

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

March 31, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Elijah: Finding God on the Hard Road

Learning on the Hard Road (1 Kings 17)

Introduction:

A. We all face hard roads

Let's ask God for help as we come to His Word...

Back in 2017, my family had a rough stretch. Our son Grant got a stomach bug that got so bad we had to take him to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a parasite and had an overnight stay. And our high deductible HMO plan said did not say, "You know what, don't worry about it, we'd love to cover all the costs for your son's overnight hospital stay."

No, thousands of dollars in bills later, a new challenge came with a phone call. My wife Stephanie called to say her car died and that she and our daughter Kate were stranded on the way to pick up Grant from school. So I rushed over and in the 100 degree heat push her car out of the street and then we switched the car seats to my car and Steph and Kate picked up Grant while I waited for the tow truck to tow her car to the repair shop. Nearly \$500 later the car ran again with a new throttle pedal.

A few weeks later, I got another call from Stephanie that her car died again. So I rushed over from work and put the car seats in my car and then took another ride with the tow truck to the repair place. Nearly \$700 later we had a new throttle body and running car.

A few days after that, as I sat at my desk here, I got another call. As I picked up my phone I braced for more bad news, and yes, Stephanie's car, which was only 5 years old, died again. So I rushed over and pushed her car out of the street and got the car seats in my car and then took another ride with the tow truck.

So far I've kept a pretty good attitude. I mostly sought God in these disruptions and had spiritual conversations with each of the now three tow truck guys I've ridden with, and this third time we towed Steph's car to a different repair place. They found a technical service bulletin that identified the problem and that Hyundai would fix it for free. This repair place couldn't believe the first one didn't do this research after we came back a second time, so another frustration. We got the car towed again, to the Hyundai dealership, who fixed the problem for free.

But soon after this, my car died on the road. I got to take my fifth tow ride to a repair place. Shout out to AAA, who definitely lost money on our membership that year. A few hundred dollars later, my car was fixed, but we wondered how much longer it'd last since it was 16 years old. So now added to the stress was the possibility of having to buy another car on top of all these other bills.

Then soon after that, my son Grant got another bad stomach issue, which landed us back in the ER. Around 8 at night, they discharged us. We were in separate cars, so Steph took Grant to pick up some medicine and I was to take Kate straight home.

Having had all these car troubles, including my car dying that week, and drained after the time at the hospital and the mounting bills, I prayed that both cars would have no problems on the way home. Having prayed, I started driving, we got on the highway, and soon my car was shaking, so I exited the highway and coasted into a closing dealership as my car died.

A salesman helped me push the car to the repair area, where I filled out an overnight repair form as my 4 year old daughter peppered me with questions as she tried to understand what was happening. And then we called Stephanie, who also couldn't believe the car had died again.

Then I sat down on the curb with Kate as we waited for Stephanie and poor, sick Grant to come pick us up. I was just drained, and angered about God not answering my prayer to get us home with no car troubles. The only thing that kept me from crying as we sat on the curb was trying to hold it together for Kate, who was already past her bedtime and wasn't going to respond well if dad started crying.

Sometimes, as we journey through life, we find ourselves on the hard road. Everyone, whatever your beliefs, spends time on the hard road, and sometimes it's way worse than chronic car troubles and illnesses and mounting bills.

Some of us are on the hard road this Easter season, feeling this tension over our pain, questions, and struggles as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. So this year, as we prepare for Easter, we're going to learn from the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Because Elijah was no stranger to the hard road, and yet he found God there in amazing ways.

We'll see Elijah's walk with God on the hard road in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. 1 Kings is the 11th book in the Bible, so more towards the front; if you get to the book of

Chronicles you've gone too far. And if you're new to reading the Bible, and the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers, and we're in chapter 17 of 1 Kings.

