

# When The Creek Runs Dry

Oct 6, 2019

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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So holy spirit, ask in these next few minutes as we prepare to come to your table that you would use your words to shepherd us into being the people that you want us to be. We pray this in your name. Jesus. Amen.

Well, hello to all of you. Hello to those of you at home, watching at home. One of the questions, the story that we just read about Elijah, one of the questions it raises is how do we thrive? How do we prosper? How do we live the big life that God wants to give us? When things are going great and when things are not going so great, and you see both in this story, right. There's a drought in Israel and God sends the prophet Elijah to a brook where he can get water. So yay, things are great, but then the brook dries up so not so great. Not so great, right.

And just parenthetically, the translation uses the word brook, but I am from Eastern Washington, so I know that the correct word is creek. Okay. Or, crick, as my grandmother used to say. So, and this is just an errant grammatical truth. Don't argue with me. I used to teach English. The sooner you city people learn to talk English, right, the better it's going to be. So how do you feel when your crick is full and when your crick is dry? I'll use creek from now on because it'll be distracting if I don't.

Because some of you right now, things are going awesome, right. Things are going well in your job, or in your family, or in your finances. Things are going great, right. Or, school, or sports. Things are going awesome for some of you, for others, you know, not so great, right. Things are kind of hard. Things are, your finances are drying up, or relationships are drying up, or your life feels boring. But here's the thing, if things are going great, God has more for you even more to help you thrive even more. And if things are not going great, God can also help you thrive even in the middle of that.

So how do we do that? Let me just kind of walk through this story almost verse at a time. And if you have a Bible, you can follow along I Kings 17 or you can follow along on the screen. I'll just kind of walk through verse-by-verse and I'm going to make a bunch of observations. Okay, and you just kind of take home with you the one that God kind of underlines for you. All right. Or, the one that annoys you the most, which may be God underlining something for you. It's going to be a potpourri of prescient Presbyterian points to pick from.

The background to this story is a guy named Ahab is King and he is Israel's worst king ever. Worst king ever. And he and his wife Jezebel worship the false God called Baal, who was the God of rain. In verse one, God sends the prophet Elijah to say to Ahab, "There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." What was Baal the God? Rain, so this is kind of, Elijah says, let's see who really controls things, God or Baal.

And then in verse three, God says to Elijah, "Leave here and hide in the Kerith Ravine. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food." Now, ravens is an interesting choice for God to have made because they're scavengers, right. They're kind of like vultures. They eat the carcass of dead things. One time, my wife and I were in Italy and we were in a restaurant where the menu was only in Italian. But rather than ask for a translation, we said, "Oh, let's just live dangerously and order something and see what we get."

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No, uh-uh (negative). They brought Christine, this plate filled with dead sea creatures. Their head still on, their eyes looking straight at up you, right. So to this day, we call it the plate of death. Ravens would generally bring you a plate of death, scavenger meat. However, this is a miracle. So I think we can assume that maybe it's good meat. They're not just bringing Elijah roadkill. Okay, it's good meat. And what this shows is that God, what God will use the most unlikely things to bless us. You would not think of ravens as blessing you. God often uses the most unlikely things, things we don't even want to happen sometimes, he will use those things to bless us and I'll give some examples in a minute.

The other interesting thing about this creek is it's name, Kerith, which means separated or cut off. See, God here is preparing Elijah to be a great prophet and in order to do that he needs to cut some things off of Elijah's life. He needs to cut Elijah off from some things. By this point, Elijah is well-known, he has access to the King and so God is kind of saying, "I've got to cut you off from the spotlight in order to prepare you to be the prophet I need you to be." Like God's saying, "I got to cut you off from some things. I got to work on you privately so you can be my person, publicly."

Sometimes in order for God to bless us, whether we're in good times or bad times, he's got to cut something out of our life. He's got to cut something off. Maybe it's an obsession with money, or our looks, or how popular we are, or our reputation, or an addiction. He's got to cut something out of our lives to bless us. What might God need to cut out of your life in order for you to thrive?

