

“In God We Trust?”

Who’s the Boss? – A series on the Kings

1 Kings 17

Introduction: Take your Bibles and turn to 1 Kings 15, 1 Kings 15.

One of the great slogans of American culture is “In God we Trust.” It has donned our coins since the early 1900’s and it was declared to be the official motto of our nation by an act of congress in 1956. It was recently reaffirmed by our Senate in 2006 and by our House of Representatives in 2011 as the national motto. And so today, American currency that is used around the world declares us to be a nation that puts their trust in God. Yet, you and I know the rest of the story. I doubt anyone in this room would say that we are a nation that is actually putting our trust in God. We may be a nation that gives token allegiance to God at times of crisis, but the majority of our nation’s life is made up of disregard for God. How easy it is to declare trust and actually have none!

This was the case in Israel in the days of the rule and reign of Omri, the wicked king. He did more evil than any of the kings who were before him, and in so doing he set the stage for the wickedest king of them all – his son Ahab. While the people of Israel may have declared token trust in Yahweh God, they participated in false worship and idolatry and even the establishment of a new god brought over from the nation of Sidon, known as Baal. The Israelites may have carried the slogan of “in God we trust”, but in practice they had abandoned the one true God.

And yet, in the midst of this evil and vile false worship, the one true God provides a faithful witness to himself through the ministry of Elijah the prophet. The vilest of kings in Ahab was countered by the most illustrious of prophets in Elijah. In chapter 17 we see this illustrious prophet of God dropped on the scene in abrupt fashion. We are told nothing of his family heritage, and we are barely told where he is from. We are just shown over the course of the next many chapters of Scripture his prolific ministry as the mouthpiece of God in the face of vile wickedness among God’s own people. As we consider this first chapter of Elijah’s ministry this morning I want to show you the nature of faith with the hopes that we go beyond slogan Christianity. We inherently know that we must go beyond the slogan of our godless culture and affirm more than “In God we trust.” But we are often found lacking when it comes to faith on the ground. We can confidently express this faith in slogan form. We can counsel our brother or sister in Christ to just keep trusting the Lord, or to keep doing the right thing even though things are going poorly, or to just believe. But we must go deeper than this. We must progress beyond slogan faith in God, and this first chapter of Elijah’s ministry provides some profound lessons of what this faith on the ground looks like in the life of the believer. We are going to organize our study by looking at Elijah, at the widow, and at God. First we see that Elijah is man of mature faith.

I. Elijah was a Man of Mature Faith

- a. This powerful prophet from Gilead gets dropped on the scene of Ahab’s wicked rule in verse 1 and in so doing his life provides a picture of mature faith in God. This is shown to us through his obedience to the Word of God. He was a man of mature faith in that he acted on God’s Word.
- b. He Acted on God’s Word – vs. 1, 3-5, 8-10, 13-14