B. Israel's leadership problems

1 Kings 17 took place about 2,900 years ago and was a bad time for the nation of Israel. After King Solomon died, the nation split into a northern and southern kingdom. Elijah was from the northern kingdom, which had about 60 straight years of evil kings. Now Ahab is king, the 7th bad king in a row, and said to be the worst of the seven. Ahab married a wicked foreign queen named Jezebel. Together they led the northern kingdom in worshipping the false god Baal. The worship of Baal sometimes included perverse practices, like child sacrifice and orgies, and on top of that, Ahab and Jezebel also murdered all the prophets of God they could find.

I. Elijah's hard road and God's work on it

A. Confronting power (17:1)

In this mess, where even the power structures of the nation are encouraging evil, God calls his prophet Elijah to confront King Ahab. In the Old Testament, prophets were people of godly character who knew the Scriptures. And God would sometimes speak through a prophet to bring a message that His people were to obey. God is making no easy request of his prophet Elijah, telling Elijah to stand alone before the cutthroat king and confront his evil. Let's see how Elijah responds to God's challenging call in verse 1 of chapter 17:

17 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Baal, the false god Ahab and Jezebel led the people to worship, was said to be a sky god with power over the weather and fertility. So the promise of drought was not random, it was a direct challenge to Baal meant to show the people that God is the rain-giver, not Baal.

And no rain, especially back then, was a huge deal, people would starve in those conditions. Elijah was already living in a hard time to follow God, but now his road is harder: he's made an enemy out of king Ahab, and like everyone else, now faces drought.

B. Being sidelined (17:2-6)

And Elijah's hard road is just beginning. Verse 2:

² Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: ³ "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. ⁴ You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens

to supply you with food there.”⁵ So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there.⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

God’s command here puts Elijah, now a wanted man, in a safe place, and it gives space for Elijah to deepen his relationship with the Lord. But it’s not easy in the prime of your life and career to be sidelined: no chance to impact others and all alone.

Stephanie and I watched the first season of *Alone*, a reality TV show where 10 contestants were dropped off various places on Vancouver Island and had to survive totally on their own. The one who lasted longest got \$500,000. Each contestant had to tape a daily video of themselves. It was interesting to learn how they made shelter and got food and water and survived the elements, but as time progressed, it became more interesting to see their struggles being totally isolated for over a month, all alone. Imagine being Elijah here, day after day after day, all alone in that barren, boring wilderness, only ravens for company.

It may not be as extreme as Elijah’s, but many of us have a season of isolation at some point on the hard road. Sometimes, like Elijah, it’s because God is calling us to something, like say moving to a new place for a new job. Other times our isolation comes because we’re broken people living in a broken world. Whether it’s an injury, or illness, or time out of work, or in prison, one way God wants to work in our isolation is by deepening our relationship with Him. That was certainly true for me when I spent some time bedridden after a major car accident.

I sure didn’t want that car accident, and I bet wilderness isolation wasn’t part of Elijah’s dreams for his life, but he experiences God there. God providing Elijah with a source of water in the drought and with food from the ravens, which is even more surprising than it sounds because the Old Testament said ravens were an unclean animal.

And as Elijah experiences God through this unexpected provision, he also had plenty of time to talk with God and to listen. To deepen their relationship, and for Elijah to work out his issues with God about how his life was going. We’ll talk more about this wrestling with God later in the series, so I hope you can make it the next two weeks too.

C. Dried up brook and dangerous journey (17:7-9)

But now, in verse 7, we see a new challenge on Elijah’s walk with God on the hard road.

⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.”

As the drought continues, the brook dries up, and God says to go to Zarephath. God is calling Elijah, a wanted man, to travel over 100 miles of open land and then stay in Zarephath, the homeland of wicked queen Jezebel and the center of Baal worship.

And if Elijah even makes it there, he’s not to receive help from a wealthy, God-fearing businessman. No, he’s supposed to get help from a dirt poor, pagan widow with a young son. Elijah is on a journey where what he’s depended on is no longer there, where he has nowhere to go but God. Some of us know that feeling.

