

Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

"That Wondrous Weakness"

1st Kings 17

11.5.23

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." ² The word of the LORD came to him, saying, ³ "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan." ⁴ "It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." ⁵ So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. ⁷ It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹ "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." ¹⁰ So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." ¹² But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." ¹³ Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son." ¹⁴ "For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" ¹⁵ So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah.

¹⁷ Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!" ¹⁹ He said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." ²² The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. ²³ Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." ²⁴ Then 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."

The section of the Bible we've been reading these last two months is commonly called the *Book of Kings* but, in a sense, it could also be called the *Book of Prophets*. As this succession of kings comes to the throne, each one rises or falls in accordance with his response to the interruption of God's messengers carrying

~~God's Word. Kings who believe God's word thrive...kings who don't trust in God's word from God's messengers fail and fall.~~

~~There are some ten prophets who interrupt the parade of kings and now we've come to the Big Guns, two prophets like a new Moses and Joshua — ELIJAH and ELISHAH. Elijah (the first of these two prominent prophets who stays in the narrative for a while) ELIJAH is almost synonymous with the word "prophet" (see the *Transfiguration — Matthew 17*).~~

Today's narrative is a kind of parallel to the story of Gideon which also takes place in *Gilead* as it's noted in v. 1 – maybe that note is to remind us of Judge Gideon who had to pare down his army so that he could be weak enough to win the war (yes, WEAK enough to win?) And that's the question I have for YOU today: are you weak enough to win? Are you weak enough for God to use you as He carries out His beautiful plan in the world i.e., to raise up His King who will make all things new?

I wonder how YOU feel about your weaknesses, your disadvantages, your disabilities, flaws, failures, mistakes, limitations, shortcomings, your needs. There's nothing holy or good about NEED or POVERTY or FAILURE in themselves but when our need is brought to God, it can become a portal – a doorway into our souls – through which God enters and does amazing things.

Let's look today at: 1) The Quest for Power

2) Weakness in God's Economy

3) Weakness in YOUR Life and Mine

Elijah comes out of nowhere but then he sticks around for the remainder of this volume and right into *Second Kings* when his successor takes over as prophet to the North. One Biblical dictionary said that Elijah is "*Portrayed as an individual of remarkable strength and energy*" (Eerdmans) and if that's so... this is the moment when God makes Elijah weak enough to be used. Part of the story takes place in a town called "*Zarephath*" meaning "*refinery*" – this is Elijah's refining. God has to make Elijah weak before he can be used.

~~To put this a little differently: the way God has designed things, the life of *True Spirituality* (Schaeffer) cannot be known without weakness, a real and ongoing experience with deficiency — "*turning His gaze toward His disciples, Jesus began to say, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'*" (Luke 6.20) Weakness is a central element in God's way of refining us, of restoring the soul and restoring the whole universe.~~

And... ON THE OTHER HAND... we don't want weakness; we dread it, we avoid it, we deny it, we learn to cope with it, manage it and cover up our shortcomings.

AND religion or spirituality is one of the main ways people manage their weakness and often find IN religion or spirituality power to face life. We definitely don't want religion to make us weak or to expose

our flaws and frailties and certainly DON'T want a religion that tells us weakness is desirable. 'Cause... you know: weakness is bad and power, ability, strength, health, success, advantage... POWER is good!

~~The influential atheistic philosophers who so influenced the 20th-Century and beyond, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche all taught that religion is both a quest FOR power and a tool OF power to keep people in line and ironically in certain ways the Bible both recognizes and affirms that idea. Not only Islamic Jihad met with the *Christian Crusades* (in the Middle Ages) but in our modern day, the so-called "Health and Wealth Gospel" ("which is NO gospel at all" – Gal 1.6-7) is a quest for power using religion and it's gone global. So much of the American Church's attempts to sway government is also a pursuit of control.~~

~~Marxism has been a violent plague on this planet, but Marx was right when he said that "Religion is the opiate of the masses" – often used by unscrupulous players to lull or to force the weak masses into submission... because no body wants to stay weak.~~

The kings in the history we've been reading have almost universally used religion to gain power. Using idolatry they try to harness the forces of nature. They sacrifice to idols to get power over their enemies or get it to rain. But God sees that human power is only an illusion – we are, in ourselves totally powerless. Not only can a microscopic virus take us out but, if God were to withdraw from this planet or any individual on it for one nanosecond, we'd fly apart into quadrillions of molecules ("He upholds all things by the word of His power." Hebrews 1.3) To think we can exist independent of God is thĒ Great Lie and God won't be complicit in it.

