; he has to initiate. When he gets there, he meets a widow. God had told him he'd provide through a widow, but how did he know this was the one? She's just gathering a few sticks for her last meal with her son. He asks her, "Hey, could you bring me a little water?" When he sees her willingness, he adds, "And a piece of bread, too." She tells him of her plight, and then he challenges her to take what she has left for her last meal with her son and give it to him! He promises if she does that she and her son will have more than enough to survive the long drought. She took him at his word. Can you imagine giving **him** her last meal and not her son? Sometimes God calls us to radical giving that doesn't make any sense at all. She trusted God and gave to him first. When we do that, we never run out. Look what happened. Day by day *"the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry."* I'm sure Elijah and this widow would have preferred a roomful of sacks of flour and barrels of oil, but that's rarely God's way. His way is day by day. Jesus taught us to pray for our "daily bread." When we live this way, we're constantly reminded of our dependence in him.

Trust is only as good as its object

God is the sovereign God of creation! Remember Baal was considered to be the god who controlled the rainfall and the fertility of the land. Here God is teaching Elijah and all Israel that Yahweh controls the forces of nature. He can direct ravens! He can cause the flour and oil to never run out! The hero of this story isn't Elijah; it's God. The most important part of preparation is to learn who God is. And we only learn who God is when we take him at his word and trust him. I was reminded of this as I went

through my E110 readings this week. I had to remind myself that the point isn't to get through the readings. The point is to get to know the living God. The point is to be drawn into worship and to love him more.

Trust listens and obeys God's word. Trust is built in obscurity. Trust is built progressively day by day. Trust is only as good as its object. In his book *Your God Is Too Safe*, Mark Buchanan describes how the staff at Bridger Wilderness Park in Wyoming posted some of the suggestions that had been made by park visitors. Here are a few:

- » Trails need to be reconstructed; please avoid making trails that go uphill.
- » Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests.
- » Chairlifts are needed in some places so we can get to wonderful views without having to hike.
- » The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.
- » A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can be reimbursed?
- » A McDonald's would be nice at the trailhead.
- » Too many rocks in the mountain.

Those suggestions reveal the kind of life we want. Elijah's story shows us clearly if we're going to be prepared, we're going to have to stop looking for chairlifts, longing for Big Macs, whining about the bugs, and griping about the rocks. We're going to have to love the wild majesty of following and trusting the living God. There are no shortcuts or escalators. It takes trust—the kind that overcomes the objections and obstacles. God loves it when we do what he's told us to do because we trust in him. Francois Fénelon said, "There's only one way to love God: to take not a single step without him, and to follow with a brave heart wherever he leads."

Go back to that simple pattern of preparation. First, God commands. Second, God promises to provide. Next, we respond in obedience. Finally, God provides. Is that pattern at work in your life? What's God commanding you to do? What's his promise? What step of obedience do you need to take? What provision are you waiting for?

God's way is the way of Elijah. It's the way of Jesus. It's the way of truth and trust. It is the way of real life, great adventure, and God's presence. It's the way to be prepared.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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