

## STICKY GIVING: LIFE IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS (1 Kings 17:1-24)

I heard about a farmer who faced financial difficulties. To make matters worse, his wife became ill and had to go to the hospital. While she was receiving treatment, the bills began to pile up. The farmer went to the bank and asked for a loan, but the bank refused to make that loan. The farmer decided his only option was to rob the bank.

He tried to think of everything he would need to pull off the heist. He got himself a handgun, and got a bag for the money. He even rehearsed what he would say to the teller: “Don’t mess with me; this is a stickup.”

Finally, the day came. The farmer parked his truck behind the bank and walked around to the front door. All the while, he was practicing his line: “Don’t mess with me; this is a stickup . . . Don’t mess with me; this is a stickup.”

The farmer was a bundle of nerves. He was as scared as he could possibly imagine ever being. Despite his fear, he was determined to go through with it. He walked right to the teller, pointed the bag at her, gave her the gun, and said, “Don’t stick with me; this is a mess up.”

I believe some people have a private fear that at some point, God is going to say to them: “I’m not going to stick with you; you are a mess up.”

Maybe you fear a spouse or a friend saying, “I’m not going to stick with you; you are a mess up.” Maybe that has already happened.

I can’t tell you what the future will bring regarding your relationships with other people, but I can tell you what God has promised. We read in Proverbs 18:24 that there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Solomon didn’t identify who that friend is, but I believe He is Jesus. Jesus promised He would be with us always, even to the end of the age. God promised that He would never leave us nor forsake us.

I am convinced that life is all about relationships—our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with one another. Everything else pales into comparison with healthy, satisfying relationships. Money, accomplishment, fame, none of those can hold a candle to a family who loves you, friends who care for you, and God who will not give up on you.

There is a pastor who wrote a book with an interesting title: *Sticky Church*. The title is not meant to describe what the preschool area is like after snack time during Sunday School nor the condition of the tables following a men’s pancake breakfast. Rather, the goal of his book is to help pastors structure their church in such a way that it is sticky. In other words, a sticky church is a church whose members want and choose to stay. Such churches have learned how to close the back door. Their membership is committed to one another. Such churches are sticky churches.

That pastor who wrote that book followed it up with a couple more—*Sticky Teams* and *Sticky Leaders*.

This morning, we are going to look at 1 Kings 17. This chapter is all about giving. I am going to call it sticky giving because the giving that takes place in this chapter causes the giver and the receiver to connect and to be bound up with one another.

Other than God, the central character in this passage is the prophet, Elijah. We are going to look how and what God gave Elijah, what Elijah gave to God, and what Elijah and a widow gave to one another. Their giving proved to be sticky; it connected them together.

Before I read from the chapter, let me set the stage. I believe there are four central figures in the OT. They stand head and shoulders above all the others. They are Abraham, Moses, King David, and Elijah. Abraham is the greatest of the patriarchs; Moses is the greatest lawgiver. David is the greatest King. Elijah is the greatest prophet. More is said about Elijah in the NT than any of the other prophets. He was a towering figure, and he was God's man for his day. The people needed a strong prophet who would not bend.

To understand Elijah's ministry, we must be aware of the foe he faced. In 17:1, Elijah speaks to King Ahab. The power behind the throne, however, was Ahab's wife—Jezebel. She was a wicked, wicked woman. She was not Jewish. She was a Sidonian princess who worshiped Baal, and her goal was to eliminate the worship of YHWH and to promote the worship of Baal.

What Elijah says to King Ahab in 17:1 strikes at the very heart of Baal worship. Elijah says it is not going to rain for years until I give the word. From James 5:17 we learn that it did not rain for 3 years and 6 months. That is significant because Baal was said to be the storm god. People prayed to Baal asking him to send the rain. Elijah was making the point that it was his God, not Baal, who brings the rain. This act of defiance made him Public Enemy #1.

God knew that Elijah needed to hide. God told Elijah where to go, and He promised to take care of Elijah. Let's read 17:1-7.

### **God Sticks with Us by Providing**

In addition to giving Elijah a mission and a message, God promised to meet Elijah's physical needs during the time he was to remain hidden. The brook that ran beside where he stayed provided water easily enough, but God used a more elaborate means to provide Elijah with bread and meat. Look at v. 6. We are not told where the meat and bread came from, but are assured that God used ravens to deliver Elijah's meals. I suppose this was the first food delivery service. And Elijah didn't even have to pay for it and the delivery birds didn't hang around waiting for a tip.

Have you ever had the experience of God providing for you in unexpected ways? A check arrives in the mail. A bonus comes at just the right time. A friend slips some money into your hand. They didn't know your need, but God did, and He used them to provide, to meet that need.