In this narrative we've been reading, three significant times, people succeed in building something, constructing a significant milestone and God immediately confronts the success with a warning of judgment. Solomon is warned after he builds the Temple (9.1-9). Jeroboam builds his religious theme park with Two Golden Calves (!) and God pronounces that Josiah will destroy it and burn the bones of the false prophets there (CH 13). And here again, Ahab marries a pagan queen (Jezebel) and builds a monument to honor Jezebel's god, Baal. It's as if each building project and success has the potential of being another *Tower of Babel* promoting *the Great Lie* that humanity is powerful in itself AND that there's any life at all outside of the one true and living God.

In today's section, we see a completely different view from a secular approach to power and to a religious view of power. It all works together as a vivid picture of what Jesus Christ said and did to reorient our thinking about weakness in God's economy (or management of things).

Elijah tells King Ahab that it won't rain except when he, Elijah, says it will rain. That's pretty heady stuff for any human being to have that kind of authority. Maybe, to protect Elijah from thinking that HE actually had ANY power over the weather or over anything else, God call Elijah into the wilderness.

He feeds the unknown prophet from Gilead by ravens carrying meat. Do you know the word, "RAVEN-ous"? These birds are known to be perpetually hungry, but God has them serving contrary to their nature

– giving food instead of taking. Water in a time of drought and food from ravenous birds - must've really proven to Elijah that God could be trusted completely. "When I GOT nuthin' God has everything!"

Then the brook dries up (the drought is REAL!) and God calls Elijah back into Ahab's territory – in fact ALL the way through it to the very North part where the Gentiles live. It all seems like a terrible idea but "I'm sure God is sending me to where there's rain..." But NOPE, drought in the North too!

He probably thinks this widow is going to be very wealthy. She lives in a town (Zarephath) that means "a smelting place" that's a place where they refine metals like gold so, probably there's a lot of wealth there! So, Elijah walks all the way through Ahab's territory... and comes to this refinery town and looks for this elite woman who owns the gold-refinery. But there's NO ONE there!

Then he sees what looks like a big chicken scratching in the dirt looking for bugs but it's not a hen - it's a young woman looking for twigs for firewood. She has a dirty face. I KNOW THAT because everyone's saving any water for drinking, and NO ONE is wasting water to wash!

So, he calls out to her, "May I have a glass of water ...and while you're at it may I have a piece of bread." But she has only one last handful of flour... She plans to bake it with her last drops of olive oil over this stick-fire... then eat it with her only child, a little boy, and then they both plan to die. It's the most pitiful, pathetic, portrait of poverty. It was like a neon sign over her head saying, "NEEDY!" She's the personification of weakness. No one wants to be her – everyone avoids her... and Elijah must have thought, "*You're kidding me, right?*"

And maybe then it dawned on him... "Perhaps God brought ME to this refinery town... to refine ME!" – Like, "LORD, how needy do you think I am that I would resort to someone like THIS to care for me? LORD, HOW WEAK DO YOU THINK I AM?"

Answer: "MUCH weaker than you know, dear Elijah.... AND, until you realize how utterly dependent on ME you are... and that I can provide for you in the most unlikely of ways... until you see how powerless you are in yourself, I can't use you. I brought you here to refine you in Zarephath, the Refinery."

When Elijah asked that young woman for water she must've thought, "*Um... that's asking a lot.*" And then, when he added the bread, did she think, "Uh... you're joking, right? I have ONE handful of flour – our deathbed meal – and YOU THINK YOU'RE worse off than I am?!"

"Well, yes, ma'am, I'm coming to know that I'm a lot weaker than I think...and in fact, IN MYSELF, I have nothing... no strength, no resources, totally powerless... BUT I'M LEARNING MA'AM and so will you, that *the God of All Power* will meet us and care for us...if only we trust Him."

So, she believed, and God miraculously multiplied that bread and oil for two years... and THEN, God asked her for the ONE LAST RESOURCE she had, her only son. When the son stopped breathing, her first thought

was that her moral imperfections had been discovered; the Holy Guest living in her house had seen the real her – and God was judging her by taking her son.