But despite the dried-up brook, dangerous journey, and uncertain provision, Elijah heads to Zarephath, God providing him protection on the journey through hostile territory. Elijah arrives in verse 10, which says:

D. Uncertain provision (17:10-16)

¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.” ¹² “As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

Things are not looking good here. But Elijah has experienced God’s faithfulness with the brook, the ravens, and safety on his journey, and he now calls the widow to join him in having faith in God. Elijah’s growing faith on the hard road being used by God to minister to the widow. A widow not of Israel, but of the Gentiles, showing God’s heart for all people. Verse 13:

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.’”

This dirt-poor widow is called to give up her very last bit of food and trust God to provide. While you’re probably not down to your last meal, we’re all tempted to hold on to “jars” in life. It could be our money, or an important relationship, or career success. And on the

hard road, God may call us to release that treasured “jar.” Imagine being that widow, holding your nearly empty last jar, looking at your starving son, and considering Elijah’s invitation to faith. Let’s see what the widow does in verse 15.

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

Elijah and the widow now on this journey together, learning to put their faith in God as provider. Pastor and author Tony Evans describes what they’re learning as “God is your source - everything else is a resource that He provides for you.”¹

Probably most of us don’t think we’re wealthy, but by world standards, most of us are, and when we face the hard road, we can be tempted to trust in our resources. To think we’re okay because we have a place to stay and food in the pantry and money in the bank rather than saying we’re okay because we know God. “God is your source - everything else is a resource” is also a good lesson for us as a church stewarding the land sale proceeds.

E. Death and questioning (17:17-20)

Next, Elijah and the widow face a devastating loss that profoundly tests their faith on the hard road. It starts in verse 17.

¹⁷ Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

The widow’s young son gets worse and worse till he dies. The widow not only carries the horrible heartache of losing her son, but, having lost her husband and son and already poor, she is on her way to marginalization and starvation. And on top of all these terrible burdens, she believes her sin brought God’s judgment on her son.

Elijah does not respond to the widow’s verse 18 accusations, instead asking her to place her pain in his arms in verse 19:

¹⁹ “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD, “LORD my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?”

¹ <https://store.tonyevans.org/product/2109/elijah-2014-cd-series>

Elijah carries the boy to the upper room, likely a temporary shelter on top of the widow's small house. There Elijah brings a version of the widow's question to the Lord, crying out to Him, asking why God, why have you brought tragedy on the widow? These painful, pointed "why God" questions are often part of the hard road.

If you've read the Bible, you know that our suffering is often not because of anything we did. Elijah here has been incredibly faithful, but is still on the hard road. Sometimes the hard road is just part of life as broken people among other broken people in a broken world where things are falling apart.

And as is often the case for us, Elijah gets no direct answer why the tragedy came, but as he continues to cry out to the Lord, he prays a surprising prayer in verse 21.

F. God breaks through (17:21-24)

²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

To this point in history, God has done some amazing things through Abraham, Moses, some judges, kings, but there's not one account of anyone being raised from the dead. Which makes Elijah's prayer even more surprising. And Elijah keeps with it, after praying twice, nothing happens, and yet he prays a third time, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

On the hard road, Elijah has seen God show up over and over, not in all the ways Elijah wants, but with everything he needs to accomplish God's purposes. And so Elijah has been learning faith on the hard road, and it leads to this amazing prayer of faith, which God responds to in verse 22.

²² The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, 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 from your mouth is the truth."

After the resurrection miracle, the widow really sees that the Lord is the true God and that Elijah is His prophet. Both the widow and Elijah have been learning faith on the hard road. They realize that Baal, the supposed god of rain, fertility, and life is powerless to help, even in his own back yard.

But the Lord God breaks through. He controls the rain. He provides a safe place for His prophet to go deeper with Him. He provides protection on the journey to Zarephath, He provides

food for the starving widow, her son, and Elijah in Baal's back yard. He is even the Lord of life and death and sin, resurrecting the dead son.

