

October 13 Lesson 7 (NIV)

ACTIVE FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Proverbs 3:1–10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 17:1–24

1 KINGS 17:8–16

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹“Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” ¹⁰So 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?” ¹¹As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹²“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.”

¹³Elijah 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. ¹⁴For 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.’”

¹⁵She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶For 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.

KEY VERSE

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. —1 Kings 17:16

RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE

Unit 2: Responses to God’s Faithfulness

LESSONS 6–9

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

AhabAy-hab.

BaalBay-ul.

CanaanitesKay-nun-ites.

JerichoJair-ih-co.

JezebelJez-uh-bel.

PhoeniciaFuh-nish-uh.

SidonSigh-dun.

TyreTire.

ZarephathZair-uh-fath.

Introduction

A. The Need to Reward Good Work

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said that “the reward of a thing well done is having done it.” Emerson, it should be noted, did not work in a human resources office. Today’s hiring managers

know that relying on intrinsic motivators—like the satisfaction of doing a good job—is not often successful for recruiting and retaining talent.

Fortune 500 companies were studied to discover how they incentivized their employees in ways other than increasing salaries. The lengths that these large companies went to in order to reward their best employees are mind-boggling. Google, the internet giant, offered free food and outdoor workout facilities to employees. The Mayo Clinic offered free massages and mental health services to employees at its Arizona site. Aflac hosted an annual employee appreciation week complete with trips to theme parks, movie screenings, and prize drawings. Most employers can't bankroll such ambitious employee incentive programs. However, smaller employers also see the value of incentives and offer extra time off, gift cards, etc.

God offers incentives for obedience to him (see Leviticus 26:3–12; Psalm 19:7–11; etc.), but his motivation isn't to jockey with other deities for the loyalty of a committed work base. Instead, God's rewards flow from his just character (Romans 2:6; Hebrews 11:6). God's justice not only punishes the wicked but rewards those who faithfully obey him (Revelation 22:11, 12), especially when they do so in the face of adversity.

B. Lesson Context: Literary

Most scholars believe that the books of 1 and 2 Kings, originally a single book, were written after the fall of both halves of the divided kingdom of Israel but before Judah returned from Babylonian exile in about 539 BC. The author of these books, whom some believe to be Jeremiah or one of his contemporaries, drew on hundreds of years of historical sources. He viewed Israel's history through the lens of God's covenant with his people as described in Deuteronomy. The author of 1 and 2 Kings meticulously organized Israel's history to make it obvious to his fellow Israelites that they were suffering exile and humiliation because of their lack of faithfulness to God's covenant.

Throughout the books of 1 and 2 Kings, the Lord honored the faith of individuals—whether kings, prophets, or the lowly—who remained true to the God of Israel. The exiles who first read 1 and 2 Kings struggled to understand why God allowed them to be handed over to their enemies and how they might find forgiveness and restoration. The history served in part to assure them that God would honor their faith, no matter where the people found themselves.

C. Lesson Context: Historical

Our narrative is set in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab (874–853 BC). The details of his reign reveal the king's unwillingness to trust God to reward the northern kingdom if they would remain faithful to the terms of the Mosaic covenant (1 Kings 16:30–33). God initiated a covenant with his people that was similar to political treaties that earthly kings entered into with a newly conquered population (see Lesson 6). As king, Ahab had been charged with the task of being a steward of the covenant, just like every king before him (Deuteronomy 17:14–20).

The blessings and curses of the covenant should have provided every incentive needed for Ahab to lead his people into a season of covenant renewal. However, his contempt for the covenant and the Lord could not have been clearer. Ahab placed no stock in God's sovereignty or in his ability to reward the faithful or judge the wicked.

Instead of trusting God, Ahab cemented a political alliance with the Zidonians by marrying Jezebel, a princess from the coastal city Sidon. This alliance incited Ahab to disregard God's

covenant. Jezebel turned Ahab's heart to the Canaanite god Baal and away from the Lord (1 Kings 16:31). Ahab in turn promoted Baal worship in the northern kingdom by constructing an altar in his honor (16:32). Ahab also allowed for the rebuilding of the city of Jericho (16:34), even though Joshua had placed a curse on anyone who attempted such folly (Joshua 6:26).

The author of 1 Kings draws parallels between Moses (the original prophet of the covenant) and Elijah (the ninth-century BC prophet who called the nation back to covenant loyalty). Both Moses and Elijah challenged rulers who defied God (Exodus 5:1; 7:10, 20; 1 Kings 18:17, 18). Both prophets hid from evil kings (Exodus 2:11–15; 1 Kings 17:1–7). Both confronted the false gods of their day (Exodus 32:19–35; 1 Kings 18:20–40). Both experienced the presence of God in a unique way (Exodus 33:17–23; 1 Kings 19:9–18). These parallel narratives suggest to the reader that Elijah has inherited Moses' authoritative role to call the people to covenant faithfulness.