We're moving on in the story. Then it says in verse six, "The ravens brought Elijah bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook." So he's getting meat twice a day, and this shows that God's blessings are often very abundant because back then, nobody, not even the King got meat even once a day, let alone twice a day. So this is emphasizing God's abundance because here's the thing, God, don't command what God don't supply, okay. Remember, Eastern Washington, this is correct grammar, okay. God will not command us to do anything that he will not supply us to do. God says, give some of our money away. He'll meet our needs, he'll supply it. Maybe not our wants, but our needs. God says forgive his holy spirit will help us do that. God don't command what God don't supply.

Next verse, seven. "Sometime later, the brook dried up." Well, that sucks, right. The brook called cut off, got cut off. Because see, for a while, Elijah had a sweet deal going on, right. Everyone else is stressed out about the drought. They're looking for food, they're looking for water, right. But Elijah, the ravens are bringing in meat twice a day. He's got the brook to get water from. His Instagram post must have been so irritating, right. Like everyone's all stressed because of the drought and he's down by the creek taking selfies, right, just me chilling by the creek with this sweet steak the ravens brought me, right. Hashtag too blessed to be stressed, right.

And everyone else is like, "Stupid Elijah. I hate Elijah. Stupid Elijah." But then the creek dries up and you kind of got a wonder, did Elijah wonder, "Did I do something wrong? Did I screw up? Is God punishing me? Maybe not. Sometimes the creek just dries up. All right, last year was great at school, but not so much this year the creek dried up. The job used to be awesome, but now it's frustrating or boring. The creek dried out. You used to not worry, but now maybe you're afraid of things going on in our culture, or

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in our world and you feel fearful and you used to not worry, but now you do. The creek dried out, right. What do you do when the Creek dries up?"

Well, here's the thing. Just because you're out of provision does not mean that God is out of plans. Just because you're out of provision doesn't mean God's out of plans. God provided the creek. He can provide something else. Don't look to the provision, look to the provider. Just because you're out of provision, does not mean that God is out of plans.

Verse eight, "Then the word of the Lord came to him. Go at once to Zarephath and stay there." That first word, go. Go. Because see, here's the thing. Sometimes in order to thrive we have to do something different than we've been doing. Even if those things are good things, the creek and the ravens were good things, but sometimes to receive an even better blessing, a bigger blessing that God has for us, our creek has to dry up to move us on to something new. Maybe your creek is dried up and God is trying to move you on to something different.

The marriage used to be great, but now it's kind of dry. That doesn't necessarily mean divorce. Means it's time for new ways of relating, new ways of communicating with each other to make the marriage even better, better than it's ever been before. The brook was good, but that now there's a new thing to do and so God uses the dried up brook to get Elijah out of his comfort zone. Sometimes to get us out of our comfort zones, right, something has to dry up. Something in our life has to dry up, dry up satisfaction you get from being popular, or success, or money so that you can do something new.

See God has in store for Elijah and even greater miracle than these than these ravens. Elijah is just one chapter away from calling fire down from heaven and destroying the profits of Baal. It's this huge miracle, which he would have missed if he had stayed in his comfort zone by that stupid creek. Sometimes something has to dry up so that God can move us to something bigger. And here's the punchline of the whole sermon, something bigger that doesn't make sense at first, and this is where we middle-class Presbyterians, we don't do so well on this point, right. When it doesn't make sense, we don't like that. Uh-uh (negative), we don't like that at all. God says, "Go to Zarephath." Here's the thing about Zarephath. That's where all the Baal worshipers were. In other words, God sends Elijah into the territory of his enemies. It makes no sense at all.

This week I saw a post about how glue was invented because originally glue was made from the bones of hooves and dead horses. So this picture, right, "I bet if we melt down a horse, we could use it to stick stuff to other stuff." And then next, "Dude, is everything all right at home," right? Because who would ever think this up? Right? I know, let's melt down a horse, right? I mean, it makes no sense at all. It makes no sense at all, but here's the thing, it works. Some things don't make sense, but they work. Sometimes to thrive in good or bad times, God will call us to do something that makes no sense at all, but to receive the blessing we got to do it.

