

Fed by Ravens

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[0:00] Okay. Good morning, friends. And good morning, kids. We're so glad that you're with us. Hopefully you've grabbed yourself a worksheet covered in ravens. That is at least going to vaguely help you track along with what I'm saying. If you've got a Bible with you, we're going to be in 1 Kings chapter 17 in just a moment. So as you've heard over these six weeks, we're just going to go through the major events of the life of Elijah.

Who is a strange man. This sort of wild man of the desert who encounters and confronts the king of the nation in his day. So in the section just before what I'm about to read, we've met a guy called King Ahab. He has married a foreign queen, which he wasn't supposed to have done. And he's built a temple to a different god, Baal, in Samaria, which is the capital city of Israel. And everything is sort of going wrong for the nation. They're being led away from the worship of God. And it's in that context that chapter 17 begins as Elijah just sort of walks straight onto the scene. Let me read it to you. I'm going to read from verse 1. And kids, you've got on your sheets, you've got this, but in slightly different words than the ones I'm going to read. 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 Kareth, 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 Kareth 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. This is the word of the Lord.

So bam, right onto the scene walks this prophet. Everything's gone wrong. And then all of a sudden, right in front of the king is Elijah. The writer is trying to introduce a little bit of dramatic tension. And then he says, okay, it won't rain. That's his whole message to the king. It's not going to rain. And that's the backdrop to all the stories that we're going to look at over the next six weeks.

It's not raining. It doesn't rain for three and a half years. That's pretty bizarre. You know, it hasn't rained here for, well, it rained this morning. Until I'd written it in. But, you know, it hasn't rained here. It hadn't rained here for, what, six weeks or so? Something like that. I don't know. But it's not a deal for the crops. But three and a half years, what are you going to eat?

[3:03] Like, it's disastrous for them. And it's more than that. This god they're trying to worship, Baal, is a storm god. And so what's happening is that the first, we hear about him, and then Elijah walks in and said, he has no power. The thing that you think he controls is the rain.

There's not going to be any unless I say so. And that's what happens. This is, it's a judgment on the people of Israel, sure. It's a judgment on Baal. And Elijah then leaves Israel across the river to the east. He leaves the nation.

And if we know our Bibles really well, this is sort of starting to sound like a different story. He's gone out into the wilderness. I didn't read the section before, but we just heard about Joshua. About one sentence before, Elijah walked on. And we might be thinking, how, some of this sounds faintly similar. So he's gone into the wilderness. He's delivering a judgment on a foreign god. And a little bit later in the story, they're going to come to Mount Sinai and renew a covenant with the living god. He's Moses. He's supposed to read the story and think, I've heard some of this before. And he comes in a pair. There's a guy after him, Elisha, who kind of comes in and sort of conquers the land. It's like, oh, it's that Moses and Joshua. The Bible loves that pairing. It comes up another time later on.

And that's what the gospel is. They're very keen to say that John and Jesus look a lot like Elijah and Elisha. And they look a lot like Moses and Joshua. And again, what we'll pick up as we go through these stories over the next six weeks is the Bible wants us to laugh at Baal. This God that they've decided to worship instead is kind of useless. He's not very, he's supposed to be in charge of the rain. He's supposed to be there for making the crops come. Doesn't seem to be able to do that. When eventually the great confrontation comes on the mountain, I'll leave it for whoever's doing that. But there's a nice toilet joke about Baal that I'm sure they can draw out for us. But like it wants us to laugh at this God. He seems kind of useless. It's a little bit like that tone of, you know, the school bullies come over to fight you. And then your dad, who turns out to be some sort of Olympic boxer, walks in behind you and the school bully suddenly doesn't seem so scary anymore. The confrontation between Baal and Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is not one of equals. It's one where Yahweh laughs at him. Because he can't do anything.

It's just like the plagues in Egypt. Again, just like Moses, which were all designed to show that the Egyptian gods, pretty useless. All the stuff they thought they could control, they couldn't. But Elijah, he leaves Israel. He goes out into the wilderness to this brook called Kerith. Because essentially there's nothing to drink. So he goes and sits by this little brook until it's not there anymore. There's a drought. But God blesses him.

[6:21] There's food for him. It's a little bit like he's given this little garden. Doesn't use that word. But this little garden in the wilderness that God's made for him, a place where there's meat and bread and water and he can live there as a faithful follower of the Lord. Lovely.

He gets bread from heaven. Literally, it comes from the sky. Great. Would he have chosen this? He says his bread and meat are delivered to him by ravens. Yeah, there is. There's a raven on the screen over here on the E. Kind of scary bird. I don't know if you've seen a raven. They're enormous.

They're sort of, I don't know, like knee-high or something. Terrifying looking things. And they eat dead stuff. They don't hunt animals. They go and find carrion. They eat dead animals.