- i. As a prophet of God you don't get to choose your message, or its recipient. Elijah did not choose to be the guy who would walk into Ahab's idolatrous, adulteress and prophet slaying regime to tell him that the one true God was going to shut off the water of Heaven for these years until he said otherwise. God elected Elijah to do this, and Elijah dutifully went as the spokesman of God and delivered the message. Why? Because he was a man of mature faith. This is what faith does. It takes God at His Word and believes it in every detail and then acts upon it. In fact, a faith without these actions of obedience is no faith at all. And believe me, these actions of obedience in confronting Ahab were a supreme act of faith.
- ii. In essence what Elijah was doing was challenging Ahab to a divine duel. Ahab had led the nation to the worship of another god. Ahab had married the princess from Sidon and with her entrance into the country, the worship of a pagan god named Baal became the center of worship in Israel. In this section of the world where Israel and Sidon are located, the weather is fairly predictable by season. You generally know when you are most likely to get rain and when you are most likely to not get rain. This then determines your planting and growing and harvesting seasons in an agrarian culture. In a pagan culture like Sidon, this then carries over to the gods that they worshiped as they linked gods to the rains that bring life and the drought that brings death. Baal was the fertility god of Sidon. He was the god who showed his power and might by bringing the rain and the dew so that the crops could grow, which in turn guaranteed that all things could live. The Sidonians believed that Baal controlled the rain. They also believed that when the rain stopped Baal was obviously hindered by some other god. And so they conjured up that Baal had to submit to Mot, the god of death, during every dry season and this was why the rain stopped.
- iii. So, here is Ahab bowing down in the temple in Samaria that he made for this foreign god, Baal. Here he is worshipping the god of the rain, and here comes Elijah telling him that Yahweh will stop the rain. This is the making of a good old fashion duel of divine proportions. This is Yahweh God saying through the mouth of his prophet – "you think that Baal controls the rain, well, let's just see if that is true or not."
- iv. This took great faith for Elijah to be here proclaiming these words in this context. But then we are told in verse 2 that Elijah again received the word of the Lord that instructed him to go to the brook Cherith on the east side of the Jordan where ravens would feed him. There is not much that is logical in man's estimation about this word from the Lord. Elijah is told that he was to go to a dry and arid place in the midst of a long drought. As if the drought wouldn't be bad enough in the land of Israel, Elijah was to go to the other side of the Jordan which was almost always more dry and more arid than the land of Israel. Not only that, but he was told that the ravens would feed him there. Ravens were unclean birds as defined by the Law, and their usual menu was made up of things that you really wouldn't want to eat. So, Elijah is told to go to a drier and more arid place in the midst of a long drought where God will let him drink from the brook and be fed by the road kill café that the ravens bring. This is not an easy command to obey, but what does he do? Verse 5 says, "So he went and did according to the word of the Lord." Elijah went against logic so that he could obey God's clear command and in so doing he landed in the place of God's provision. And he found that this obedience to the word of the Lord was filled with the blessing of God's daily provision. I am guessing that God intervened in the course of normal raven affairs and even caused them to find some freshly baked

bread and fresh meat instead of their usual menu of decaying carrion. Maybe God even directed the ravens to the kitchen of the palace in Samaria to borrow some food from an unsuspecting king Ahab. We don't know what the ravens brought exactly, but we do know that Elijah's obedience was met with God's faithful provision. Morning and evening he was supplied with what he needed.

- v. Then the brook dried up because the drought persists in the land. God didn't miraculously let the stream continue to flow, though he could have, because he had another mission for Elijah. He tells him to go to Zarephath because God has commanded a widow there to feed him. And again, against all logic, Elijah obeys and in obeying displays a mature faith in God that is willing to stake all on the veracity of God's word. Zarephath was a town in Sidon. Sidon was the home country of the evil queen Jezebel. Jezebel learned the art of wicked and violent rule through her dad who ruled over this land of Sidon. They didn't tolerate non-Baal worshipers in Sidon. They didn't really appreciate non-Baal prophets in Sidon, but rather they usually sacrificed them. Not only was Elijah being sent by the word of the Lord into the heart of the desert, so to speak, he was also being sent to the home of a widow. Widows in the ancient culture were hopeless, helpless, disrespected, and dirt poor. That was why there was special provision within God's Law to care for widows. This is why the Scriptures talk so often of God's special care for and concern for widows and orphans. This is why ministry to widows and orphans is described in the New Testament as true and authentic ministry. They were a desperate lot. It was not a good thing to be a widow, and it was especially not a good thing to be a widow in the midst of a long standing drought. If anyone is going to have extra provision, it is not going to be a widow. So, God is telling Elijah to find his sustaining provision in ravens and in a widow. This is not logical to our limited minds. Why not send your prophet to the land of Judah where the house of Asa continues to reign. Certainly this man of God would have found refuge among God's people there. But rather, God sends him to Cherith and then to Zarephath – to be fed by the ravens and the widow. And what did Elijah do? He arose and went to Zarephath! This is mature faith. Taking the word of God as authoritative and right. Staking your very life and existence upon this word in such a way that propels obedience even if that obedience flies in the face of logic.
- vi. This is the kind of faith that must be growing in your life. As you grow into full and mature manhood in Christ, this is the kind of faith that will be a trademark of your existence. You will have this willingness to obey God even when obedience to God flies in the face of all logic. You see, many of the things we are called to be and do in the Word of God fly in the face of the logic of our sinful hearts. I mean really, how could it possibly be best to obey and honor dad and mom when they seem so out of touch with my life? How could it possibly be best to slow down and develop a fervent prayer life when there are so many things that need to get done? How could it possibly be best to love this person who hates me and overcome their evil with good? How could it possibly be best to love my wife like I love myself? How could it possibly be best to follow the leadership of my husband like the church is to follow the leadership of Christ? How could it possibly be best to stand for what is right in the board room of my company when it might cost me my job? You see, so often our logic gets in the way of our obedience because we think we know better than God. Elijah puts on display for us a mature faith in God that did according to His Word because he trusted that what God said was best.

