

# “Preparation for the Battle” 1 Kings 17:1–9 // *Something Better; Something Greater #1*

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## Announcement:

Wow... due, in part to the great work that you have already done, Summit, we're being asked to send MORE people into prisons in both Durham and Raleigh. We're being asked to assist MORE people as they re-enter society after incarceration. This is not “cheap” ministry—it's real ministry, life on life, in a place where people experience brokenness.

It's one of our 5 areas.

I want to challenge you to be a part of this important ministry. Attend the info meeting that we have scheduled for this Wed night. Come and ask questions of current team members. Hear first hand about the impact this ministry is having. Find out how you can get involved.

## Series Intro:

One of the complaints that you hear a lot about our society is that we've forgotten God, or that we have quit believing in him, we've kicked him out of our schools and governments. But that's not really true. Statistically, America is more religious than ever. Only 3.5% of Americans are atheists, which is one of the lowest percentages in history.<sup>1</sup> So... in your face, Richard Dawkins.

The question for most Americans is not, “*Is there a god?*” but “*Which God is the right one? And how can we know? Or can we even know?*”

- We've all heard “God is like a mountain...” And if we could just get some perspective we'd see that they are all climbing up the same hill toward the same destination. You go up one side, I go up another.
- We suspect that maybe there is a little bit of truth in every religion.
  - *Life of Pi.*

That's the world we live in, which makes what we're going to study over the next few weeks really relevant. We're going to study through the lives of a couple of fascinating Old Testament characters who God raised up during a time when Israel was having to consider, for the first time in their history, that question.

## Historical context:

- Israel, of course, was founded upon monotheism. But a civil war had split Israel into two kingdoms: a Northern one and a Southern one. The **Northern Kingdom** was called Israel and the **Southern kingdom** was called Judah.
- Well, the northern Kingdom had a succession of bad, ungodly kings—19 of them to be exact spanning over 200 years. Two centuries of bad kings, culminating in 875 BC with the worst one ever: **Ahab**.
- Ahab married a cute little thing from the neighboring pagan nation of Sidon called ‘Jezebel,’ and she brought into Israel her favorite gods, Ba'al and Asherah, and promptly began to set up temples for them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/Not-All-Nonbelievers-Call-Themselves-Atheists.aspx>; <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons>

- Well the people were so far away from God that they went along with her, primarily because Baal and Asherah promised prosperity and protection during a time when Israel really felt like she needed it.
- But worship of these gods became increasingly dark: they even practiced **child sacrifice**.
- And after a few years, after Jezebel was firmly in power, she slaughtered hundreds of prophets and priests of God and in their place set up hundreds of her own.<sup>2</sup>

So, for the first time in Israel's history, we are dealing with a **pluralistic society**.

- (BTW, **when I was a kid** and I heard ba'al mentioned, I thought "ba'al" meant **one god** named "Ba'al." But "ba'al" is more like a **title**. There were hundreds of ba'als. There was the "ba'al" of **fertility**; the baal of **medicine**; the ba'al of the **harvest**; the ba'al of **business success**; and, particularly relevant to Elijah's story, the "**ba'al**" that controlled nature.<sup>3</sup>
- Plus, **each region** had its own ba'al. There was a ba'al of the Philistines; one of the Sidonians. And so, when one region conquered another they'd say it was because their ba'al was stronger.)

Into this situation God sends a man named Elijah. The whole point of Elijah's life is "*Which god is the real God?*"

- **Elijah's name** means, "The Lord is God," which kind of gives you the punch line of his life, but that was his life's calling, to show that the Lord is the only true God.
- The **primary scene** in Elijah's life is comes from 1 Kings 18, which we'll get to in a couple of weeks, in which there is this big showdown on top of Mt Carmel to determine who the real god is.
  - Biblical scholars say that **every other scene** in Elijah's life rotates around that one.

So the point is that our world is much like his, and therefore we have a lot we can learn from Elijah.

