



Have you ever been in a situation like the one in the video we just saw? I sure have. As a follower of Jesus Christ, our faith grows as we learn to trust Jesus more. Once we know he can be trusted we then step out in faith and he catches us. But, there have been times in all of our lives where he asks us to fall back into the unknown and into what doesn't make sense. It's in those circumstances that we struggle with our faith and ask ourselves questions like, "Can I really trust God? Is God fully in control? Does God truly care about my problems and pain? Does God even have the power to do anything about them?" I think it is very normal to ask those kinds of questions. It's amazing how our human nature often keeps us from the very thing that will help us trust him more. Today we are looking at a very moving and powerful text where both a widow and the prophet Elijah are pushed to very edges of their faith. God asks them both to essentially fall back when it doesn't make any sense to them whatsoever. Maybe you find yourself in a similar situation today?

Before we jump in to today's passage, let me give you a brief overview of Elijah's life so far. We are told that Ahab, the king of Israel, "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him." Not the kind of description you want in the Bible! Ahab worshipped the pagan god called Baal. He turned the hearts of God's people away to foreign gods and detestable practices. In Ahab's mind either Yahweh is God or Baal is God, but both cannot be God. Ahab chooses to worship Baal. Elijah jumps onto the scene, a relatively unknown prophet from a little town and announces to Ahab that a drought will plague the nation for several years. The word of the Lord tells Elijah to flee to the Kerith Ravine and hide. God provides for Elijah water from a brook and food from ravens during this time. The brook eventually stops running and the word of the Lord tells Elijah to go to Zarephath and stay with a widow and her son.

Zarephath was a center for the worship of Baal and Ashteroth. It would be like being a Jew during World War II and God telling you to move to Berlin. God again provides for Elijah and the flour and oil never run out. The widow, her son and Elijah are given enough bread every day to live. It's hard to imagine what it was like to live without rain for three and a half years. It must have been miserable. But, that's not the only problem. There is also a drought of God's word in Israel. It's at Zarephath we find Elijah, hiding from Ahab, living in a pagan town with a pagan family, waiting on God to make his next move. Through all this Elijah was learning to become a man of God. He was learning to trust

God. But, God has another test to put Elijah through. We pick up the story in verse 17 of 1 Kings 17. Suddenly, something terrible happens that takes the widow and Elijah by surprise.

### **The Widow Struggles to Trust God**

**Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" (verses 17–18).**

After about two years, the widow's son becomes sick. We don't know what kind of sickness or disease he had, but whatever it was, it eventually caused his death. I want us to enter into this woman's grief and pain. I can't think of anything more terrible and painful than losing a son or daughter. That's not how life is supposed to work. Parents are supposed to outlive their children. Life is hard. Life is unpredictable. Death is unavoidable. I know several families in our church who have lost a son or a daughter and they will tell you that the pain never goes away. Statistics say that most marriages won't survive the death of a child because it's just too hard to deal with.

But this woman was alone. She was a widow. For her, in the time she lived, this was a life-altering event. Without a son to work and provide for the family, she was destined to live in loneliness and extreme poverty. There was no social security or social services for widows. Her entire world and future was wrapped up in her son and now he's gone. What this woman doesn't realize and what we tend to forget is God specializes in impossible situations.

In her anguish she lashes out at Elijah and blames him for her son's death. This is all **your** fault Elijah! During times of crisis we don't think straight. Sometimes we even blame those who have done the most to help. We expect her to ask Elijah to do something, but instead she placed the blame on him. It was a dangerous and risky thing to host a prophet in your home. For this woman, who was not a follower of Yahweh yet, the gods were fickle and capricious. They could be generous or they could be harsh and prophets represented them. If a prophet got angry or offended at some little thing, they could be set off and pronounce some sort of curse that would one day come true. The widow assumes that is exactly what happened. She thinks her son has died because of something she has done. What was the sin haunting her? Was it worship of Baal? Was it immorality?

Was it guilt she was feeling from her husband's death? We don't know. Maybe it was nothing. At first she blames Elijah but deep down she was angry at herself. Ultimately, though, she is blaming God by blaming God's prophet.

We can't be quick to judge her too harshly because anyone who has lost a loved one, especially a child, understands her grief. When pain and suffering come our way, our natural tendency is to blame someone else. We've been doing that since the Garden of Eden. As God is walking through the Garden he finds Adam hiding and asked, "Did you eat from the tree?" Adam takes a bite out of the fruit again and says, "She made me do it!" Just the other day, my family went to Annelise's softball practice and we brought Brenden, my two-year-old, and his scooter. As Missy, Brenden and I were walking, we stopped and I asked Missy to hold my stuff so I could put on Brenden's helmet. In that one-second interaction, Brenden jumped on the scooter and fell back hitting his head on the asphalt. You know what my immediate reaction was? "Missy!? Why didn't you do something?" I couldn't believe I blamed her! It was ridiculous! That's how we all are.