They go and sit on dead animals and then eat the meat of them. So you're thinking, where's this meat come from that they're bringing him? These big scary birds come over and they give him questionable meat. You're like, is this, is this blessing? Is he happy about, like, how would you feel? Because you can read it and think, the Lord is looking after him. He's blessing him. He's able to eat. I just try and enter into the man's mind. How would he feel about this? I mean, sure, delighted that God's giving him food, but it's weird. And it's almost certainly not the way that he would have picked it. Wouldn't he rather that the Lord made bread appear on a nice stone next to him rather than they had to get it out of the beak of a raven?

[7:54] And then you think that ravens are unclean animals in the Old Testament law. You're not allowed to eat them. You shouldn't really be touching them. It's good because they eat dead bodies. That's one of the rules. Things that touch the dead, you don't eat them. They haven't got the right shoes on. That's what the whole thing about hoops is about, but don't let me get caught into that.

So these unclean things are bringing him food to eat. And he's supposed to be grateful?

What's my point? When God looks after us, sometimes it's quite surprising. Often blessing does not look like what you're expecting. In fact, very rarely when you pray and ask, Lord, would you do this for me? Does it then look like the nice little tight image you've got in your head? Often it comes in a way that just feels sideways.

I suspect when the ravens brought the food to Elijah, he was initially thinking, am I even allowed to eat this? Like, is this a test? What's this? Is this God's? What's happening here?

And then they keep bringing in bread and meat morning and evening. He's like, well, I've got to eat something. And then after a while, I guess the Lord's looking after me. But these are unusual messages. What's the blessing that you can't see because you want God to do it your way?

[9:16] I mean, I don't know the answer. It's a question for us to think on. What is the blessing you can't see because it looks like ravens bringing you questionable meat? But you get to eat.

What's the thing that you're like, I really wish you wouldn't? I would not have done it that way. But that seems to be the thing the Lord has given you. And you're like, okay, do I need to be grateful? I guess so. What's the raven? I'd like to tell you a story that a friend of mine was telling me last week. Some of you will know him, a guy called Finn.

He's part of our church. He's just gone over to join the army. So he's just in basic training. He was back here last Sunday. And he was telling me about what the experience has been like, you know,

what he's been enjoying and which drills he's been good at and which he's been less good at. And before he went, we'd been chatting a bit about what it might be like.

And we prayed together that he would have two Christian friends that he'd meet in basic training. Because it's like, it's not, he's a relatively new Christian Finn. It's not the easiest place always, I think, to be a Christian in the army. We're like, it's just going to be easier with some other Christians to stand with you. So we asked the Lord for two. He met one.

Another guy, also doing basic training, follows the Lord. He's like, okay, we can go to church together. Great. And then Finn was telling me this story about the guy who I think is on the bunk next to him. And sort of, I imagine, I have no idea. Please forgive me. I'm probably going to use all the wrong terms. I don't know what it's actually like. But I imagine it's pretty difficult. Basic training. It's quite hardcore, I would imagine. And the guy is sort of considering giving up. He's like, I don't know if I want to do this. And Finn's chatting with him before they go to sleep. And he's saying, well, you can do that if you want.

[11:09] But could I, before you're making decisions, can I pray for you? How do you feel about that? And the guy's like, yeah, all right. You can pray for me. And Finn prays for him. And Finn, I won't be able to put it in quite the words Finn did. But essentially, he said, this is the best prayer I've ever heard or prayed in my entire life. He's like, it's just like the words came through me.

He's like, Finn's not, he'd be quite happy with me telling him. He's not actually the most eloquent guy. He doesn't go in praying very easy. He's just like, it was just like, straight through him. And he found himself praying that this guy would have dreams and visions.

I don't, I mean, he's quoting the Old Testament prophets. I bet you Finn doesn't know that. And then the next morning, the guy starts to open up to Finn. And he's telling him about some of his past, some of the things he's been into in his life.

Starts telling him about his history with black magic and the occult. Sounds like he's been very involved with. And then he says, but the thing is, last night I met Jesus in a dream and now I'm a Christian.

Yeah. Finn, the second friend that we prayed for, for Finn to have, Finn had to, well, he didn't really share the gospel with him, to be fair.

[12:23] But he, he had to pray for him. And then Jesus met him in a dream. Surprising. I mean, I think now from what Finn was telling me, there's about four of them reading the Bible together at night in their bunk. They're not all Christians, but sort of curious.

They've seen Finn reading his Bible and they're like, yeah, sure, let's get in on that. Which is helping him do it every day. He's loving church. There's like more Christians around. Like, it's a wonderful blessing. But do you see that it's quite surprising?

We pray for two Christians and you're sort of hoping, like, to, I'm in my head thinking two guys who are a little bit, you know, a little bit further on, a little bit more mature maybe. Been a Christian a bit longer. Maybe they can help him. And the Lord's like, nah.

Finn, you're going to have to do all the discipling. But I can, like, you can have that guy, if you like, who's right next to you. And then, bam, and he comes. Like meat in the mouth of a raven. But exactly what he needs.

And save that guy's life. Like, who knows where he might have ended up. But he's now met the Lord. And his whole trajectory of his whole life will be different.