The narrative of Elijah's ministry stretches from 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 2; First Kings 17 opens with Elijah defying King Ahab's chosen deity, Baal. Baal was thought to control the dew and rain, concerning himself with the fertility of the earth. Because the Canaanites were an agricultural society, Baal was one of the predominate gods in that land.

Elijah sought to make known to all God's people Ahab's foolishness in revering Baal. Elijah invoked the name of God and declared that there would be no more rain until the Lord permitted it (1 Kings 17:1). God protected Elijah from Ahab's retaliation by leading him to a hidden place near a brook. Every morning and evening, God sent ravens to Elijah with food (17:2–6).

Jesus noted that the drought lasted three and a half years (Luke 4:25). Sometime during that period, the brook dried up. When it did, Elijah lost his source of drinking water (1 Kings 17:7). This brings us to today's text.

I. Sent to Zarephath (1 KINGS 17:8–10a)

A. The Lord's Command (vv. 8, 9)

8, 9a. Then the word of the LORD came to him: “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there.

The drying of the brook (see Lesson Context) forces Elijah out of his hiding spot. But God doesn't leave Elijah to his own devices to find a new source of food and water. God provides, but the new hiding spot may surprise his prophet. God leads Elijah to *Zarephath*, seaport in *Sidon* (later Phoenicia). The city lies approximately 22 miles north of Tyre with which it is often associated (Ezra 3:7; Jeremiah 25:22; Matthew 11:21, 22; etc.). This puts Elijah squarely in evil Queen Jezebel's homeland (1 Kings 16:31)—surprise!

9b. “I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.”

God's second surprising choice regarding Elijah's hiding is to choose *a widow* to serve as the prophet's patroness. Widows in particular are economically vulnerable within a patriarchal society where men control the mechanisms of commerce. Without a living husband or other adult men in their families, widows and their children often find themselves destitute (compare Exodus 22:22).

The prospect of God's burdening a widow with the task of caring for Elijah must be disorienting to the prophet. Ordinarily, he would be tasked with caring for widows, not the other way around. God charges his people to care for the widow and the fatherless (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 24:19–21; 26:12, 13, 19; etc.). David later writes that God is the defender of both (Psalm 68:5; see also 146:9). Yet the Lord chooses instead to *sustain* Elijah through a widow.

B. Elijah's Obedience (v. 10a)

10a. So he went to Zarephath.

The Scripture doesn't detail any internal struggle that Elijah may have over complying with God's counterintuitive plans. Instead, the narrative simply states that Elijah does as God directs. Elijah thus becomes an expatriate and remains separated from the comforts of home.

Perhaps part of God's purpose in sending Elijah out of Israel is to make it hard for Ahab and Jezebel to find him (1 Kings 18:10). After all, Jezebel will react to the Lord's prophets who reject Baal by ordering their slaughter (18:4, 13). She will gladly have Elijah killed along with all the others (19:2). Elijah needs to be kept safe until it is time for him to expose Baal for the false god he is (18:16–40).

II. Meeting at the Gate

(1 KINGS 17:10b–12)

A. Elijah's Request (vv. 10b, 11)

10b. 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?"

The town gate is a highly trafficked area. The comings and goings of people create such a steady flow of witnesses in the vicinity of the gate that the judges of the city often settle court disputes there (Genesis 34:20–24; Deuteronomy 17:5; 21:18–21; Ruth 4:1–12; etc.). The narrative doesn't reveal how Elijah picks the *widow* out of the crowd. Somehow God prompts the prophet.

The task of drawing daily *water* from the well customarily falls to women. (Genesis 24:11 provides an early example.) They draw the water for their households in the evening or early morning when the harsh Middle Eastern sun isn't beating down on the world (contrast John 4:6, 7). However, instead of coming to the gate to gather water, this woman is intent on *gathering sticks* to build her fire. The prophet's request is an interruption to her agenda.

11. As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

The widow complies with Elijah's request. As she goes *to get* the water, Elijah interrupts her to add a second. God has revealed his command to Elijah that the widow is to sustain him (see above on 1 Kings 17:9). But even with that knowledge, Elijah asks in incremental steps to have his needs met: first water, [then pause], then *a piece of bread*.

The text doesn't reveal the cause of Elijah's tentativeness. Perhaps his thirst is greater than his hunger when he first meets the widow. More likely, the prophet recognizes the widow's precarious economic situation. Even as he imposes on her for food, he only asks for a morsel of bread, not an entire meal.

B. Widow's Response (v. 12)

12. "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."

The widow's reply *as the Lord your God lives* is a strong oath. It swears truthfully that she is unable to honor the prophet's request (compare 1 Kings 1:29, 30; 22:14; Jeremiah 5:2; etc.). Unlike

Ahab (see Lesson Context), the widow isn't resisting the request out of brazen disobedience. Rather, she speaks honestly about the reality of her situation. Her status as a widow and the impact of the drought combine to make her destitute. She has no hope of generating a sustainable income. She has enough *oil* and *flour* left only to make one final loaf of bread for herself and her *son* before they *die* in their poverty, which she recognizes will not take long. The plan reveals her despair and resignation.