I posted a question on Facebook a week back and asked, "When we suffer and are in pain, why do we tend to blame others for it?" I received 22 fantastic comments. I can't read them all, but let me highlight a few:

- E100 reading for today! Joseph could have blamed his brothers for everything. Instead what did he do? He took what God gave him knowing that it was created for good not evil.
- Human Nature-not taking personal responsibility for troubles we're having-it's easier to blame others!
- Because sometimes they are responsible!
- It is much easier to look without than it is to look within.
- One of 2 things happen with me. I kinda panic because I didn't do something that could have prevented it, so instead of coming clean, I blame. It's because I feel shameful about it and don't want to be found out. Or the second reaction is thinking I'm so smart and self-righteous. How could this be my fault? They must have caused it. That one is when I'm not honest with myself.
- We blame others because we want someone to place our anger on. Some pain and struggles, don't have an answer why they happen. It is harder to feel in control when there are no answers.
- John Piper put it well of what I was thinking. "We are fallen, comfort-loving creatures. We are always on the lookout for ways to justify our self-protecting, self-securing, self-pleasing ways of life." - Don't Waste Your Life

Those are all really thoughtful answers. I emailed a marriage and family therapist at our church and asked him the same question.

Here's what he said: "Pride. As C.S. Lewis said about pride: It's not one sin among many, it's the root of all sin. When we encounter suffering (which is often times confusing) we seek to make sense of the apparent chaos. And what better (and easier) way of making sense of something than blaming someone/something else. If we knew better what was going on, and how to make it stop, then it potentially can feel better. So in that instance we have an inflated sense of self to the point that we trick ourselves into thinking we can absolutely pinpoint the cause of our discomfort, and then what needs to happen to alleviate it. It also helps to consider how we all operate with this innate need to protect our ego from harm. So when we encounter painful events our defenses get activated. Our pride can trick us into thinking that we did not deserve such ill-treatment. Pride also effects the aftermath by insisting that someone else must be at fault and therefore must change to make the situation better. Why would our pride ever admit that there was something we may have possibly done to warrant such pain, and furthermore something we need to do to improve the situation?"

I think he is right on the money. We don't really know what was going on in the widow's heart. In her anger and pain she blames Elijah, herself and God for the death of her son. The irony is that they would have died from famine without God's help through Elijah! How will Elijah respond? How will God? Look at verses 19-21.

### **Elijah Cries Out to God in Faith**

**"Give me your son,"** Elijah replied. **He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"**

Let's not forget that this was a tragedy for Elijah too. He had been living with this family for a few years. I am sure he's played with the boy, ate meals with him, and became very close to them both. He's just as shocked as she is. Here's yet another crisis in Elijah's life. And sometimes that's what life is made up of, isn't it? One crisis after another. The car gets fixed and then your refrigerator goes out. The medicine finally starts to work then someone else in your family gets sick. It's sometimes one thing after another and that can even lead the strongest person of faith to doubt. What did Elijah do to deserve this? Nothing! He's obeyed God. He's done exactly what God wanted him to do. Now he is enduring the brunt of the widow's blame.

How does Elijah react? He calmly asks to be given her son. For a Jewish man, let alone a prophet, to touch the dead corpse of a Gentile was strictly forbidden and ceremonially unclean. Elijah

didn't seem to care about religious rules. In faith, he takes the boy upstairs, lays him on a bed and cries out to God in prayer. I don't think Elijah had any idea what God would do. Up until this point, no one in the Bible had ever been brought back from the dead. Elijah had no frame of reference and no experience with dead people coming back to life. This is the first resurrection in the Bible. God has prepared Elijah for this moment. God said, "Elijah, trust me, fall back, go to Ahab and announce a drought. Trust me again, fall back, go to the Kerith Ravine where ravens will feed you. Trust me, fall back, go live with a widow and her son in Zarephath. Trust me, fall back, cry out to me, I am God." God is once again strengthening Elijah's faith to prepare him for the battle of God's on Mt. Carmel in chapter 18. What is God using to build your faith this week?

God, because he loves us, brings us into those desperate moments where the only place we have to go is to him. It's in those times where he teaches us to trust him. It's never fun. It's never easy. But, it's always necessary if we want to become more like Jesus. As we were in the process of adopting Brenden, there was a continual fear Missy and I had to deal with. At any time Brenden could have been taken out of our home and placed back with his parents. For over a year we were in a powerless situation that we couldn't control. All we could do is pray and ask others to pray. And that is all we needed to do. Through the adoption process we learned to trust God in a deeper way. Isn't that what parenting is all about? Parenting is learning to place your sons and daughters into the hands of Almighty God time and time again. Ultimately God is their heavenly father and we are stewards/managers of the kids he blesses us with. We have to be careful and not hold on too tightly to our children. The widow had to let go and in faith placed her son into the hands of the only person who could do anything—not Elijah, but the Lord.

