

1 Kings 17:8–24 (NRSV)

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” ¹⁹But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰He cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” ²²The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” ²⁴So 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.”

What is more than precious life? Where does life originate? Who is the bringer of life?

A widow and her son learn that there is only One who can give true life.

Last week, we left Elijah in a dry creek bed (a wadi) being fed bread and meat by ravens. The prophet had confronted Ahab, the king of Israel,¹ telling him that the LORD God (YHWH²) was going to bring a drought to the land. Ahab had led the people away from the worship of YHWH to the worship of the Canaanite god, Baal. Because the worshipers of Baal believed he was the bringer of rain, and hence life, Elijah’s promise of drought was a direct YHWH v. Baal challenge. Wisely, God told Elijah to run away and hide in a wadi near his hometown after delivering the news to Ahab.

But now, YHWH comes to Elijah, telling him that the time has come to leave the wadi. He is to go to the city of Zarephath in Sidon and look for the home of a widow, whom God has commanded to feed Elijah. Right off the bat, the story has taken several surprising turns.

- Zarephath was not an Israelite city. It was a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coastline, north of Israel.

¹If you haven’t had the chance to read the first study in this series, you probably should. It provides a lot of important background to the Elijah stories. You can find a copy at www.scottengle.org. It is the Weekly Bible Study for July 11, 2010.

²When God meets Moses at the burning bush, he reveals his name to be YHWH, meaning something like “I am who I am.” Because the name of God was very sacred to the Israelites, when they came upon God’s name, YHWH, in Scripture, they would not say it aloud. Instead, they said “Lord,” (*adonai* in Hebrew). In keeping with that tradition, most English Bibles print “LORD” (small caps) every place that YHWH appears in the books of the OT.

- Zarephath was in the land of Sidon. You'll recall from last week that Jezebel, the Baal worshipping queen of Israel, was from Sidon, indeed, the daughter of the king of Sidon.
- The widow, like her neighbors, is a worshipper of Baal, not YHWH.

Thus, God commands Elijah to head off to a pagan land and the home of a pagan widow, whose widowhood put her on the margins of society, among the most desperately destitute. God's work is going to move forward even through these pagan Gentiles, for there are no boundaries on God's grace. All the world is God's and no one, not even the ancient Israelites, had some sort of exclusive claim on God. They had been chosen and saved for the larger purposes of God's restorative work. All the families, even those Baal-worshipping Phoenicians, were to be blessed through them, as God had promised to Abraham long before (Genesis 12).

Jesus referred to this story when he began his public ministry in Nazareth. Jesus rose to read in synagogue on a Saturday and chose a passage from Isaiah. The passage looked forward to the day when God's kingdom arrived, Israel's sins had been forgiven, and the blind made to see. When Jesus told his fellow Nazarenes that these words had been fulfilled on that very day, the gathered men responded angrily. Just who did Jesus think he was, after all!! But Jesus didn't respond in kind; he simply reminded them of Elijah who had to flee from his angry fellow-Israelites and take refuge among the Gentiles, bringing God's life even to the foreigners. (see Luke 4:14-30, esp. 24-26).

No food?

When Elijah arrived at the outskirts of the town, he met a widow who was busy gathering some sticks and asked her for some water and a bit of bread. The widow assured him that she had little of either.³ In fact, the drought had been so severe that she was headed home

Bible and Story

In *Eat This Book*¹: *A conversation in the art of spiritual reading*, one of the things that Eugene Peterson wants us to appreciate is that the Bible consists largely of stories. Small stories within larger stories within still larger stories within the overarching story of God's work to redeem his creation.

Stories remind us that the Bible was first spoken, not written. Stories are one of the most accessible ways we share memories and insights. Few things are more memorable than a great story.

But stories also invite us in. We can participate in a story, we can get involved. When Elijah meets the starving widow and asks for something to eat, we can easily imagine what our own response might be.

