

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Running Out or Running Over

1 Kings 17:7-16

When we were counting our blessings and giving thanks this past week, Tuesday's rain should have been near the top of the list. We definitely needed that gift from above. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that here in the D.C. area, and more broadly the Mid-Atlantic region, we been experiencing drought conditions for a while now. October and early November were unusually dry. And looking back even further, about 20 to 30 inches of rain have fallen across the region this year. That's about 10 to 15 inches below normal.

As I indicated, we may not think much about the impact of drought conditions. I myself have been reminded of it by the cloud of dust that's generated when I'm vacuuming leaves with my riding mower, the same cloud that's visible through the fall sunlight, drifting across the way to our neighbor's property. The leaf blower comes in handy not just for clearing the leaves but also for blowing the dust from our cars. All that to say, we shouldn't take Tuesday's rain for granted.

In many ways, though, our own challenges with drought don't even begin to compare with what so many people in other parts of the world have suffered, and continue to suffer, with the absence of rain. I think, for instance, of the country of Somalia. During the past 25 to 30 years, Somalia has gone through a series of protracted droughts. Some of the most recent ones occurred in 2016 and 2017. Rains failed for three seasons in a row. The harvest and livestock were destroyed. There were spikes in food scarcity, malnutrition, and disease. Water supplies became undrinkable because of the possibility of infection. Civil conflict and unrest worsened. Large portions of the population were displaced, with people moving from rural areas into the cities.

In the midst of such large-scale human suffering, there were countless stories of deprivation, despair, and death. One of them involved a woman named Madow Mohamed. At the height of another Somali famine, seven years earlier, she had to leave her crippled five-year-old son Abdirahman by the side of the road so she could lead her eight other starving children toward help. When she returned to search for him, all she found was a grave. He was among 260,000 Somalis who died. As she wiped away tears, she said, "You can never forget leaving your child to die. It is a hell that does not end."¹

The woman in today's Scripture passage may have felt like she was moving deeper and deeper into a hellish experience of her own. The opening verse introduces us to conditions on the ground. "Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land" (17:7). No rain. No water. No harvest. No livestock. No food. And seemingly no hope. When we first meet the widow of Zarephath, she's gathering sticks to build a fire for a meal. She expects it to be the last meal, the funeral meal, for herself and her son. She has very little left. "A handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug" (v. 12). Being a widow, she knows what it's like to be destitute, without a system of support. She has plenty of experience with taking what little she has and making the most of it. But this time she fears that she, and her boy, will not make it at all.

That's when Elijah shows up and tries to counter her fear with his own "Do not fear" message (v. 13). At first, his reassurance may have sounded strange, or perhaps even unbelievable, to her. After all, here's this crusty prophet, claiming that God told him to come here, where she would provide him with nourishment. But the widow may be thinking, "Hey, I don't know what the Lord told you, but I didn't get the memo. I don't know you or your God. What's more, you've got a lot of nerve showing up here, asking me to fetch you something to eat and drink. Can't you see how desperate things are for me and my son? You have no idea what it's like to hold your starving child in your arms, watching him grow thinner and more listless, seeing the life going right out of him."

But Elijah doesn't change his mission or his message. He not only asks the widow to bring him some bread but also promises that there will be plenty for her and her son as well. In other words, what looks like not enough will turn out to be more than enough, because of God's limitless provision.

That's what this story is about. It's about God's abundance. It's about how the Lord shows up and turns running out into running over. Now that doesn't mean that God's mission in this world is to make you materially prosperous. Beware of any gospel that tells you that God's primary purpose is to reward your faith with financial blessings and physical well-being. Yes, God knows that we have physical, financial, and material needs. He cares for us and is present to provide for us. But the enough that he has in mind for us, and for the world, is so much better than the enough that we often have in mind for ourselves.

I once saw some online advertisements from a Christian financial services company whose aim was to help people be good managers of the resources that God entrusts to us. The company's goal was to enable individuals and families to make good choices about money. One of their ads put it this way: "Being wise with money starts with a simple question: What's your enough?"