- *How can we be effective showing our society that God is the real, only true God? How can you be effective where you are? Do you ever wonder if you are actually making a difference—in your school; your work; your family?*
  - We have **missionaries** in places where the worship of others gods is the official state religion, and there are literal Jezebels trying to kill them. How should they conduct themselves?
- **Here's what is encouraging to me...** When God wanted to do something about the situation, he didn't raise up an army, he raised up one man! One man, or one woman. And I believe that's what God wants to do today.
  - He wants to raise up some of you as an Elijah in your circle of friends, or your workplace, or your family.
  - **One business leader** to stand for integrity within an organization that is corrupt; or **one teenager** to stand for purity or the truth of God's word.
- And **if you are one of those not convinced** that there is only one God or that the Christian God is the true God, or, at least not that he's the only true God... these stories are going to present you with why God is the only true God.
  - Pluralism is not new: it's not something we've invented in our highly sophisticated, global society. It's as old as the world itself, and it's always been the question.
  - When someone says to me, "All religions are the same," I think of it like when someone says, "All people from a certain race look the same." You must not know anyone from that race, or not pay very good attention. You're kind of a bigot. Same thing. When someone says, "All gods are the same." You must not be paying any attention.
  - This is a great series to **bring somebody to**, especially someone who wonders about this question.

<sup>2</sup> We're never given the exact number she killed, but based on the fact that she replaced the ones she killed with at least 850 prophets of Ba'al, we assume the number was in the hundreds, if not much higher. Furthermore, the text say Obadiah kept 100 alive and we would assume that the number she killed was greater than the remnant he was able to rescue.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/47227/Baal>

- All of us know somebody who asks this question. Why not bring them with you these next few weeks?

Today we're going to look at how God prepared Elijah for this conflict.

- The stories of Elijah go in pretty fascinating pattern... big picture; small picture. *What God is doing in the world; what God is doing in Elijah.*
- God has one major obstacle to overcome in using Elijah. One. And when God conquers this one thing in us, it becomes the source of all of his power in our lives.
- **Warning:** it is totally different from what you've heard most your life—different from what your parents filled you with; different from what your teachers have said to you.

## 1 Kings 17:1–9, ESV

[17:1] Now Elijah the Tishbite, (kid: tickbite) of Tishbe in Gilead,

said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

- Remember, one of the main 'ba'al's was the 'ba'al of rain.' So Elijah is going all up into Baal's house and shaming him—saying, "you don't really control this; God does."
- And this is also, of course, a death sentence for Israel. With no rain, crops won't grow, and people will starve.

[2] And the word of the LORD came to him: [3] "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. [4] You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." [5] So he went and did according to the word of the LORD. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. [6] And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

- Which proves that Spirit filled people eat lots of meat, because whenever God hand-selects the menu in the Bible, it always includes meat. *That's probably not the main point of the passage.*

Now, what you have here is what I told you about. We're going from the big picture of what God is doing in the world to what God is doing in Elijah. Like *Google* maps.

- God is going to teach Elijah a major lesson. One major lesson he has to teach to anybody he uses.

## The lesson of complete dependence God uses the weak, not the strong

Elijah was a man, like any man, who had always taken care of himself. God took that away from him and put him in a place where he had to depend on the special provision of God for the food he ate and the water he drank.

- The brook that God placed him at was called "*the Brook Cherith.*"
  - "Cherith" in Hebrew means literally "*to cut down.*"
  - "Elijah, I'm going to cut you down. I'm going to remove any strength you have in yourself, even to take care of your most basic needs, and teach you to depend completely on me."
- Write this down: **Before God can use us, he must first break us.**
- Sometimes God does this to you and you can't figure out what he's doing. You've been there.
  - Somebody lets you down—a friend; maybe your father or mother.
  - Something you've depended on gets taken away—a talent; you get passed up for an opportunity that you believe you should have. And you are facing the prospect of a future without something in it you really thought would be there.
  - **God is at work in those things, removing false idols and teaching you to depend totally on him.**