- vii. This firm stance upon the Word of God in Elijah's life is seen by his acts of obedience and also in his words of direction to the widow in verses 13-14. He has just told her to bake him a little cake of her remaining meager supply and bring it to him before she feeds herself and her son. This call to obey the word of the Lord again flies in the face of logic. This is not how the jigsaw goes together. You don't ask a widowed mother who is about to fix a final meal for her family to give up her food to a well-fed man all in the name of hospitality. Being hospitable is all well and good in the midst of plenty, but when there is a drought and you are a widow, the rules would seem to change. I can't imagine being confronted with these circumstances and then obeying the word of the Lord to the extent that Elijah does. He has been told by God to go to Zarephath and that a widow there will be directed by God to feed him. But when the widow tells you that she is collecting sticks to go make her last meal with her last little bit of provision, would you have the faith to say to this widow to go and make a little cake for you first? Wouldn't it seem more logical to think that you must have found the wrong widow? But Elijah did what he was told because Elijah believed the word of the Lord. He tells her to not be afraid because the Lord has made it clear through this word to the prophet that this jar of flour and jug of oil shall not be spent or emptied until the Lord sends rain upon the land. In other words, Elijah's faith is centered upon the word of the Lord. He can tell a widow to do this because he has full confidence in what God has said. Even though it doesn't seem logical to give up your remaining provisions to feed a stranger, God has said that if you act in obedience in this way then your jug and jar will not go empty. Elijah was bold in his obedience to the word of the Lord because he had full confidence in that very word. In other words, he had a very mature faith.
- viii. This promise from the Lord in both Elijah's case and in the widow's case was a promise of daily provision. But this promise of daily provision is not the point of the passage. We cannot simply carry over from this text the provision of the Lord for these daily needs and all of a sudden make it normative for everyday life in the 21st Century. The main reason we can't do that is because that is not what the text is calling us to learn from the passage. The point is not to simply be encouraged to trust God in our times of great need and depend on him to supply for the jar and the jug. The point is to see that God miraculously proves himself to be a God of His Word and therefore worthy of our trust. You see we are always more prone to identify ourselves with the Elijah's and the widow's because it ends well for them. But what about all of the other faithful worshipers of Jehovah that didn't get met with unending flour and oil? God's prophet was the recipient of special care through the raven and the widow while God's remnant people in Israel were suffering from the ravages of drought. This passage is not meant to offer you an escape clause from starvation and other disasters that frequent our world because that is not the point of the text.
- ix. The other reason we can't do this is because we know that it doesn't always work. Christians die from starvation just like anyone else does – whether it was ancient Israel or modern day Sudan. Christians don't get a pass just because they believe in God. This means then that from experience we know this passage cannot be teaching something that isn't true. What we can know from this account is that God was providing for Elijah because God had a specific task for Elijah to accomplish. Therefore, we can know that as long as God has work to do through us we can be guaranteed of his provision. We are invincible from the things that might kill us until we have accomplished those good

works that have been foreordained for us to accomplish. I say this, just to say that we must be careful how we apply the teachings of a narrative story like this. What we most certainly must see is that Elijah was a man of deep and mature faith in God as it was seen in his very direct acts of obedience to God's Word.

