

## Provided by Choice

### 1 Kings 17:1-6 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> 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.” <sup>2</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: <sup>3</sup> “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. <sup>4</sup> You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.” <sup>5</sup> So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. <sup>6</sup> The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

The prophet Elijah bursts on to the scene with our Bible reading today! This is his very first appearance, Elijah #1 for comic book fans. 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.” (verse 1) Elijah would go on to raise a boy back from the dead, confront and vanquish over 800 false prophets of the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah after a conflict on the top of Mount Carmel, and, in the end, be carried into heaven without dying by means of a whirlwind accompanied by chariots and horses of fire! So, it makes sense to have Elijah appear the way he does with the message he does. He comes as a man of action, as a man who stands to serve the LORD, announcing a drought that would last 3 ½ years.

The LORD had foretold that this would happen even before Elijah, some 500 years prior in the days of Moses. “Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 11:16-17) The Israelites had gone astray. Wicked King Ahab and his Queen Jezebel “set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. [They] also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.” (1 Kings 16:32-33)

By withholding the rain and thus the crops, the LORD was giving direct judgment on Baal and Asherah. They were fertility gods, and the true God took away their fertility. They were completely powerless against God. This serves them right! God had clearly foretold that if they went and served other gods, then he would withhold the rain and the food from them. They got what they deserved!

At the same time, though, Elijah was provided for. The LORD told him to “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.” (verses 3-4) Elijah obeyed and did just that and the LORD provided for him naturally from the brook and miraculously by the ravens. It must have been because he was such a holy and righteous man that the LORD provided for him. The believers prosper because they’re good and unbelievers don’t because they’re bad. It’s easy to point the finger and say that people should suffer for being bad, but is it so easy to turn that pointing back around to yourself?

We are experiencing a pandemic right now and part of us wants to pin the blame somewhere. It was China for not reporting it early enough and for letting it out! It’s the World Health Organization’s or CDC’s fault for not being on top of it. It’s the governor’s fault for not issuing better preventative measures. It’s that person who just had to travel and bring it back and spread it to their family. It’s that person without the facemask at Lowe’s fault. I’m clean. I’m healthy. I haven’t had it. It’s everyone out there who’s to blame. It’s those other sinners! They’re the enemy! Blaming someone else makes us feel better, gives us a place to direct our indignation.

Wait a minute. We want to say that Israel deserved this drought that Elijah prophesied because they all went astray. They built a temple for Baal and put up an Asherah pole. This clearly was against God’s commandments. God had threatened punishment for breaking these. They truly deserved this – all of them. But later in Elijah’s ministry (in next week’s Bible reading), we learn along with Elijah that the LORD has reserved “seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19:18) There were faithful believers still living in idol infested Israel. Did they deserve the drought? Did they deserve to suffer along with the rest of their nation? Why was Elijah provided for and not these 7,000 faithful believers? Why did they have to suffer through this drought brought on by their wicked King Ahab?

A thought has wormed its way into our thinking: “All blessings from God are predicated upon your obedience to God’s law.” In other words, if I am doing good and living right by God’s commands, then my life will be full of good things, of blessings, of happiness, and all that my heart desires. I will have a good life if I just obey God’s commands. This then leads us to think that the only reason that the LORD took care of Elijah during this drought was because Elijah was such a good and faithful prophet. He earned to be taken

care of, to be blessed. And then we take the converse to be true that if things are going bad in my life or in someone else's life, then it's because I'm not doing a good enough job of obeying God and that I need to work harder.

But why really did the LORD take care of Elijah while the 7,000 believers in Israel had to suffer through the drought? If we say that all blessings from God are predicated on our obedience to his laws, why are any of us given the gift of life before we have even had a chance to do anything to earn that blessing? Why are we given parents or guardians who provide for our needs before we have done anything to earn that? Yet God blesses us with these things. This idea that I have to obey God's laws in order to receive something good from him doesn't work in real life.

When I consider myself spiritually, I want to think that I'm a pretty good guy. I don't hit people. I rarely yell. I try not to lie. I work hard. I don't get drunk or do illegal drugs. I remain committed to my wife and our marriage. But there is a war inside of me everyday that I'm trying to hide from everyone else. I know what the right things are to do but so often I have thoughts and urges to do the complete opposite. I want to yell at someone, hit them, put them in their place. I want to be mean. I don't want to always work hard. I get lustful thoughts. And I don't want to be honest with all of you about these things that war inside of me; I'd rather you just think that I am such a good Christian that I don't have a problem with any of these things and am just pure and holy without any temptations or spiritual struggles because I work so hard at it. My sinful nature is a part of me, and I can't get rid of it. I deserve a drought, a pandemic. I don't deserve anything good, let alone any blessings.

Why, then, does the LORD provide me with anything good? Why does he provide me with good while other Christians who are trying so hard to live by God's commands don't receive the same things? Why did Jesus feed just those 5,000+ and not everyone else in the world, or at least all believers in the world? Why does Elijah get to hide out by a brook for a continual supply of water and not even have to get his own food because the ravens brought him meat and bread every morning and every night?

The answer is in our second Bible reading today from Ephesians chapter 1. God "chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will...which he has freely given us in [Christ]." (Ephesians 1:4-6) Our biggest and most important blessings, which is to be made right with God, to be made holy and blameless, to have all our sins taken away and clothed with Christ's perfection, to be adopted into God's family, to belong to him – none of these are based on our obedience to him. They are freely given. It's God's choice to provide these things for us. It's God's choice to provide what we need also for our daily life – our health, our food and drink, our house, our job, all of that. All blessings are not predicated on my obedience to God's law. Yes, God does promise good things when we obey his laws, but not all the time. Sometimes we can obey him and still suffer, like those 7,000 believers going through the drought. We are provided for by God's free choice, not influence from us at all.

So, what does this mean if I am blessed, like Elijah was with food and drink everyday, and have so many good things going on in my life and that I know that I am well taken care of? It means God chose to do this for you freely out of his love for you, not because you earned or deserved it. What does it mean if I have to suffer through this pandemic, through getting sick, through losing a job, through having day to day difficulties in making ends meet, in dealing with death? Does this mean that I am the really bad sinner who deserves all this? Not necessarily. But God does promise to work all things for your good, including these awful things. Not knowing all things like God, we use this time like with the 7,000 believers who didn't bow down to Baal, a time to re-examine our lives, to ask if I stand right with God.

And when I ask that question, I can immediately answer that since God freely chose me in Christ, I am right with him. God has chosen to love me. God has chosen to provide a perfect substitute for me, someone who fought temptation and won. God has chosen to make me holy and blameless in his sight, even though the war rages inside of me. He freely chose to make me a place with him, to provide for me. God chose to bless me often in spite of my obedience. He does not take those things away from me when I go through bad times, times of suffering. Instead, he holds these truths before my eyes to get me through the difficult times knowing that I am unconditionally loved by God's free choice.

Being freely chosen by God, I look to him to provide for me, even when there's a drought, even when there's a pandemic. When I remember God's choice to love me and make me holy, I know that blessings are not being withheld because of my disobedience. In Christ, all of that is freely taken care of. He will work all things for my good. So, I listen to the word of the LORD like Elijah. I trust him to provide by his choice, not my efforts. Amen.