- **“Before God can use a man greatly, he must first hurt him deeply.” A. W. Tozer**
- **Craig Groeschel** says this story reminds him of the **little bird flying south** for the winter. But he got a late start, so he got caught in a snowstorm. The storm was so bad that ice formed on his wings and he couldn’t even fly. He went down for a crash landing, and couldn’t get back up. He thought, “Great. Now I’m going to freeze to death.” But then suddenly a cow came and took a dump on him. At first, the little bird this had gone from bad to worse, but then he realizes that the manure has warmed his wings and is thawing them. He got so excited that he started to **chirp and sing**. But this attracts a cat; who comes and eats him. **We can learn 3 lessons from this story:**
  - **Lesson 1:** *Not everyone who drops manure on you is your enemy.*
  - **Lesson 2:** *Not everyone who digs you out is your friend.*
  - **Lesson 3:** *When you’re in manure, sometimes its helpful to keep your little chirper shut.*<sup>4</sup>
- God is at work in your disappointment and your pain removing your idols—your false sources of trust and joy and hope and making you depend on him.
- Write this down: **If dependence is the objective, weakness is an advantage.**
  - Elijah’s strength is his greatest enemy.
  - God will sometimes make you weak so you can find your strength in him.
- Paul: **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” 2 Corinthians 12:9**
  - How crazy... Do you boast in your weaknesses?
  - Where has God made you weak right now?
    - *Financially?*
    - *Single when you want to be married?*
    - *Removed an opportunity from you?*
    - *Some skill that you lack?*
  - Me:
    - Me in Indo when my roommate got medivac’d out.
    - One or two skills that I have always lacked that God has always supplied for me.
      - Moses.
    - God has always kept me by the Brook Cherith; I’ve been given weaknesses and so have you.
    - Maybe God has given you a disease just at the time you thought... cancer. But God uses that as an instrument to teach you how to pray, or your family what really matters—knowing God.
- **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Matthew 5:3**
  - I’ve never wanted to be poor in spirit. I’ve always wanted to be at least middle class in spirit, which means that I have the resources to do what I need to be done. Dig deeper. Try harder.
  - God’s treasures are found not in our strengths, but in our weaknesses.
    - Starts with our salvation...
    - Continues on to our strengths...
    - **Illus.** “God can use you, too. But you’re not his first choice.”
- Rejoice in your weaknesses. Flip side: **Beware your strengths, because those are places you are most likely to forget God.**

**[7] And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.**

- Now we go from bad to worse. The brook dries up and the courier ravens with their daily rations of beef jerky and spam quit coming to visit.

*But look at what happens next...*

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Groeschel, “The Making of a Man of God,” 1 Kings 17

[8] Then the word of the LORD came to him, [9] "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

- (This is the story for next week, but let me just give you a cliff notes version of the story...
- Zarephath was a city in Sidon. Little tiny town north of Israel. Exit 297 off of I-95.
- And there, Elijah meets a widow... and he asks her to make him something to eat. She says, "I can't." ***She's affected by the famine, too.*** "I have just enough oil and flour to make one small cake for me and my son, and then we'll die of starvation." But Elijah tells her to believe God and do what he says, and when she does God multiplies the oil and flour so that it never runs out, not for the whole drought!
- Now, do you remember who else was from Sidon? Starts with J... Jezebel. And guess who the main god is in Sidon? Ba'al. So God first took from Elijah his ability to take care of himself and provided for him through a special act of providence. Then God took away from him even that—made him even weaker—and took care of him through a full-blown miracle.
- ***And the greater Elijah's need, the greater glory God got in the provision.*** Write this down: ***The greater the need, the more glory God gets in the provision.***
- Question:
  - When Elijah was a young man, he got his food by earning money, and buying food. Was God at work providing in that? Yes. But isn't it easy to forget in a situation like that, that God is the one providing for you *through* the job, and start to assume that is all you? Yes.
  - So God took the job away, and he puts Elijah by a secret brook, and there he provides for him through what we call special providence—he marshalled a brook and a raven catering service to meet Elijah's needs. Well, it's easier to see God in that.
  - But then God lets the brook dry up, and takes care of Elijah by multiplying the oil, which leaves no room for doubt as to whether or not it is God.
- The greater the need; the greater the chance for God to display his power...
  - **Every miracle** in the Bible starts with a problem!
  - When God really wants to show off his power, when he really takes you into the heart of Sidon, he will often make you weaker so that his power can rest upon you.
  - **Because, see, he doesn't want to put your talents on display, because that's not going to help anybody.** Might impress some people, but it's not going to help them.
  - He wants to put his talents on display, because he's the God and Savior of all who will call on him.
  - So he chooses the weak to shame the strong; the simple to confound the wise, and sometimes he makes the strong weak "*so that no human might boast in the presence of God,*" and so our boast would be in Christ as our righteousness, strength, provider and our security.
  - That's why when I preach to you I don't want to try and impress you with my strengths—*look how much I know; look how successful my Christian life has been!* That might impress you, but it's not really honest, and it's not going to help you. I'd rather show you my weaknesses, and display the grace and power of Christ in me, because then you can seek the same grace and power of Christ that I have found.
  - What God has made available to me, he's made available to you, too.
- ***Write this down: The greater your weakness, the more chance for God to display his power.***
- If dependence is the objective, weakness is an advantage. So rejoice in your weaknesses, because in those are places you are made strong.