III. Faith in a Foreign Land (1 KINGS 17:13–16)

A. Elijah's Confidence (vv. 13, 14)

13a. Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid."

Refusing to *be afraid* emboldens individuals to trust God, especially when circumstances suggest that conformity to God's will isn't the safest or wisest course of action (compare Mark 5:36). The command not to fear is found throughout the Old Testament, often paired with a reminder of God's presence (Genesis 15:1; Joshua 10:25; Isaiah 43:5; Zechariah 8:13; etc.). The frequency with which God and/or his prophets repeat this concise command underscores its importance.

13b. "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."

Notice the sequence: the widow is to prepare Elijah's food *first* and *bring it to* Elijah. Only then may she prepare food for herself and her *son*. What faith this will require!

14. "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.'"

In identifying the source of his request as *the God of Israel*, the prophet assures the widow that her need will not go unmet, no matter how long the drought lasts. *The Lord* is at war with fictitious Baal for the purpose of provoking King Ahab and the people of Israel to return their affections to him (see Lesson Context).

God knows that faithful people are also adversely affected by the drought, to the point that obedience might look foolish and even life-threatening. But here we see that God is capable of caring for his prophet and the widow while simultaneously commanding the attention of his unfaithful king. Through Elijah, God assures the widow that her modest pantry will not be depleted until God again allows the *rain* to nourish the now barren *land*.

Elijah's confidence in God's provision reinforces what the drought suggests: God's power is not limited to a certain geopolitical area (contrast 1 Kings 20:23–25). He can withhold rain not just in the land of his own people but wherever he chooses. God can rescue a widow in Sidon as easily as he can rescue a widow within the confines of the promised land.

B. The Widow's Obedience (v. 15a)

15a. She went away and did as Elijah had told her.

The widow listens to Elijah and abandons her original, hopeless plan. Perhaps Elijah's exhortation fills her with faith. Maybe she complies out of love for her son, even though she is not fully convinced that God will provide (compare Matthew 17:20). Either way, her faith allows her

to act where King Ahab is unwilling: she puts her trust in the one true God and places her future in his hands.

C. The Lord's Provision (vv. 15b, 16)

15b. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.

The result of the widow's faithful action is exactly as Elijah says. Rather than consuming a final meal with her son, everyone in *her family* can eat for much longer than her provisions would have lasted naturally. The Lord's work through her obedience sustains everyone involved.

16. 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.

In the Old Testament, the formula *the word of the Lord* frequently attends a prophecy from God (1 Kings 17:2; 2 Kings 20:16; Jeremiah 33:19; Zechariah 7:4, 8; etc.). The repetition in these two verses of the fact that the widow's *flour* and *oil* fed the family for many days emphasizes God's work on behalf of these obedient people.

God has braided together the fates of the prophet Elijah, the unnamed widow, and the widow's son. The latter two, at least, would not have survived the drought otherwise. Because the widow welcomed the prophet, she shares in his reward (compare Matthew 10:41, 42).

Conclusion

A. The God Who Rewards Generously

Due to the nation's apostasy under King Ahab, God-honoring faith was almost absent in Israel (compare 1 Kings 19:18). So God called an unlikely widow—a foreigner familiar with God only by reputation—to put her trust in him. Her faith in God was shown through her obedience, feeding Elijah before providing for her son and herself. She responded to God in faith even though she was not among God's covenant people.

In Jesus' first public appearance after his temptation, he saw fit to mention the widow as an example of faith. He had returned to Nazareth to worship in the synagogue. After reading a prophecy from the book of Isaiah concerning the anointed one, Jesus proclaimed himself to be the fulfillment of that Scripture (Luke 4:14–30; compare Mark 7:24–30). Though the congregation spoke well of him momentarily, Jesus' response to their marveling at a hometown hero infuriated them. He reminded his audience that God hadn't sent Elijah to any of the widows within the confines of Israel. God had chosen an outsider who would demonstrate obedient faith.

The exiles who read these accounts in 1 Kings (see Lesson Context) were reminded as we are that God's influence is not limited to one group of people or one piece of land. God had not entered into a covenant with the widow's people. He had not revealed himself to them through the law. But God favored her modest faith by blessing her obedience. God still honors faithful obedience, no matter how tentative those attempts initially are.

B. Prayer

God, we desire to obey you, but sometimes our hearts are rebellious, and sometimes we are simply discouraged. We know that you honor those who strive to obey you. May this knowledge strengthen us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God honors the faithful.
Always has, always will.¹

¹ Shallenberger, L., Boatman, C. R., Taylor, M. A., & Thatcher, T. (2019). [Active Faith](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, M. K. Williams, & J. Gerke (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2019–2020* (Vol. 26, pp. 57–63). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.