Elijah says it, "(v.19) *Give me your son.*" (C.S. Lewis wrote: Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead.") Then, the prophet covered him, prayed THREE TIMES and God raised the only son from the dead. And like the Centurion at the foot of the Cross said of Jesus Christ, "Truly, this was the Son of God"(Mark 15.39) so the widow says of Elijah, "*My faith is now totally resting in the God who sent His word to me by YOU, His servant.*"

Now, if you've read the Four Gospels, you probably see some direct parallels here to the life and work of Jesus. He too went into the wilderness (Luke 4.1) to be tested. As Elijah was served by birds in the wilderness, Jesus was served by angels. He too went into some strange places to find strange people who would believe God (Luke 4.24-26)... Elijah's weapon was the Word of God and Jesus Christ IS the Word of God. Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for water (John 4). Jesus Christ raised a daughter from the dead (Mark 5.22ff) and raised a widow's son (Luke 7.12). He multiplied bread and the list goes on and on and on! So many pointers IN today's passage, preparing us for Jesus – Elijah is the voice in the wilderness preparing us to meet Jesus.

Jesus Christ takes the weakest of the weak, those who are poor... hungry... mourning... the meek... the hated...the dead (Matthew 5.1-12). He welcomes and blesses us. He covers us with His holiness and perfection. He raises us from the dead. He says, "Arise and Live – take My place and I will take yours."

"I will take your weakness and become totally weak, totally helpless – I'll take your guilt and sins, take your curse – I'll even take what you fear most – judgment and death. When you are sure (like this woman) that God sees your sins (He DOES BTW) and that He has come to expose and punish you – that He wants to TAKE from you! But if you trust Him, you'll hear Him to say, "Give me your son... or GIVE ME YOUR mess, your deadness and weakness and shame – *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."* (John 3.17) The One greater than Elijah, who doesn't really pray to heal the sick... but just commands illness and death to release their victims, "Lazarus come forth (John 11), Little girl, get up (Mark 5)... Young man, I say to you, arise!" (Lk. 7.14)

He says in the *Book of James*, "*But the brother of humble circumstances is to celebrate his high position*" (James 1.9). In other words, if you're needy and you perceive that and recognize it about yourself – that's an enormous blessing in God's Kingdom because you're more apt to see through the illusion of the Big Lie. You're better positioned to see that you are NOT a self-sufficient, independent, in-control person who doesn't "need a crutch". (When I was in college, I was at a heavy metal concert at the *Lakeland Civic Center*, handing out pamphlets about the Christian message and this guy said, "*No thanks, dude, I don't need a crutch!*" I thought "Dude, I don't need a crutch either... I'm much worse off than you think! I don't need help – I need to be carried, raised from the dead!... Every day! I need someone to live FOR me...die FOR me and rise from the dead IN MY PLACE! And I need a Spirit to inwardly convince me that this is all true.")

If you're not a member of a church, not a believer in Jesus Christ – is it because you're not good enough...? Because that's not the requirement. You have to be weak enough. What's keeping you from joining Christ's people is not your weakness... it's your strength and your pride.

If we get this, we'll be prayerful people because we see our doing as insufficient (Ps 127). We start to realize that we NEED Jesus every day and every moment. If you have NEED and WEAKNESS that daily remind you of that – well, Charles Spurgeon once said, "I kiss the raging wave that slams me into the Rock of Ages" Tell people (appropriately) about your need and your weaknesses as long as you quickly add, with St Paul "*Most gladly, therefore, I'd rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for when I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2nd Corinthians 12.9-10)

Q U O T E S

The truth, however, is that in many respects and certainly in spiritual matters, we are all weak and inadequate, and we need to face it. Sin, which disrupts all relationships, has disabled us all across the board. We need to be aware of our limitations and to let this awareness work in us humility and self-distrust, and a realization of our helplessness on our own. Thus we may learn our need to depend on Christ, our Savior and Lord, at every turn on the road to practice that dependence as one of the constant habits of our heart, and thereby to discover what Paul discovered before us: "*when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2nd Corinthians 12:10) ...

– J.I. Packer, *Weakness is the Way* (2013; pp. 15-16)

The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up your self, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; Book 4, CH 11: "The New Men")