## (Conclusion)

So again I ask you, "Where has God made you weak?"

- **Finances? Single?** Taken away some **talent** or **opportunity**? Given you a bad **marriage**? Destroyed your **health**? Left you **without some skill** you need for an assignment he's given to you?



He's put you there to trust him.

*Maybe some unexplainable things are happening to you right now.* Maybe you are **like the bird** that just got dumped on. Do you realize God is working in that, training you to trust him and depend on him?

- Reminds me of *Karate Kid*. It was in the mundane that Miagi taught the Daniel Larusso the skills necessary to fight in the arena.
  - God took Elijah to the brook Cherith and then to a poor widow's house in Zarephath so he could produce in him the faith he'd need for the battle on top of Mt. Carmel.
  - **God could use Elijah to do great things for him on top of Mt Carmel in 1 Kings 18 because he taught Elijah to trust him by the Cherith brook in 1 Kings 17.**
  - Question: What if you never get a *Miagi moment*? We really want those. God is still working!

**God wants complete dependence; total trust; unconditional surrender from you.** Because those are the instruments he uses to pour out his power on earth. Not our skill.

- God is not look for super-human people with great talents to use on earth. He's looking for ordinary people with unconditional surrender and extraordinary confidence in him.
- So he sometimes tears you down to produce that. Because (and you know this) strength in us leads to independence. You get cocky and feel like you can take care of the future just fine, and so you don't become sensitive to God's will. That's why it's so hard for rich or powerful people to ever really come to know God! They don't feel like they need him. And though their lives are sometimes "successful" here, they are powerless for the things that matter and worthless for eternity.
- So when God wants to fill your life with his power, he wounds you and makes you weak so that you will depend on him. And you should rejoice in those things.
- ***Before God can use a man greatly, he must wound him deeply.***

*Look in your Bible at 1 Kings 17:1 and I'll show you one of the most important transitions you can ever make in life.*

- **17:1** Elijah is defined by where he's from. Elijah the Tishbite.
- Now look at the last verse in this chapter, **17:24**, Elijah is identified simply as "the man of God." He's gone from being defined by where he's from to being defined by whom he belongs to.

***Have you gone through that transition?***

- How do you define yourself? What gives you confidence as you look into the future? Your strengths? How much money you have in the bank, or your earning potential? That your talents can guarantee you a good job; or your looks can guarantee you a good husband? That your health prospects are pretty good?
- Or is your confidence in God—that he has plans for you, that wherever he leads you he'll provide for you; and whatever assignments he gives you he'll supply you for? And so you look into the future with faith, and surrender, saying, "*God, where you tell me to go, I'll go. I know whatever you assign to me, you'll supply me for.*"

Listen... God wants to use you for MORE! In the New Testament book of James, James says this about Elijah:

[17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. (James 5:17-18 ESV)

We're just like him. And we can have access to the same power... but we've got to have the same faith and surrender and the way God produces that is by our weakness.

- (BTW, *It's not that our miracles will look exactly the same, but we'll experience God's power and provision in the assignments God has for us in our day and time.*)

*So, again, where has God made you weak? Can you rejoice in that and look to God to see what he is doing in that, and just trust him and follow him?*

The path to greatness with God goes through the valley of brokenness and pain. **"Before God can use a man greatly, he must first hurt him deeply."**

**Last thing:** If you're one of the ones considering which God is the real God, consider what this story is showing you about God.

- The Christian God is the God who **helps the weak**. Every other god **rewards the strong**. Those who are **morally strong** are **rewarded with heaven**. Those who **accomplish, achieve** are rewarded with **success**.
- The Christian God is a God who says ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, because if they are poor in spirit, they will depend on me, and I'll give them the kingdom of heaven."***
- The Christian God is a **God who died on a cross** to pay the penalty for our sin so we could enter heaven based on his gift and not our righteousness. We don't get to heaven by earning enough moral credit to get there; we get there by admitting we have no moral credit and depending on his grace and his gift as our entry rite to heaven.

This God is unlike every other god every concocted in the minds of man. ***Have you come to know this God?*** It will change your whole life!

**Bullpen:**

God's greatest instruments are not superhuman. They are ordinary people with weaknesses but great dependence on God.

***! Write this down:*** *The greater your weakness, the more chance for God to display his power.*