c. He prayed fervently – James 5:16-18

- i. We also see this mature faith in the fact that Elijah prayed fervently. The apostle James actually uses this very incident from Elijah's life to make a point about how we should be praying. In James 5 he says:
 1. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.
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 5:16-18 ESV)
- ii. James is calling the New Testament church to pray because the prayers of righteous people like Elijah have great effect. Elijah's prayer is explicitly cited as he prayed that it might not rain and for three and ½ years it didn't rain. Then he prayed for it to rain and it rained. So James' use of Elijah sheds some light on our passage. We are told in James that it didn't rain on the earth as a result of the prayer of this righteous man, Elijah. Now, have you ever prayed for it to not rain? Better yet, have you ever prayed for a drought?
- iii. Why would someone do this? Why would Elijah do this? Well, remember the context of the situation. Elijah is an Israelite. His land and his people are being led by an idolatrous and wicked king who is making Baal the god of the land instead of Jehovah. This is a desperate situation that requires desperate measures. The people that God has called by His name are now living in the land that God promised and they are worshiping another god who is really no god at all. We are told in chapter 19 that Elijah "has been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts." In other words, Elijah's righteous soul is vexed by the idolatrous and wicked ways of his own people. So much so that he can't just sit around and do nothing. He must act. So what does he do? He prays!
- iv. And he prays in accordance with God's very own word. You see God had spoken specifically to what would happen when his people did the very thing they were now doing. He said in Deuteronomy 11:
 1. ¹⁶ Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; ¹⁷ then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (Deut. 11:16-17 ESV)
- v. This promise of judgment from God propelled Elijah to pray for this judgment to come. Now, it is no light matter to pray for judgment of this magnitude on the people of God. But Elijah prayed this way because if God didn't act according to how he said he was going to act then God would be a liar. Elijah also knew that God was a loving and good God who would only act in the ways that were best for His people. He knew that drought in the face of rampant idolatry was God's good and well-designed means to regain his people's attention. Elijah was convinced that hearts full of worship of the right God was more important than belly's full of food that worshiped a false god. And so he prayed that God would stop the rain. This is mature faith in God. Praying for God to act

so that his people are awakened from their spiritual stupor, no matter how painful that awakening might be, is a prayer of one who is mature in faith in God. Praying for God to act according to His revealed word is a prayer of one who is mature in faith. Knowing the Scriptures enough to know how to pray – to go beyond the “Lord bless this person” and “Lord be with this person” kind of praying – is a pray of mature faith.

- vi. But this isn't the only instance of fervent prayer that we see in Elijah's life. In verses 17-24 he is confronted with the dead son of this widow of Zarephath. The widow had the token of life on her shelf, and the reality of death in her arms. All of her affections were wrapped around this little boy. Her life was found in his life, and here he lay dead in her arms. How could God have done this? So she turns to the prophet of the God who had given her life sustaining provision and asks him that very question. Instead of responding with some theological sermon explaining the providence of God who can take away whatever he has given, Elijah takes the boys in his arms, go to his upper chamber and prays. This man of God is fraught with the same questions of the widow. Not because he has lost faith in God but because God's providence doesn't make sense to him either. And then he asks for something that has never been done before. He asks for Yahweh God to raise this boy from the dead. This is the first account in Scripture of anyone being resurrected from the dead. Elijah himself had never seen it done, but he is bold enough to ask for it to happen. And in verse 22 we are told that the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah and raised the child to life. Elijah had a mature faith that asked for something he had never seen in the face of a Providence that he didn't understand.
- vii. Again, we must be careful with our application of this text. We do not command God's all-powerful hand with our prayers. We do not tell God what to do. God also will not act out of character. So, he had said that he would withhold rain if idolatry was rampant and so we can be guaranteed that he would have done this, and yet Elijah prayed. This is how it works. God works within his world and within his sovereign will in response to the prayers of his people. There is mystery in how this all works out, but there is no mystery in our responsibility. We are to pray, believing that God will respond. This is what Elijah did. He was more concerned about right worship than about enough provision, so he prayed. He was concerned about God's reputation in Zarephath, so he prayed. This is what mature faith does – it prays fervently.
- viii. This may be one of the greatest weaknesses of the modern Christian, and therefore of the modern church. We want what we want and we want it now. We don't have time to pray because we don't have time to wait. We have lost our sense of dependence upon God to seek him through prayer. Why is it that our church's weekly gathering that is focused on praying together is the least attended gathering? Is this not a sign of self-dependence rather than our God-dependence? Is this not a sign of our immature faith? You see Elijah puts on display a man of mature faith and one of the hallmarks of this faith was fervent prayer. Mature faith displays an actual dependence upon God that is shown through fervent prayer rather than just the token allegiance that so often dominates our lives.