[13:28] Finn was very able to see the, because he was like, we prayed for two people. Which to me, I had forgotten. The, and he was like, we prayed for exactly two. Here they are. I met one, and then this guy. Be like Finn.

Expect to, don't expect it to work out the way you think it's going to. Look for ravens. And thank the Lord for them. And also, let's be honest, be specific when you pray.

If we prayed, let's have some Christian friends. I wonder if Finn would even have gone looking. We'd pray for two. Be specific when you pray.

Not only because then the Lord gets to win himself glory. Because you're way more likely to notice he did the thing. But also, he might just do it. In fact, my experience, strange that would be, is it's almost, I can't make a rule for this.

You won't find it in the Bible. It doesn't necessarily work theologically. But my own experience would be, it feels almost like the Lord is more likely to say yes to my prayer if I'm specific. Now, I don't think that's actually true. I don't think it works like that.

[14:31] That's not how prayer works. The Lord just blesses us. But, I wonder if it's that I notice more the answers to my prayers when I'm specific. I wonder if it's when I pray big old vague prayers.

I'm like, yeah, maybe it happened. But if we say, Lord, can you do this and this? And can you do it in the next week, please? You're then like, oh. There it is.

Not what I was expecting. Like meat in the mouth of a raven. But, an answer. Keep your eyes open for the Lord answering in ways that you do not expect.

You can imagine Elijah sat there at the brook before it dried up. This unclean raven has come with whatever that is in its mouth that we'd probably rather not ask about.

And he's like, surely this is cursed meat. Right? It's in the mouth of this thing that sits on dead bodies. Surely it's cursed meat. Surely this cannot be my salvation.

[15:32] Surely a man on a cursed tree can't be the salvation of the world. And yet God has form in using cursed things to bring blessing.

That's what the Bible is very clear. To die hanging on a tree means you're cursed. In fact, the New Testament wants to make a real point of it. It's like, yeah, Jesus was under the curse. That's the whole point. Took it for us when he died on the cross.

God uses cursed things to bring blessing. Jesus took the curse for us. He uses it in 1 Corinthians chapter 1. He says he uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

Like suspect meat in the mouth of a raven. And the cross, this thing that we see in Elijah's life, the kind of the ravens bringing meat and bread, bringing surprise, bringing blessing that doesn't initially look like blessing, the cross proves it.

That that is the way that the Lord acts. That end to end, he provides. Because he's made a way for each and every one of us to know the Father. To not just be provided perhaps for material needs, but to know God.

[16:51] God provides. In what to those at the time would look like the most surprising way possible. A man dying cursed on a tree.

God will provide, but you will be surprised by it. It will come sideways. It might look like a raven with some suspect meat.

I think that's really good news. We need to keep our eyes open. We need to look. We need to expect that we will see the blessing of God. We need to expect that we will find that he is answering our prayers and providing for us.

But he's going to do it. He's committed to his people. If you know him and follow him, he said he's going to go with you all the way to the end and beyond. He's going to provide for you. And it probably won't look all neat and tidy like you hoped it would.

It might look like in a drought, sitting by a stream that's drying up, while scary birds bring you bread and meat. But it is provision.

[18:02] It is blessing. He is for you. I think we should worship him for that. Quit the band. Then maybe I'll pray and then we can worship the Lord together.

Lord Jesus, this next week, please would you open our eyes to where you are blessing us that we have not seen it.

Would you open our eyes to your work in our lives, in our households, in our workplaces, in our schools, on a showground in Norfolk, wherever we might be. Open our eyes to see your work. We believe you're going to be doing it. We ask that you do, that you provide for us, that you bless us, that you surprise us with how good you are. We've spent the morning singing about how good you are.

Prove it. We say that not to test you, but because we want to be delighted by you. Show us. Give us the eyes to see that you are not just good, but beyond our imagination, good.

[19:16] Beyond what we could dream up ourselves, good. Beyond the thing that we could expect, or wonder, or even maybe ask for, good. Thank you, Jesus, that when we pray naff prayers, or we ask for stupid things, you go, no, but I'm going to ask the Father for the thing you should have asked for, and then he's going to give you that.

Thank you for that grace. Thank you for that, when we pray less naff prayers, and you're like, you know what, that'd be really fun, let's do it. Thank you for the fact you let us participate in all that you're doing in the world.

Not that we particularly have to go and do anything. You're going to do your mission. But we get to join in. We get to, we get to ask you for things, and see you go, yeah, I really, I'd love to do that. And then come and act for us. Be near to our hearts when we ask for things, and that we think are good, and you don't give them. Come for us, in our sorrow. And even in that, surprise us with blessings. In the midst of our deepest pain, often, I know it's easy to preach on this stuff, Jesus, and there'll be a number of people in the room who'll be thinking, yeah, but, what about that? [20 : 36] comfort us, and surprise us in the middle of it with blessing, with ravens, bread from heaven. You are the very bread of life. Amen.