

# OpenTheo

## October 3rd: 1 Kings 17 & 1 Peter 1:22–2:10

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Elijah and the drought. Living stones in a spiritual house.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

1 Kings 17—Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab, As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word. And the word of the Lord came to him, Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.

So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him, Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.

So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, Bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink.

And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand. And she said, As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.

And Elijah said to her, Do not fear. Go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it, and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.

For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth. And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days.

The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah. After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.

And she 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. And he said to her, Give me your son. And he took him from her arms, and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed.

And he cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son? Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again. And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.

And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, See, your son lives. And 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 true.

In 1 Kings chapter 17 we are introduced to the character of Elijah who bursts suddenly into the narrative in a very unexpected way. Elijah and his successor Elisha are at the heart of the books of the kings and their joint mission is very important for understanding the destiny of the kingdom and also for considering something about the character of prophecy. Elijah begins by announcing a drought.

The interesting thing here is that there is no mention of the word of the Lord coming to him. Rather Elijah himself swears by the Lord that there will be no rain in the next few years except by his, Elijah's word. Looking closely it seems that Elijah is taking

something of an initiative here.

This isn't just God's word that has come to him. Rather the drought is initiated by Elijah's own zeal. Of course this should not be understood as Elijah bringing anything about by his own power.

It is God who shuts up the heavens and prevents the rain so that there is the drought. However God seems to do this in response to the prayer of Elijah. James chapter 5 verses 17 to 18 make this more explicit.

In Elijah then we see something of the initiative that the faithful prophet can exert. In his zeal and his fervency the faithful prophet Elijah can call God to act and God acts. In bringing a drought God is fulfilling his curse that he gives in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 22 to 24.

The power of a prophet like Elijah seems to involve acting with a certain initiative given by the spirit of God. This is not a blank check of course. But the prophet is entrusted with divine power to act on God's behalf.

Why a drought? It seems to me that the answer to this is found in the fact that Baal was among other things the God of the rain. And so the judgment of no rain is a judgment not just upon Israel for its unfaithfulness but a judgment upon Baal the rain god. Both the judgment and Elijah himself are reminiscent of the exodus and of Moses.

Now of course since Elijah is not merely a messenger but one who initiates this judgment he becomes public enemy number one. Ahab the king of Israel will want to seek him out and destroy him. And so according to the commandment of the Lord he flees to the brook Cherith east of the Jordan where he will be sustained by the Lord for a long period of time.

He is fed by ravens. This is a miraculous provision that shows God's power over birds and animals. They would not usually provide for a human being in that sort of way.

And during this period of time Elijah is cut off from the rest of the land. He's cocooned as it were within this one particular wadi. While the rest of the nation is desperately searching for this prophet that brought this judgment upon them he is safe and secure within this bubble of protection.

Now if we're attentive we should notice something here. What other story in scripture do we associate with God's power over animals and birds? What other story in scripture might we think of when we think about ravens coming to a person? What other story involves a great judgment involving rain or the lack of it? It's the story of Noah. Noah when the judgment comes upon the whole earth is saved within his cocoon, his bubble of the ark.

And the same thing happens in the story of Elijah. Elijah is saved from the drought within the cocoon or the bubble of the brook Cherith. In the story of Noah he sent out a raven but it just flew round and round because it found nowhere to rest because the land had not yet dried up.

In this story the ravens keep coming back until the water dries up. Rabbi David Foreman who points out a number of these things also observes that Tishbe, the place that Elijah comes from, is the consonants used for the word in Genesis 8 verse 7 which refers to the drying up of the land, the verse concerning the raven. In the case of Tishbe those consonants are found in reverse order.

The ravens coming in the morning and in the evening might remind us of the morning and evening sacrifices. The ravens might also make us think of the Gentiles. The raven is an unclean bird but it is the means of feeding and sustaining Elijah in the wilderness.

As a prophet much of Elijah's ministry will be either in the wilderness or in Gentile lands. Like Moses he is someone who has his ministry outside of the land or on the borders of the land. He never fully enters in.

When the brook dries up the Lord sends him to Zarephath, a place of Sidon. When he arrives in Zarephath he meets a widow who is gathering sticks and he asks for water and he asks for a morsel of bread from her. In many respects he is asking her to play the role of the ravens, what they have done for him in Cherith he wants her to do for him in Zarephath.

But the woman herself is in dire straits. She and her son are on their last rations and about to die. Nonetheless Elijah still asks her to prepare a little cake for him.

As she gives the first fruits of her last remaining flour and oil to him she and her son will be saved. If God has formed a bubble of protection or cocoon around Elijah by serving him, by playing the role of the raven, the woman and her son will be preserved. And they are preserved for many days.

The jar of oil does not run out and the flour does not run out. However the son of the woman becomes ill. While the jar of oil is not running out and the flour is not running out, his spirit runs out.