II. The Widow was a woman of Infant Faith

- a. We can also learn about faith through the life of the widow. There is an obvious progression in the text that can be seen through the widow's own words. When she is first confronted with Yahweh's prophet telling her to do the unthinkable, she responds with words of “As the Lord your God lives.” There is some way in which she knows that Elijah is Yahweh's prophet, and at

that point she is at least willing to admit that this Yahweh God lives. Unlike her god, Baal, who had obviously submitted to the Mot, the god of death, for several years at this point, she admitted that Elijah's God was alive. She is obviously willing to try another option at this point because Baal is obviously not coming through in the clutch.

- b. Then this faith dramatically progresses as she sees Yahweh God provide her with her daily need of flour and oil in miraculous fashion. This Yahweh God is quickly rising to the top over all of her other gods. He has proven himself to her to be the supreme god. But then her son dies, and the small faith that she had is shattered by adverse circumstances. How could this living God do such a thing to her? She no longer cared if she had daily provision because her son was dead and Yahweh was to blame. But then Yahweh did something that she had never even heard of Baal doing. Yahweh brought life back to her dead son. He who had no more breath, was given life again, and Yahweh was to praise! And what is the response of the widow in verse 24?
 - i. Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.
- c. In the face of inescapable evidence her heart yielded true faith. She now knew that Elijah was God's prophet, which meant that she knew that Yahweh was the one true God, and that he had the truth as it was spoken from Elijah's mouth. We are told in Hebrews 11:35 that "women received back their dead by resurrection." This widow in 1 Kings 17 is certainly one of those who knew that her god had no answer for her dead son, but knew that Yahweh did. As she placed the lifeless corpse into the arms of the prophet she believed that this God who lived could indeed bring life back to her son, and indeed he did.
- d. This all happened because God was at work in her life. We are told at the beginning of the story, back in verse 8, that God had commanded a widow in Zarephath to feed Elijah. This is not telling us that the widow now became Yahweh's robot, but rather that the widow was the recipient of God's sovereign grace. He was choosing to work in her life specifically to draw her to himself. This was so that his prophet could be physically saved, but this was also so that she could believe upon the one true God in faith.
- e. This is what God does. He often works in the midst of tragedy and trouble to draw hearts to faith in Him. Maybe you are here this morning and you have some of these infant signs of faith. Maybe you know a lot about this God that all of these people are here to worship. Or maybe you have heard the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as your only hope for salvation, but you have yet to put your heart's trust in Jesus as your only hope for salvation from your sins. Is God also allowing some difficult things into your life? Things similar to drought, uncertain future, and death? Maybe God is at work in your life like he was in the life of this widow. Maybe he is calling you to faith in Him.
- f. This widow expressed faith in the wake of her resurrected son. There is a greater resurrected Son, to which this resurrection points. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died the death that we deserved to die, only to be resurrected from the grave. Jesus' resurrection should provoke in your heart the same response that the widow's son's resurrection provoked in her heart – faith in God. He has spoken – not just through Elijah – but in these latter days through sending The Word – His Son, Jesus. This Word is true. He is the life-giving God, and you must put your faith singularly in Him.

III. God was the Only God Worthy of Trust

- a. Speaking of God, the whole point of this narrative is to point your heart and mind to Yahweh God. These 24 verses are God 101, because in them we see many of the essential character qualities that make Yahweh God who he is.