We spend a lot of our time, our energy, and our effort trying to figure out and secure what we think will be enough. Not just enough for right now but enough for the future. Enough money. Enough property. Enough education. Enough clothes. Enough food. Enough resources, of various forms, to keep ourselves comfortable, safe, and secure. Of course expending so much effort on securing enough also generates lots of anxiety about running out. Running out of money. Running out of time. Running out of health. Running out of energy. What if I run out of . . . ? What if what I think is enough isn't really enough?

But what ultimately matters is what God thinks is enough for you. The story is told about a spiritual seeker who interrupted a busy life to spend a few days in a monastery. "I hope your stay is a blessed one," said the monk who showed the visitor to his cell. "If you need anything, let us know, and we'll teach you how to live without it."² Most of us, if we do an inventory of our lives, will probably find that there's a lot we could live without. In fact, we could very well be more alive, spiritually speaking, without it. Our definition of enough might shrink and our souls might enlarge.

Remember that the God who feeds Elijah, and the widow, and her family, isn't a God who shows up in places where there's already more than enough and says, "Here, have some more." No, this God shows up in places and circumstances where there's lack, limitation, and loss. Places of emptiness and barrenness. Places that are often abandoned or ignored. Maybe even a place like a garbage dump. That's where a woman named Heidi Baker does a lot of her ministry in Mozambique. She describes a vision she had:

I saw the wedding feast of the Lamb. There were huge, long tables laid out with the most beautiful food I have ever seen.

I heard the Lord say, "Wake up, Church! Wake up, Church! The feast is about to begin! The poor have not yet been called, and My house is not yet full. I want My house to be full!"

Then I saw the Lord Jesus dance on the garbage dump, and I was with Him. As He called, the children and youth began to follow and dance with us. Together, Jesus and I would stop and touch them; their bloated bellies would become flat, and their infected wounds healed. Their hair, turned brown by malnutrition, would become black and shiny.

He put beautiful garments of purple, blue, gold, and silver on them. He led them out of the dump and into the wedding feast and said, "You sit in front!" And the hungry children from the garbage dump sat at the head table.

I've worked in the garbage dump ever since, and many hundreds of children and youth have met the Lord and are being fed physical and spiritual bread.³

Heidi's ministry is one of the ways that God's abundance flows into the life of the world and into the lives of those who suffer and hunger. In today's text, the Lord appears in territory where the streams have dried up and the crops have withered. He comes to where stomachs are empty and shelves are bare. The Lord starts to move where there's just a handful of flour and a spoonful of oil. "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 gives rain on the land'" (v. 14).

Thanks to God, things didn't run out. There was enough. Day by day, the Lord provided for Elijah, the widow, and her family. In the verses that follow today's text, we see that though the widow's son died, even then the resurrecting power of God was flowing, working through Elijah to raise the boy and return him to life, and to the arms of his mother.

Like Elijah, we are sent to proclaim a word of abundance. God's abundance. God's abundance in a world where we often operate out of a story of scarcity instead of a story of generosity. A world where we think there's not enough to go around, so I need to get mine, even if that means you don't get yours. But when all we do is hoard it and hold it, we're just showing that our view of God is too restricted, too limited, too small. It's as if we think God only has so much to give, and once that's all gone, the supply is exhausted. It's all over. So for now we need to grab what we can while we can, rather than generously sharing and freely distributing what God has entrusted to us.

But today's text says something very different. It says that because of God's abundance, his power to give life and the resources to sustain it, there really is enough. More than enough. And our assignment is to act on God's generosity and fidelity by the way that we adjust our enough, as well as by the way we give, share, and distribute his gifts. Through our giving and our pursuit of righteousness, we become the link between God's abundance and the needs of others. We become the bridge between the Lord's generosity and human scarcity. We testify to fullness where it looks like there's only emptiness. We bring a word of life into the territory of death. We don't proclaim a God who's running out. We proclaim a God who's running over.

¹ Maggie Fick and Katharine Houreld, "A Child Dies, a Child Lives: Why Somalia Drought Is Not Another Famine." Reuters website. March 23, 2018. Accessed November 7, 2018 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-aid/a-child-dies-a-child-lives-why-somalia-drought-is-not-another-famine-idUSKBN1GZ24I>>.

² Philip Yancey, "What 147 Elk Taught Me About Prayer." *Christianity Today* (March 2006).

³ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/july/5070907.html>.