Due to the drought, eventually the brook from which Elijah drank dried up. In v. 8 we find the second occurrence of the phrase, "the word of YHWH came to him." God gave Elijah a new set of instructions. God sent Elijah to non-Jewish territory. He went to the Mediterranean coastal town of Zarephath, which was close to Sidon. Guess where Jezebel was from—Sidon. God was saying to Elijah, "The home of your enemy is going to be the place of your provision."

God's plan was for Elijah to mooch off a widow lady for an extended period. Look at v. 9. You might think, "Well, this widow must be a woman of means. God is sending Elijah to a wealthy woman who can take of His prophet." That wasn't the case at all, not at all.

Notice vv. 10-12. She is about to cook what she believes is her final meal. She is expecting to eat this little bit of bread, and then she and her son will die of starvation. That's her plan. That was not God's plan.

Aren't you glad that God has a better plan than you do? "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

God sent Elijah to that widow for her good as much as for his. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. We'll take more about that later, but God can use others to meet our needs as we allow Him to use us to meet theirs.

Upon a first reading, it appears that Elijah is being selfish. He tells the woman to make him bread before she makes bread for her and her son. What Elijah says to the woman at the beginning of v. 13 is key. He says, "Do not fear." It is fear that keeps us from trusting God. It is fear that robs us of the blessings that come from obeying God. Fear destroys relationships, families, businesses, communities, and even nations.

When Franklin Roosevelt was first elected president, our nation was in the depths of the Great Depression. The unemployment rate stood at 25%. Roosevelt's first task was to reassure the nation that conditions would improve. Early in his inaugural address in 1933, he said, "This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Fear is incompatible with faith. By faith we must evict fear because faith is what God blesses.

Elijah went on to bolster the widow's faith by telling her what God had said. Look at v. 14. Here we find a principle: If you want your faith to grow, you must feed it with the word of God.

I get confused as to whether we are supposed to feed a cold and starve a fever or starve a cold and feed a fever. Let me tell you what I do know. What I do know is that we are to starve our fear and feed our faith. We starve fear by refusing to focus on those fears. Instead, we feed our faith by taking in the word of God regularly and by the various means at our disposal—by reading it, by studying it, by listening to it, by memorizing it, by meditating upon it, and by any other means of which we can think.

The widow heard the word of God. She believed the promise she was given, and she experienced the blessing of God. It was as if her jar of flour had no bottom and her jug of oil was inexhaustible. There is no way of knowing, but I suspect that if you picked both the jar and the jug up, they would not feel full. Instead, they would feel almost empty. Maybe they were like a tube of toothpaste. You think it is empty, but you are amazed at how many days it lasts. The difference, of course, is that you get to end where no more toothpaste comes out, but the flour and the oil kept on for weeks, and months, and very likely more than a year.

God provided. He provided for Elijah and for the widow. He provides for you and me,

too.

Pastor Bryan Wilkerson said the following:

It's often called the law of the harvest: you reap what you sow. If you sow barley, you reap barley. You'd have to be pretty foolish to sow barley and expect wheat. Not only that, but the more you sow, the more you reap. If you sow 10 acres of barley in the springtime, you can expect 10 acres worth of barley at harvest time. But don't expect a harvest of 40 acres if you only sowed 10. It doesn't work that way. The more you scatter, the more you gather. Paul applies that simple principle to finances; the more you give, the more you gather. In the same way that a farmer who sows generously reaps generously, a person who gives generously is blessed generously. Put another way, the more generously we give, the more abundantly God provides.

We determine how much God blesses us by how much we give. The widow thought she was giving all she had. In return, God gave her all she needed, and He gave her enough to support herself, her son, and a needy prophet.

### **We Stick with God by Obeying**

The best thing we can give God is our obedience. That is what Elijah gave God—his obedience. He went to the King with a tough message. He could have come up with plenty of reasons as to why it would not be a wise course of action to anger the king, but God gave him a message, and he said just what God told him to say.

Camping by a brook, drinking from it, and being fed by ravens sounds like a fun camping trip for a weekend, but that was what Elijah did week after week, and month after month, for who knows how long. He may have been glad the brook dried up and that he got a new assignment.

When that assignment came, he did what God called him to do.

Daniel Nayeri was born in Iran. After three years of living in refugee camps, at the age of 8, he was able to emigrate to America with his sister and his mother. They settled in Edmond, OK. He graduated from Edmond's Memorial High School before going to New York University where he studied writing. In 2020 he published a children's book about his life which became an award-winning book.