- i. He is the Creator and therefore Sustainer of his creation. Therefore he can command the wind and the rain, and he can turn on and turn off the Heavenly sprinkler system because he made it. He owns the ravens and can command their every move to be instruments of his provision. He is the giver and taker of life. As Job says, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”
- ii. Yahweh God is also holy. He hates sin and separates himself from it. He brings righteous judgment upon those who persist in sinful ways.
- iii. He is the completely Sovereign God. He is in control of all things, and though this sovereignty can often be confusing or perplexing, it is never wrong or bad.
- iv. Yahweh God is also a merciful God. He has a plan to spare his prophet so that he can accomplish his purpose and so he mercifully provides for his daily need. He even determines to use a widow who is outside of his people to feed his prophet, and in so doing he brings to her a true knowledge of God and faith in Him. God was merciful to sovereignly choose to bring the knowledge of himself to those outside of Israel. In fact, this is yet another thing we can learn about God. When his own people reject Him, he expands his work beyond them and rescues those from other peoples and nations. In doing this we see his broad mercy and love.
- v. We also see that Yahweh is a God who is personal. He reveals himself to his people, namely Elijah in this chapter. And he listens to His people as they request His work in the world. God is a personal God.
- vi. But the main emphasis of this first chapter of Elijah’s life is to show us that there is only one God who gives life. While Baal may have had the supposed power to command the rain, Yahweh had the actual power. While Baal had to supposedly submit to Mot every dry season and endure death until the rainy season, Mot had no authority over Yahweh. In fact, Yahweh has sent his own prophet into the heart of Baal country and provided miraculously for him there simply to prove that he is the one true God who has the power to give and sustain life. He also allowed the widow’s son to die to show that even in this region of the world, where supposedly powerful gods had rule over one another, Yahweh made clear that no one had rule over him, not even the god of death. Yahweh God alone is the life-giving and life-sustaining God.
- vii. All of this stands in stark contrast to the worship of Baal that has infiltrated God’s very own people. How silly of them to worship a god who doesn’t even exist and has no power over the wind and rain. How ridiculous to place hope in a god who isn’t even there while your heart rejects the one true God who has clearly made known to you that he exists.
- viii. You see, at the outset a drought looks pretty harsh – especially a 3 ½ year drought in an agrarian society. But this drought was an act of God’s merciful intervention in the lives of his people. He proved himself to be true to his word. He said he would intervene with drought if they worshiped the gods of pagan lands, and so here in chapter 17 he does just that. This drought is the proof in the pudding. Yahweh God is true to His Word!

Conclusion: So what have you done with this one true God? He has made himself unmistakably known to ancient Israel and to the widow of Zarephath and to you and me. There is no other God. He is not one among many who happened to win the day on 1 Kings 17. He is the only true God.

- Are you like the Israelites who bowed down to other gods even though they were presented with undeniable proof of the one true God? Then this passage calls you to repent and believe and follow Him alone.
- Are you sensing the work of God in your life like the widow of Zarephath? Are you on the verge of faith, but haven't yet staked your life solely upon God and His Word? Then this passage calls you to this life-staking kind of faith? Like the widow in the presence of her resurrected son, you must profess faith in God alone in the presence of His Risen Son.
- Are you a maturing Christian seeking to grow in faith? Then turn your eyes to Elijah and observe his life. James told us that he is a man with a nature like ours. In other words, he is flesh and blood just like us and so the faith that we see in Elijah can be a faith that we can develop by God's grace in our own lives. What does this kind of mature faith look like? Well, it stakes all upon the veracity of God's Word. Though at times his word may not make logical sense to our finite minds, a mature faith beckons us to obey this word. This mature faith also looks like a life of fervent prayer. Our increasing awareness of the idolatry that surrounds us should have one effect upon us – it should drive us to fervent prayer. That tug in our heart to abandon the one true God and worship an idol should have one effect upon us – it should drive us to fervent prayer. This passage calls you as a follower of Christ to develop mature faith in the only God who is worthy of your trust. Let's pray!

Benediction:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

² May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

(2Pe 1:1-2 ESV)