Think of that widow's overflowing joy as she receives her son back. And on top of that indescribable joy, think of her relief in knowing that her sin won't keep her from God or bring judgment on her son. God even breaks through her sin as He displays His forgiveness.

Conclusion:

A. Jesus breaks through for us

Now God did not speak through Elijah to tell the widow, "Hey, you're not a sinner, or you decide what's right and wrong, or your sins are no big deal." The widow's sins are a huge deal before a holy God, and our sins are too. But as author and pastor Tim Keller says it, it's like God is saying to the widow, "No, your son did not die for your sin; my Son will die for your sin." The widow can have her son back because her Heavenly Father is going to lose His Son for her.

As Elijah in verse 21 stretches out his arms over the boy and intercedes for him, so Jesus stretches out His arms on the cross and intercedes for us.² After taking the penalty for all our sins on the cross, on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead, showing His resurrection power over sin and death.

And so if you don't yet know Jesus, I'm not here to criticize the ways you're not living up to God's standards, we all fall short, we're all messes. Our heart for you here at Northwest is for you to join us in receiving eternal life in Jesus. That the good news of the Easter season is that Jesus came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross took the penalty for your rebellion against God, for every way you've ever hurt other people, for every good thing you've failed to do, for every wicked thing you've ever had.

And now Jesus invites you to come to Him, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead, so that you can receive His forgiveness and love and life eternal. I'd love to talk with you after the service if you've got questions about that or place your faith in Jesus.

B. Let's learn faith on the hard road

I really like how a commentary I read describes what Jesus has done for us, using parallels with Elijah's story here in 1 Kings 17. It says: "Will our God enter the wilderness for us? He has done, in Jesus. Will he cross into the territory of the prince of the world for us? He

² Sermon I heard Dr. Keller preach on 1 Kings 17.

has done, in Jesus. Will he cross the boundary between the living and the dead for us? He has done, in Jesus.”³

Amen. As we look to what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do, it helps us on the hard road to take a next step with Him. Like Elijah, we’re called to faithfulness on the hard road. Like Elijah, we may have to leave behind the safe and comfortable on the hard road, and like the widow, God may even call us to release a treasured “jar.”

Along the hard road, as with Elijah, God will be with us, and will provide us what we need to accomplish His purposes, though not always what we want or everything we pray for. And that part is so, so hard.

I bet even Elijah was frustrated at times on the hard road, and might have even been tempted to decide, “You know what, I’m not following a God who won’t give me more of what I want”. Imagine if Elijah walked away from God early in the story. What he would have missed out on, and what would have happened to that widow and her son.

When we’re on the hard road, God wants to meet us there and build our faith, learning to trust Him more as He provides and works in our hearts, work we may not even realize is happening until after the struggle is over.

On the hard road, God wants to build faith that helps us to know Him better and better face our future challenges, like He did with Elijah. To turn you and me into a stronger man or woman of faith, into contenders, like Elijah. And God also wants to take that deep faith He builds in you and use it to help others take “next steps” with Jesus. That widow and her son needed the deep faith God formed in Elijah.

And so maybe you’ve got a parent, or spouse, or child, or grandchild, or sibling, or aunt, or uncle, or niece, or nephew, or cousin, or friend, or neighbor, or coworker, or fellow student, or someone here in our church family; and they’ve got a hard road coming. They’re going to need to lean on the faith God is building now in you as you take a “next step” with Him on the hard road.

So if you’re in a season of isolation, struggling with illness or injury or no job; or if you’re in a dried up brook season, having lost something you depended on; or if you’ve given a treasured “jar” in obedience to God, by the help of God’s Spirit, His Word, and His people, may we keep walking with God on the hard road, and keep learning faith as God meets us there. I’m

³ Leithart, Peter, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible.

going to pray, and if you're on the hard road, as I pray, I invite you to open your hands and receive from the Lord. Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.