The biblical stories invite us into God's story. The stories are not "illustrations" or "applications" or tools of any sort. Rather, the stories are personal, concrete, immediate, and relational. They are often ambiguous because life is ambiguous. They are honest because God is honest.

These are the stories of God and the people of God. Thus, these are our own family stories. When we read the stories of Elijah's ministry, we are reading (eating!!) the stories of our own ancestor and in them meeting our God and Father. These stories are not given to us so that we might pull God into our world, finding some advice or nugget of truth that we can put to work. No, we are given these stories so that we might enter God's world, so that we might see the far larger reality that is God.

1. The reference here is to Revelation 10:8-10, where an angel tells John to take the scroll and eat it. It will be sweet in John's mouth but bitter in his stomach. Peterson sees this as a metaphor for our reading of the Bible. We are not actually to just read it, the way we read other written materials. We are to eat God's Word, taking it within us so that we may be transformed by it.

³ Interestingly, she swears by the name of Elijah's God, the LORD God, not her own god. And we know that YHWH is not her god because she says to Elijah, "As the LORD your God lives . . ." (17:12).

to make a small fire so that she and her son could eat what tiny amount was left and then die. It isn't at all surprising that the drought would fall hardest on a widow, who had little or no means of support without a husband or family.

But Elijah reassures her, telling her to go home and make some meal cakes for Elijah and for herself and her son. The jar with meal in it will never empty, he says, for the duration of the drought. And the same is true of her jug of oil. It too will always have oil in it.

And she did as Elijah said. She and her household ate well. Neither the jar of meal nor the jug of oil ever failed. It was just as YHWH had said it would be.

In this confrontation of YHWH and Baal, the widow has learned that Baal cannot bring the rain when YHWH has commanded a drought. Instead, it is YHWH who is the giver of life, the provider of daily needs – not only for the Israelites but for the Gentiles, even for those who worship false gods. All life begins with God and God alone.

Back from the dead

A second story of Elijah and the widow follows fast on the heels of the first one. Elijah has evidently been staying with the widow and her family. Sadly, her son has fallen ill and died. The widow confronts Elijah, sure that he and his God have brought this about. She seems quite confident that YHWH has seen some sin she has committed and has punished her for it by taking the life of her son.

Her reaction isn't as crazy as we might think. For the ancients, the gods were the causes of much of what happened in life. If you prospered, it was because the gods were pleased with you. If you suffered, it was because you had sinned or otherwise caused the gods to be displeased. This was the general perspective on life even in Jesus' day.⁴

But Elijah was going to show her otherwise. He took the dead boy and carried him upstairs, laying him out in Elijah's own bed. Then the prophet laid across the boy's body three times, imploring that YHWH would return the boy to life. We're told that YHWH listened to Elijah and "the life of the child came into him again."⁵ Then Elijah picked up the boy and carried him back to his mother. The widow affirmed then her confidence that Elijah was a man of God and that "the word of the LORD in your mouth is true." Notice that she no longer speaks of "your God"; now it is simply "YHWH/ the LORD." The widow has come to see that the bringer and giver of life is truly YHWH and YHWH alone.

Next week, we'll see that Elijah is called back to his confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel. This time there will be a Super Bowl of sorts, as Elijah and YHWH take on Baal and many hundreds of Baal's priests. You can guess how that one will turn out.

Knowing the Life-Giver

These are ancient stories, but it isn't very hard to get inside them, to make these stories our own. We still live in a world in which many people deny that the LORD God is the Life-Giver. Some may simply never give it much thought. Others may have looked for life in other gods. Still others have made themselves comfortable with the notion that life is simply the result of time and random mutation acting on a primordial soup.

But can we really understand life without knowing the Life-Giver? Can we find the meaning of life if we look any place other than the God-Who-Is? After all, who is the Resurrection and the Life? Is there any other?

⁴ The community that gave us the Dead Sea scrolls, for example, wouldn't let a handicapped or injured person hold office because their infirmity was assumed to have been punishment for sin. This community was located at Qumran, by the Dead Sea, and was active in Jesus' day.

