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## Lessons from the life of Elijah

### 3. "Arise, get thee to Zarephath" (1 Kgs. 17:7-10)

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**A** BROOK IS ALWAYS vulnerable to seasonal and climatic changes, so it is not surprising that Elijah's brook dried up, particularly since the land was starved of rain. But this was the Divine decree; the Father allowed the brook to wither, and finally cease, in order that Elijah's next phase of development could commence.

#### "The brook dried up"

Thus "it came to pass after a while" (v. 7) that the brook finally dried up. The Hebrew for "after" can alternatively be rendered as 'at the end of', and the Hebrew for "a while" can mean 'a day', 'a time', or 'a year'. This supports the view that God allocated a time for Elijah to be provided with water by the brook, and once this had expired the brook dried up. So, imagine the brook diminishing daily, so that, where water once flowed, all became dry. Death by thirst would certainly seem imminent to the prophet, and so easily his confidence could have dried up like the brook.

Yet how uplifting it is to observe Elijah remaining in the place to which he had been sent, though the waters of the brook had dried up. He was not prepared to move until he had been commanded from heaven above. Likewise Israel in the wilderness wanderings only journeyed at the command of the Father (Num. 9:18,19). Through his actions the prophet mirrored the hardship of Israel in the wilderness. We too ought to hearken to the great wisdom which comes from the One Who will guide us by His hand through this wilderness of life.

#### "Arise, get thee to Zarephath"

Again, "the word of the LORD came unto him" (1 Kgs. 17:8). The Word is the source of Elijah's strength, his driving energy and guide. This is illustrated by noting the number of times this phrase is used in relation to Elijah being driven on from one place to another (*cf.* v. 2; 18:1; 19:9; 21:17,28), fulfilling the will of his Creator. Again God found him, he did not have to search for his God, and again he hearkens and acts immediately in absolute faith. Elijah exercised faith and conviction, and consequently will obtain the victory in that future glorious day.

Elijah is commanded, "Arise, get thee to Zarephath" (17:9), a town which lay between Tyre and Zidon, the leading cities of Phoenicia, and thus at the heart of the territory where Baal was worshipped. It belonged to Ethbaal king of Zidon, the father of Jezebel, his ruthless enemy. Such a command would never have been agreeable to flesh and blood, but Elijah responded in faithful obedience. God was proving the faith of Elijah, giving him the opportunity to confirm his faith in actions (*cf.* Jas. 2:20,26).

Zarephath means 'place of refining', and Elijah's faith and works were to be severely proved; his character was to be moulded and shaped, the dross removed in order that only fine gold remained. Let us also not overlook the difficult journey that he undertook to Zarephath, almost seventy-five miles, a long and arduous passage. Let us note, too, that Elijah, in leaving behind his own people and travelling to a Gentile land, became the first prophet to the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul likewise, when rejected

by his own people the Jews, declared: “from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6).

Now Zidon was a fishery, a town of the Mediterranean coast, about twenty-five miles north of Tyre. The name Zidon actually means ‘hunting’, and is derived from the root *tsuwd*, which means ‘to hunt’ in the sense of catching fish. Is this, then, suggesting that Elijah, like the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ many years later, became a ‘fisher of men’ (cf. Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17)? And just as the Master would proclaim to Simon, “Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men” (Lk. 5:10), so the prophet’s role would now change to being a fisher of men, a hunter of hearts, minds and souls. It was because of God’s power being manifested through great men such as the prophet Elijah and the Apostle Paul that men’s minds have been changed and hearts opened to the God of Israel outside the confines of the Land.

**“I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee”**

A widow woman in Zarephath had been entrusted by God with something precious: she had been given charge of sustaining this highly esteemed prophet. She was thus a person in whom the Lord had great confidence. If only it could be said of us that we are being used in His service, entrusted with a special role because He has high confidence that we will perform it!

The Lord Jesus Christ applied many of the experiences of Elijah in his teachings to those who would hear. He only went amongst the Gentiles once, when he travelled “into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon” (Mt. 15:21). The greater than Elijah re-enacted the experiences of the faithful prophet in this Gentile territory. Here he met a woman in great need, who cried out to him, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil” (v. 22). This woman was “a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation” (Mk. 7:26), indeed “[an alien] from the commonwealth of Israel, and [a stranger] from the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12). Yet God desired such faith.

**“He arose and went”**

Elijah “arose and went to Zarephath” (1 Kgs. 17:10). The prophet stood up, firm and strong, ready for the great works to be wrought. He made no delay, just as Abraham (Gen. 22:3), Jacob (28:18), Moses (Ex. 24:4; 34:4) and Joshua

(Josh. 6:12; 7:16; 8:10) had all done before him. As well as doing so physically, he girded up the loins of his mind (1 Pet. 1:13), spiritually preparing himself for the challenging events which lay ahead.