So God says to Elijah, "Go to where your enemies are." Then he says, "I've directed a widow there to supply you with food." That seems unlikely. Widows were usually poor. Elijah sees her and says, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar?" What don't we have in the land right now? Water. He's asking for the most scarce thing. And then she says, "I only have a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a

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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." Okay, Debbie Downer. Like, wow. Right.

But then Elijah prompted by God's spirit says the most counterintuitive thing at all. He says, "Do what I asked." He asked her to go make him some bread, right. "Do what I ask. 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." Yeah, right. Like that's going to work. It makes no sense at all. But she does it, she does it anyway. And the story ends. "There was food every day for Elijah and for the woman in her family for the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry." It make no sense at first, but it was the way to provision in a time of poverty, the way to life, in a time of death, the way to fullness in an empty season.

God don't command what God don't supply. God commanded her to give and he supplied her with enough. There is a pattern all throughout scripture. Trust, risk, receive. Trust, risk, receive. It may not be comfortable Elijah and the widow, they are not comfortable. It will not always be easy. It means that we have to daily trust in God, right. God didn't provide a Costco-size bag of flour and a Costco-size jug of oil. It was just enough for the day. And what we receive from God may not be prosperity the way that we define it, money, or success, or prestige, or things like that. Maybe what we receive is a deep joy that can't be stopped by anything. A sense of meaning and making a difference in peoples' lives. Good friends, great community, a more exciting life. Trust risk won't always be easy, but we will receive a blessing.

Because here's the thing, if God never asks us to do anything that seems counterintuitive to us or that we don't want to do, then we are following a made up God, who always does what we want and always says what we want and always confirms our own kind of desires and wants. That's a made up God. A real God is going to ask us to do things that we don't want to do, that doesn't make sense sometimes. That's how we know he's God and we don't need a voice from heaven to tell us to do counterintuitive things. The Bible is filled with them.

Things that God says to do. Let's just start there. Serve, forgive your enemies, right, give money, material things. That's what the widow does here. That's super counterintuitive to us and when we give more than we think that we can handle, three things happen. One, God provides for our needs. The widow's flour jar was full every day. Not with cake and cookies, all right, but with flower. Second, we discovered that we can be happy on less than we thought we could, which brings freedom. And third, we get the privilege of being part of what God is doing in the world when we give.

A while back, a man came up to me and shook my hand after our 9:45 service and he said, "You're my church. I live on the East Coast, but you're my church. I watch every Sunday live stream and this is the first time I'm visiting," and then he walked off. The guy behind him said to me, "He didn't tell you the whole story. A year ago, he wasn't even a Christian, but he found your website Googling something else, right. Just ended up on your website, started watching the live stream, became a Christian through the live stream and it's changed his whole life for the better." You make stuff like that happen if you give here. Globally all around the world, we're helping with the refugee crisis, supporting under-resourced communities in Haiti, and Rwanda, and Cambodia. Jubilee Reach, which church started and supports, is

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breaking cycles of poverty here on the East Side. If you give, you are part of making all of that happen and when we give God supplies, the flour jar keeps getting refilled.

I've told you dozens of stories over the years of people who gave and then money started coming, money they didn't expect just starts to show up and/or they became happy living on less. That's a thing, I know. East Side blasted me, right. Happy on less. Right, but it's a thing. It really happens. People can be happier on less and they get to be part of what's God's doing in the world.

Now going into these things, giving, serving, forgiving, going into these things, right, it doesn't make sense at first. You can't see it, but once you do it like the widow and the flour jar, once you do it, once you trust and risk, then you receive. Doesn't make sense at first. But when you do it, you see it and the only way to experience it is to trust and risk. And then you receive.

We know from later on in this story, that this widow eventually becomes financially better off because later it says, "She lived in a house with an upper room," which back then meant you had some money, but until the day she died, I bet one of the most exciting seasons of her life was when she was living from day-to-day, giving in defiant generosity to God and watching God refill that flower jar, showing that he is Lord even of the droughts. He is Lord when the creek is full and when the creek runs dry.