⁵ This is not a resurrection, which is passing through death to newly-embodied life that death can never touch. Instead, the boy is brought back to life, resuscitated, in something akin to being resuscitated after dying on an operating table. The boy went on to live the rest of his life and then die again. Only one person has been resurrected: Jesus. But when Jesus returns, we will all be resurrected, just as Jesus was.

Elijah, Jesus, and a Widow

In the New Testament, Elijah is seen as a forerunner of Jesus. In several cases, the parallels are striking. For example, Luke gives us a story of Jesus resuscitating the dead son of a widow:

¹¹Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.

¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. (NRSV, Luke 7:11-15)

Fred Craddock comments on these parallels in his commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series:

Both Elijah and Elisha restored life to young men. In the case of Elijah, the parallels to Luke are remarkable: the mother was a widow, the prophet met her at a city gate, and after life is restored, "he gave him to his mother," an exact quotation by Luke (v. 15) from the Greek text (Septuagint) of I Kings 17:23. We have previously and will again observe what could be called Luke's *literary* use of the Old Testament, that is, a use of the Old Testament not to offer proof of an argument, not to establish the prophecy/fulfillment pattern, but so as to allow the Old Testament narrative to provide the way of telling. Luke does not bring I Kings 17 to the reader's attention; it remains beneath the surface, and if the reader does not know the Old Testament, the Elijah story will not come to mind at all. What, then, is Luke doing? It could be simply a case of imitation, a guiding principle of literary art in that culture, widely practiced and widely respected. Our modern sensitivities about plagiarism, developed in support of laws of copyright which assume that an individual and not a society owns words, do not pertain here. As the English Bible has been a conscious or unconscious tutor of poets and novelists, perhaps the Greek Bible was a literary influence on Luke. But if Luke's readers did know the Greek Old Testament, passages such as 7:11-17 could give a sense of continuity, of being at home, of knowing a truth at the powerful level of recognition.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I once read a column by the best-selling novelist, Anna Quindlen, in which she reflected on the single-most important piece of advice she could give her children. She said she'd tell her kids to grab life with both hands – life, life, and more life – for there just wasn't enough to go around. I think I know what she meant. It is what we all seek. To live full, meaningful, and joyful lives. What we don't much about is how to do it. Or perhaps, we know a lot about how but don't actually do it. Why do you think so many people find it so hard to live full, meaningful, and joyful lives? What gets in our way? Why do we let it get in the way? What has characterized people you've known who seem to embrace life and live it robustly?

Elijah sought to show Ahab and all the people of Israel that the LORD God is the source and giver of life. In this, Elijah prepares us for the life-giving ministry of Jesus. Elijah is miraculously fed by the ravens and then the widow, but Jesus is able to feed multitudes himself. Elijah has to appeal to God to bring the widow's son back to life. But in a parallel episode, Jesus has the power to raise a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). Elijah never dies but is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Jesus, however, defeats death and is resurrected to new life, as he said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Paul writes that we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1-4) – raised to be new life. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). What does all this tell you about our own search for life? Where will we find it? What is the shape of the life given us by the Life-Giver? Why do you think that so many people look for life everywhere but in Jesus Christ? How might we help others to find new life in Christ?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 2 Kings 4:8-37 Elisha, the successor to Elijah, also has a ministry of life. Here, he too is God's vehicle for the resuscitation of a dead boy.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Luke 4:14-30 Jesus announces the beginning of his public ministry and recalls the story of Elijah going to the land of the foreigners.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 7:11-17 Jesus brings life to the dead boy of a widow. What are the parallels to the Elijah story? Differences?</p>	<p>Thursday, John 11 Jesus raises Lazarus, who has been dead several days. (Again, this is resuscitation, not resurrection). Who is the bringer of life? Why does John devote so much space to this story?</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 10:8-10 The scroll contains God's words. Peterson sees in this a message about eating, i.e., internalizing Scripture. What do you get out of it? What do you think Peterson means?</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