Elijah was utterly confident that, even though it was a time of extreme famine, God would provide for him. He placed his faith in his God, and allowed Him to direct him step by step, from one place to another, knowing that He was working in him for good (Rom. 8:28), and gradually unfolding His plan and purpose before him. The words of the prophet Isaiah are highly appropriate here: “the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (58:11). The exhortation for ourselves is that if we walk with God He will gradually make things plain before us as we journey onwards towards His Kingdom. Let us all be prepared to be guided.

**The widow at the gate of the city**

Elijah was sent, not to a person of great resource and wealth, but to a poor widow in dire circumstances. His mind would have recalled the time he had spent at Cherith, knowing that those who were of God’s choosing brought him food, though they struggled to gather food for their own (Job 38:41). He would look upon her, knowing that she also toiled to provide food for her son. He would have to have faith that she could provide food for him, though materially she had almost nothing to give.

So Elijah finally “came to the gate of the city” (1 Kgs. 17:10). As soon as he entered the gate, after his long and weary journey, he came across a widow gathering up sticks. But how did God ensure that the widow woman was there, ready to meet Elijah? The answer is found in the phrase: “I have commanded a widow woman” (v. 9). Interestingly, this Hebrew word was previously used for the occasion when God had “commanded the ravens to feed” His prophet (v. 4).

But how had God commanded this woman to care for this prophet of Israel? Had she been told by an angel or been informed in a vision? Whatever means God had selected, she responded by placing herself at the gate, in an area where she would be most likely to meet a stranger from another town and country. So Israel had now lost Elijah, and a lowly Gentile widow in a heathen land had just found him.

### **“Gathering of sticks”**

Elijah found the woman “gathering of sticks” (v. 10). This woman was busy gathering together pieces of firewood so that she could prepare a meal for her son and herself. Compare this with the prophet’s previous situation, for he had been gathering small fragments of bread and flesh each day for his meal. Both Elijah and the widow had been busy gathering to tend to their immediate, pressing needs. These two individuals shared common circumstances, for both were hungry, both were in need and both were desperate for Divine provision; two people, one a Jew and the other a Gentile, brought together for a common good.

An important principle is being revealed that, as God pushes one of His servants in a particular direction, so He counteracts with a reactive response elsewhere. When Jacob sent his beloved sons to Egypt so that they might obtain food, God ensured that Joseph was there to meet their requests. The spies were in desperate need in Jericho, so God placed Rahab to hide and protect them. The Ethiopian eunuch was seeking the Truth, so God provided Philip to expound His Word concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. All these speak of perfect timing.

### **The difficult request**

So Elijah “called to her” (v. 10). The prophet called out with a loud voice to this woman, commissioning her to a challenging work. The God of Israel had selected this Gentile woman for His purpose, and so Elijah, heeding his God’s command, called out to her. The process of calling this woman to God’s holy Name commenced.

It was the Apostle Peter who wrote: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of Him Who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). This woman was certainly being “called . . . out of darkness”, for there was little true spiritual light in Zidon, the heart of Baal worship. God was calling her out from the land of the Gentiles to “His marvellous light” in order that she could be a member of that “chosen generation”, that “royal priesthood”, that “peculiar people” which the Father has been gradually assembling since “righteous Abel” (Mt. 23:35).

It should not go unnoticed that Elijah used no words of introduction. There was nothing polite in what he said. It was a loud cry of command to a person he had never previously met. The prophet commanded, “Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink” (1 Kgs. 17:10), but this was a difficult request. Water was scarce for all, but this stranger was asking of this poor widow water to drink. Yet she obediently responded, a testimony to her faith.

### **A shadow of the One to come**

Elijah meeting a Gentile woman and requesting drink is reminiscent of the time when the Master came to Shechem, to Jacob’s well, and, just like Elijah, was feeling weary after a long journey, and asked a Gentile woman to give him drink (Jno. 4:5-7). A conversation ensued in which the Lord Jesus declared: “whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (v. 14).

This woman could give Jesus a refreshing drink, but he could provide “the water of life” (Rev. 21:6). Likewise, Elijah requested of the widow but “a little water in a vessel” (1 Kgs. 17:10), but in return she would be given “a well of water springing up into everlasting life”.

The request of Elijah is also similar to Jesus inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ home: “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (Lk. 19:5, NIV). This tax collector was not a popular man, certainly not one whom the Jews would desire to meet and sup with; yet he had been Divinely selected above all in the crowd: “Today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9, NIV).

And just as Christ found Zacchaeus, for the “Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (v. 10), so the widow who had previously been lost was now also found in the shadow of God’s wings, having finally found refuge and solace (Ps. 57:1). From this day forward she too would receive salvation in her home.

In truth, the widow would shortly become a child of Abraham (Gal. 3:29) and witness the glorious power of the Spirit of adoption (4:5). But the prophet was to make a further claim on her, as we shall see in the next article, God willing.

[\(To be continued\)](#)