What does Elijah do? He prays. He cries out to God. If you are reading the E100 plan, for 430 years Israel were slaves in Egypt and cried out to God for deliverance. God heard the cries of his people and sends Moses to rescue them from slavery. God always hears the cries of his people. Twice, Elijah uses the phrase, "Lord my God." He's saying, "You are not like these other pagan gods around here. You truly care for and love your people. You are my God. You are greater than the Canaanite god of death, Mot. You are the Author of life." What I appreciate about this prayer is how Elijah poured out the confusion that was in his heart; he doesn't hold anything back. He says, "This poor woman has almost starved to death, don't take her son away. I know that you give and you take away Lord, but please bring this boy back to life!" Elijah is struggling with God in prayer pleading on behalf of a widow.

When we suffer the question of "Why" can plague both Christians and non-Christians alike. While the Bible gives many possible reasons for suffering, we need to be really careful that

we don't become so obsessed with the "Why" that we neglect the "Who." When we are obsessed with the why, we take our eyes off what God is able to do with us and for us.

If you are wondering why Elijah lays on the boy three times, welcome to the club! No scholar I read this week has any idea either! Desperate times call for desperate measures, I guess! The beauty of this prayer is the faith Elijah displays. One scholar put it this way, "Here we have an unconditional prayer; a prayer, too, for something temporal; a prayer for a miracle; a prayer without limitations; and yet the Lord heard and answered it. Our gracious God does not bind Himself to our maxims, nor suffered Himself to be limited by our rules" (Krummacher, *Elijah the Tishbite*, quoted in *All the Prayers of the Bible*).

Let's learn to pray like Elijah. What miracle do you need to pray for today? Look how God responds to Elijah's prayer in verses 22–23.

### **God Responds by Healing the Widow's Son**

**The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"**

Can you imagine what it would have been like to see God answer this prayer and perform a miracle right before you? I imagine the boy coughing and breathing in deeply. His eyes open, color returns to his face and in confusion he asks for his mom. With tears of joy now streaming down his face, Elijah scoops up the boy, rushes down stairs and shouts to the widow, "Look, your son is alive!" The joy, the tears, the laughter, the hugs, the celebration and worship taking place in the home at that moment must have been amazing. The widow is stunned. Look at 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 from your mouth is the truth."**

It's obvious until this point, even though she has survived the famine, she still wasn't all in with God. When you and I are first called to faith in Christ, it is a call to come and die to ourselves. That usually means we need to give up something really important to us. I had to give up my dream of becoming a CEO of a successful start-up company. The widow had to surrender what little oil and flour she had. She gave that to Elijah in faith, and in return survived three and a half years of famine and drought. She had more, not less. She gave and then received. That initial choice to trust God, to fall back, eventually restored her son's life. Now she knows God is the true God and his word is truth. The eternal waters of life are beginning to flow again.

Chapter 17 begins with the word of the Lord bringing judgment on the people of God and ends with the word of the Lord being

embraced by a Gentile woman and her son. God is a God of all people, not just Israel. Jesus himself, in Luke 4:24–26, uses this story to remind people of God's love and care for even widows. *"Truly I tell you," he continued, 'no prophet is accepted in his hometown.' I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon."* For whatever reason, God chose to send Elijah to her home. He's done the same for you. Jesus, the great prophet, was sent into our world to take all the suffering and pain upon himself and die in your place and for your sin. We are all going to die, but one day, when Jesus returns, those in Christ will rise from the grave and suffering will be no more.

What's the point of this story? Even in the midst of suffering, God invites her to live by faith. By faith she offers Elijah her last piece of bread and now her dead son. Suffering widows need to learn how to live by faith just like powerful kings and wise prophets. So do we. Even in the midst of our suffering, God invites us to live by faith.

Christian author and theologian, Jerry Bridges wrote a fantastic book called, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. In it he says some profound and helpful things:

"The moral will of God given to us in the Bible is rational and reasonable. The circumstances in which we must trust God often appear irrational and inexplicable."

"In the arena of adversity, the Scriptures teach us three essential truths about God truths we must believe if we are to trust Him in adversity.

They are:

God is completely sovereign.

God is infinite in wisdom.

God is perfect in love.

Someone has expressed these three truths as they relate to us in this way: 'God in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His sovereignty He has the power to bring it about.'

"God's plan and His ways of working out His plan are frequently beyond our ability to fathom and understand. We must learn to trust when we don't understand."

So what do we do when tragedy hits? What do we do when a test comes? What's your first response? Is it to complain? To blame? To try and reason your way out of it? Or have you formed the discipline to do what Elijah does? Like Elijah, suffering and pain teach us to trust God and fall to our knees in prayer. Jerry Bridges summarizes it well: "But while God's sovereignty, along with His wisdom and love, is the foundation of our trust in Him, prayer is the expression of that trust. The Puritan preacher Thomas Lye, in a sermon entitled *How Are We to Live by Faith on Divine Providence?* said, 'As prayer without faith is but a beating of the air, so trust without prayer [is] but a presumptuous bravado. He that promises to give, and bids us trust his promises, commands us to pray, and expects obedience to his commands. He will give, but not without our asking.'"

Even in the midst of our suffering, God invites us to live by faith. How is God inviting you to trust him? What prayers do you need to be praying? Remember, God is completely sovereign. God is infinite in wisdom. God is perfect in love. Trust him. Pray. Fall back.

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