I heard a story about a guy named Bob who lives in Wayzata, Minnesota, and 20 years ago, Bob got invited to go winter camping with some friends, but Bob had a lifelong phobia of freezing to death. Like a lifelong fear of freezing to death, which raises the question, why was he living in Minnesota, right? Like try Phoenix, Bob, right. Anyway, he saw this invitation to go winter camping as a chance to get over his fear, decided to practice by putting on his warmest clothes and trying to sleep in a tent in his backyard one whole winter night in Minnesota without going into the house. But he couldn't sleep because every breath he took, it felt like he was breathing ice because he was, right.

And so Bob, he's a Christian, so he started to pray. "Lord, help me make it through the night out here." And then Bob got this thought that said, "You know, sleeping out here is a good idea." Okay, he knew that was God because that was not what he was thinking at that moment, right. He was thinking, "This is a stupid idea. This makes no sense. This is why we got out of the middle ages so we could have central heating. This is dumb, right." But that thought just kept kind of sticking with him, right. And then he got the thought, "Why don't you move the tent to the front yard to help needy people?" And he thought, "How would moving the tent to the front yard help anyone?"

Well, he made it through the night and then he started doing some research and discovered that even though Wayzata was kind of affluent, there was a lot of homeless people in their town and they always had to sleep outside in the cold, and they never had the option to go inside. So Bob committed to sleeping on his front yard as God had suggested and kind of restate donations from folks who saw it and folks who knew what he was doing, and he wanted to raise \$7,000 to buy Thanksgiving dinners for some families. In 14 days, Bob raised \$10,000 sleeping in his front yard in winter.

Well then, Bob realized the most pressing need was housing. So he decided to sleep outside for a couple of weeks every winter, dedicating the funds that he raised to help meet housing needs in his

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community. He's been doing it for 20 years and he has raised \$5.5 million. Now in some ways, Bob's creek was full. He was living a good life, a comfortable life, but God had even more for him in store. He wasn't living as big a life as God designed him to live. He was a little dry on meaning, purpose and joy.

So God moved him to do something that made no sense at all, sleep outside in the winter, and he loves it. He's got hundreds of families who are so deeply grateful to him for helping them out of homelessness. That gives him satisfaction and joy. He's got a whole town that's grateful to him because he's made a dent in the homeless problem there. More than that, God has become very, very real to him because he heard God talk to him, personally, and he has seen God provide exceedingly, abundantly beyond Bob ever could have imagined because God don't command what God don't supply. And so its flower jars, always full of meaning, purpose, joy, community, gratitude.

And by the way, he got over his phobia, God cut some things out of his life, blessed him in a very unexpected way. Sleeping outside in winter moved him to new things that didn't make sense and the result was abundance. So whether your Creek is full or dry, how can you cooperate with God, who wants to give you a bigger life than you can possibly imagine? What might need to be cut off? Where might you need to move out of your comfort zone and do something that doesn't make sense at first? Trust, risk, receive, and then a little bit of flour and oil becomes a whole lot. Burdens become blessings when we trust God. Prisoners become pardoned when we trust God. Sinners become saints when we trust God. Poverty becomes provision when we trust God. Gloom becomes grace when we trust God. God's kingdom comes and his will gets done in your life, in mine, and in our world when we trust, risk and receive from him.

So Jesus, ask that you would show us as we continue in worship, as we come to the table, remind us where you might want us to do something that doesn't quite make sense at first, Lord, but it's your way and out of it will come bigger blessings. God, whether our creek is full right now or dry right now, we ask in your name, Jesus, that you would please show us that thing you want, that step you want us to take, even if it doesn't make sense, and then give us courage to take it so we can receive the blessings you have to give. Pray this in your name Jesus, amen.

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## Discussion Questions: 1 Kings 17:1-16

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1. Why do you think God sent Elijah out of Israel to live with Gentiles?
2. What impresses you most about Elijah in this passage?
3. Had you been the widow, what would you have said to Elijah's request in verses 13-14? Why does Elijah tell her to take care of his needs first?
4. Who do you most relate to in this story (Ahab, Elijah, Widow) and why?
5. Has something ever run dry for you? How did God respond?