In the book, he tells the gripping story of his mother's conversion from Islam to Christianity. It was her conversion to the Christian faith that caused her to flee from Iran and from the death threat she faced for becoming a Christian. Listen to what Nayeri wrote:

One time she hung a little cross necklace from the rearview mirror of her car, which was probably a reckless thing to do . . . My mom was like that. One day after work, she went to her car, and there was a note stuck to the windshield. It said, "Madame Doctor, if we see this cross again, we will kill you."

To my dad, [who is not a Christian], this is the kind of story that proves his

point. That my mom was picking a fight. That she could've lived quietly and saved everyone the heartaches that would come. If she had kept her head down. If she stopped telling people. If she pretended just a few holidays a year, that nothing had changed. She could still have everything.

My mom took the cross down that day. Then she got a cross so big it blocked half the windshield, and she put it up. Why would anybody live with their head down? Besides, the only way to stop believing something is to deny it yourself. To hide it. To act as if it hasn't changed your life.

Another way to say it is that everybody is dying and going to die of something. And if you're not spending your life on the stuff you believe, then what are you even doing? What is the point of the whole thing? It's a tough question, because most people haven't picked anything worthwhile.

Obedience to God is spending your life on the stuff you believe. That is what Elijah did, and that is what the widow did. Is that what you are doing?

God sticks with us by providing. We stick with God by obeying.

### **We Stick with Each Other by Assisting**

Elijah helped the widow. The widow helped Elijah. She gave the prophet room and board. She gave him a place to sleep. She cooked food for him to eat.

And it was likely nice for her to have a man around the house again. Very likely, Elijah pitched in and did work around the house. Maybe he gathered sticks for the fire so she wouldn't have to.

The relationship between Elijah and the widow was mutually beneficial. They helped one another. We are to do the same, and we will if we keep the focus not on what we want but on what the other person needs. That is what Paul taught, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

I once heard the following story. It is a bit silly, but it makes a powerful point. Someone was contrasting heaven and hell. He said that in hell, people have utensils that are three feet long—three-foot spoons and three-foot forks. They have plenty of food, but they are starving because they can't feed themselves. Their arms are too short. In heaven they also have three-foot utensils, but everyone is content and well-fed because they reach across the table and feed one another.

If you want to experience heaven on earth, take care of one another; assist one another; love one another. That is what the Master taught us to do.

There came a point, however, at which tragedy struck, and God used Elijah in a big way. Let's look at vv. 17-24.

You and I are so like the widow in the story. When she was certain she and her son would starve to death, she showed no great emotion. She said matter-of-factly that she was going to make one final meal of bread, and then they were going to die. God,

however, came to her rescue. For weeks, and month, and more than year, they had plenty to eat. She and her son were the recipient of God's blessings. Just as her fortune had changed, so had her expectations. She now expected she would always know and experience God's blessings.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. Her son died quickly and unexpectedly. This wasn't part of her plan. Why had God dealt her this evil hand? She blamed God. She blamed His prophet.

She was not like Job nor are we. Job experienced even worse, and yet he prayed, "YHWH gave, and YHWH has taken away; blessed by the name of YHWH" (Job 1:21).

Elijah was also taken by surprise. I am certain he had grown to love the boy. Over time, he had become very fond of him, and he knew how important this boy was to his mother and how the future of the widow was tied to the health and success of her son. He, too, blamed God.

But then he went to work. He prayed. He took his case to God. Up to this time, we have no record of there ever being a human being raised from the dead. Such a thing was unprecedented, but that is exactly what Elijah prayed for, and that is exactly what he got. Look at v. 22.

We don't expect God to do anything dramatic like that for us. Sure, He did that for Elijah, but that was Elijah. He was one of the four greatest men of the OT. We need to consider what we find written in the NT. It was James who wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter that we are to pray for one another and especially for those who are sick. Then, he offered this encouragement:

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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and earth bore its fruit.

If God did that for Elijah, and He did, then God can do amazing things for you and me because we serve the same God. Our God has not changed. His strength has not diminished. Time has not altered our God.

We have talked today about sticky giving. God sticks with us by providing. We stick with God by obeying. We stick with each other by assisting.

I close by sharing some that J. Vernon McGee pointed out. In this passage we see a dried-up brook, an empty barrel, an empty bottle, and a lifeless body. Over time, God filled or animated each one. The only thing that God can't fill is something that is already filled.

If you want God to fill you with Himself, you must empty yourself of yourself—your plans, your dreams, your goals, your strategies.

If you want God to fill you with His life, you must die to your own.

Two weeks ago I said that one of the major if not the theme of the Bible is that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. When we humble ourselves and bow before the Lordship of Christ, He will give us grace, and that is exactly what we need because that grace will bind us to Him forever.