There is no breath left in him. Rabbi David Foreman compares this to the raven or the dove that might be going round and round and without anywhere to land running out of strength. And the widow speaks in an accusatory way to Elijah.

What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and cause the death of my son. The cocoon belongs to Elijah, not to the widow and her son. They are, as it were, clinging on outside, being preserved as long as they are serving Elijah.

But they are not being preserved in quite the same way as Elijah is. Elijah takes the son of the woman and he takes the son into his own place, into his own cocoon. And he identifies with the son in a powerful way.

He lays the son upon his own bed. He cries out to the Lord for the life of the son, praying this time not for the judgment upon a people but for deliverance of someone. And he stretches himself out upon the child three times, his body pressed against the body of the child so that the child might be identified with him.

So that the protection that he enjoys might extend to that child also. And the Lord responds to the fervent prayer of Elijah and the child is raised up. He then takes the child from the upper chamber of the house and delivers him to his mother, declaring that he lives.

And the woman's response is perhaps a bit surprising. Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. Elijah taking the young child into the upper room is like Noah taking the dove into the ark.

And as he takes that young child down to his mother, it is a sign of the end of the judgment. When the dove could leave the ark and survive outside of the ark, it was the great sign that the world was being restored. And a similar thing is happening here.

Rain is going to come in the next chapter. In a couple of verses time, Elijah is going to be sent on a mission to proclaim it. The prophet who had been kept in a miraculous cocoon of life while there was death all around is now spreading life out.

And there is hope for a new beginning. A question to consider. What lessons might the Lord have been teaching Elijah through these experiences? 1 Peter 1, verse 22 to chapter 2, verse 10.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. For all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to Him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and

precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. So the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. There is a strong theme of Christian initiation throughout the passage that begins at the end of 1 Peter 1. A few commentators have gone so far as to claim that this is a baptismal liturgy and that the baptism occurs between verses 21 and 22 of chapter 1. This is highly speculative and I think unlikely, but Peter does exhibit a peculiar attention to the beginnings of Christian life. He starts off by speaking about coming to Christ in an obedient response to the summons of the gospel.

This leads to purification of the soul. It leads into the life of a new family, where brotherly love should be the manner of our behaviour. Our hearts have been purified so that we might love each other.

There is likely here an allusion to the process of Christian initiation. We receive the gospel, we confess the faith, we are baptised into Christ's body, where we are united with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And Peter is calling his hearers to live out this new life that they have been brought into to the full.

And the focus on loving our brothers and sisters is really pronounced. This love must be sincere, it must be unfeigned, it must be true, and it must be earnest. A deep and a fervent love for other people in Christ.

The process being described is our being born again, we're rising to a new life, and the word of God is the means by which this happens. This word is an incorruptible or imperishable seed. It endures, it won't perish or die.

It is this word by which we were called. It is this word that gave us new spiritual life. It is this word with which we were sealed in baptism.

It is this word that we grow in and from. And to underline the point, Peter quotes from Isaiah 40, verses 6 and 8. This is a powerful passage about the good news of God's reign. In verses 1-9 we read, Surely the people are grass, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good news, lift it up, fear not, say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. As with the rest of the New Testament authors, when Peter quotes

from the Old Testament, he typically wants us to think about the surrounding context of the quote.

And here that context is the context of the Gospel message itself. God's salvation coming, God being established as King, His righteousness being worked out in history. And the powerful word by which this prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled is the means by which they have been brought into the body of Christ.

This is the word that is at work in them. Coming to Christ and the truth entails putting away all these other things that are against the truth. Deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander.

There must be a purging, a putting off, a clearing out of all those things that are contrary to Christ. As we take Christ on, as we clothe ourselves with Christ, all other things that are contrary to Him must be removed. And in the place of this deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander, we must cultivate a hunger for the purity of the truth of Christ.

Peter compares it to newborn infants desiring milk from their mothers. And it seems here that he is addressing this to infants in the faith. These are people who have just been born again, just been baptised.

They've tasted something of the great goodness of God. They've been brought into the body of Christ. And now they are being encouraged to grow up into salvation through constantly feeding on the truth.

Growing up into salvation means that this is an ongoing matter of life. The moment of being born again is not the finish line, it's the starting line. It's the place where our new life in Christ begins.

And we grow and we develop and we persevere in this life to enter into the full possession of the salvation that God has prepared for us. He appeals to the fact that they already have some taste of the goodness of God. And that taste should give them an appetite for more.

If you know that God is good, then seek more and more goodness from Him. He won't disappoint you. Becoming a Christian involves coming to Christ, the living stone rejected by man but chosen by God.

But this is necessarily something that makes us part of a body too. We are being built up into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. In Ephesians 2, verses 19-22, Paul speaks about this.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being

joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Peter himself would have known something about this, this coming to Christ as a living stone, as living stones ourselves. His own name Peter was given to him by Christ, speaking about the fact that he was a stone or a rock.

And in that context of Matthew 16, verse 18, Christ spoke about building his church, an image that mixes together a community, an assembly of people and a building. It seems very appropriate that Peter brings together those two images here. Christ described himself in John chapter 2 as the temple, and we are described in him as temples of the living God, each one of us individually and also all of us corporately.

The purpose of the church is to be this spiritual body, this living temple. We might think about the events of the day of Pentecost, where like the lampstand of the temple or the tabernacle, the disciples are lit with the living flame of the Spirit. The Spirit descends into their midst as the Spirit descended upon the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 40, or upon Solomon's temple in 1 Kings chapter 8. We are a new temple, we are a new building of God that is being established, formed by people.

And the chief purpose of the church is to offer spiritual sacrifices. The temple was there as a means of sacrifice, as was the tabernacle. But now the sacrifices are performed by persons.

The true purpose of sacrifice was always spiritual sacrifice, the offering up of the human spirit in prayer and in worship and in self-dedication. The New Testament speaks about this in a number of different places. We offer the fruit of our lips in worship.

We offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. We are washed as sacrifices in baptism. Our bodies presented to him for his service.

Our limbs and organs, like those limbs and organs of the sacrifices of the animals that were separated and placed upon the altar, our limbs and organs are presented to God for his worship and his service. Our resources are another form of sacrifice. Our praise and our prayers are also forms of sacrifice.

The primary purpose of the church, as we see in these verses, is a Godward one. Some people have said that the church primarily exists for the sake of outsiders, as if its primary purpose was mission and evangelism. That is not the case.

The primary purpose of the church is the purpose of a temple. We are to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Our purpose, primarily, is a Godward one.

And these sacrifices are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. He is the one who has provided a living way through his sacrifice. All of our sacrifices are a participation and on the basis of his sacrifice.



Without the way and the acceptance that he has won for us with God, we could never approach. Peter goes on to develop his position from Old Testament quotes, developing and exploring the meaning of the term stone. Jesus did something similar to this in Matthew chapter 21 verses 42 to 44.

Jesus said to them, Have you not read in the scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people producing its fruits.

And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. Here Peter quotes from Isaiah chapter 28 verse 16, Psalm 118 verse 22 and Isaiah chapter 8 verse 14, all of which help to develop his point about Christ as the cornerstone. God is building a new temple in Zion, the mount of his habitation.

He has placed this special dress stone, this particular stone of great beauty and value, and it is the cornerstone of this grand new edifice. Everything else is going to be built around and according to this stone. And for those who believe, they will not be put to shame.

They will not be condemned, but will be vindicated on the day of testing. However, for those who reject, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Their whole building project has been rejected.

The stone, or in the parable of the wicked vinedressers, the sun that they have rejected, will become the one that everything else is built around. What's more, that stone will become a cause of stumbling, a rock of offence. The stone is a cause of division.

For some it leads to their glorification and building up, and for many others it leads to their destruction. The dividing factor, once again, is the word. Their disobedience of the word is something that they were destined to do.

And God's placing of this stone in Zion is on the one hand a means of judgement upon those who reject, and on the other hand a means of blessing to those who accept. People's destinies will be determined according to how they respond to this stone. There is a contrast drawn now between those who disbelieve and those who accept Christ.

Here Peter draws once again upon Old Testament Scripture, Exodus 19, verses 5-6, in the context of Sinai, where God calls his people to the mountain and tells them what he will do with them. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And then in Isaiah chapter 43, verses 20-21, These sorts of statements were used of Israel in the Old Testament.

And here the language that was applied to Israel in the Old Testament is applied to the people in the church, Jews and Gentiles alike. Not only is the church a new temple, the church is a royal priesthood, it's a holy nation, it's a people of God's special possession, God's name is placed upon us. And we have a priestly purpose, but also a heralding purpose.

We proclaim the excellencies of God to the wider world. While our primary purpose is to offer spiritual sacrifices, we are also to be a light on the hill, to be those who bring light to the surrounding world. We have been called out of darkness into God's marvellous light for this purpose.

Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. And here he is referring to Hosea chapter 1-2.

There the prophets spoke about disowned people that God was receiving back. And here Peter speaks not only about Jews who are forgiven, but about Gentiles who were never a people at all, who were brought into the body of Christ and in him become a new people. The language here might also make us think about creation, called from darkness into light.

Once not a people, but now a people, God has created something out of nothing. God has brought light into the darkness. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

A question to consider, how in our presentations of the gospel could we speak about the church in a way that gives it the same centrality and importance to the message of the faith as Peter gives it here.