

## *Session 4*

# When Your Provisions Fall Short

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## THE POINT

*God provides what you need when you need it.*

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Steven Callahan survived seventy-six days in the Atlantic Ocean after his sailboat sank. He managed to escape on a life raft, surviving in the open water on fish that he speared, some rainwater, and the basic equipment he managed to salvage from his boat.

Seventeen-year-old Juliane Koepcke was the sole survivor of a plane crash in an Amazon rainforest. She trekked the jungle for eleven days, dealing with wild animals, insects, and hunger.

Both people understood the desperation of survival when provisions fell short. It takes a certain kind of person with strong instincts and a relentless will to live to survive the elements in solitude and uncertainty. Those with less tenacity would surrender to certain destruction, but these two kept struggling—clinging to the hope that they would persevere.

Rewind a few thousand years and you'll find a faithful prophet of God living through threats, a divine drought, and devastating circumstances. This prophet burst onto the Bible scene as quickly as he departed on a chariot of fire. His name, Elijah, would be remembered long after he was gone. This first chapter of his story gives us a glimpse of how we can trust God when provisions fall short.

### QUESTION 1:

***In what kind of setting would you struggle most in a challenge to survive?***

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## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

### 1 KINGS 17:5–7

<sup>5</sup> So he proceeded to do what the Lord commanded. Elijah left and lived at the Wadi Cherith where it enters the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> The ravens kept bringing him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening, and he would drink from the wadi. <sup>7</sup> After a while, the wadi dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

In a culture of Baal worship, Elijah's name is providential. It means, "The LORD He is God" (1 Kings 18:39). He first appears in the Bible as a messenger of God to a corrupt and wicked king named Ahab. His prophecy is dark. He delivered a strong message from God to the king. God was sending judgment in the form of a drought. We know the saying, "Don't shoot the messenger." This adage would mean nothing to Ahab and Jezebel his queen. Truth-tellers are never safe among narcissistic rulers. God knew this, so He commanded Elijah to hide near the brook of Cherith. There, God provided food to Elijah in an unusual way. A raven would bring him food every day and night. This primitive form of DoorDash® surely wasn't what Elijah expected. Who would?

And then there was the brook which provided water. Until . . . it didn't. You'd expect that after God announced a drought. What does one do when you're doing what you sense God telling you to do and the resources fail?

My friend Doug was a layman who felt God calling him to plant a church in another town. A few couples followed him. He left with such enthusiasm, but after a few months he lost his secular

job in the city where he was planting the church. Later his eight-year-old daughter received a devastating diagnosis of a rare form of cancer. He entered a very personal wilderness of doubt and despair. Did he misunderstand God? Was he being punished for hubris, believing he really heard from God? He came to realize that God was doing something more in his life than he realized. "So many times I felt like God was so far away, but I began to realize He wanted me to trust Him more. I would never have grown if I hadn't been through the wilderness of 2017."

As Christ-followers, we sometimes believe the lie that just because we are obedient, God will make things easy; however, we learn from experience that God often brings us into hard places when the brooks of comfort, refreshment, and happiness dry up. The big question for all of us is this: What will we do when the brook dries up? Dry brooks reveal our character and confidence in God.

When the brook dries up, we have choices to make:

- Will we resent God because of our circumstances, or will we remember His faithfulness?

- Will we panic and develop an alternative plan that strays from the principles of the faith, or will we settle in, be still, and wait?
- Will we choose to believe that the drought is permanent, or will we zoom out and see this as one chapter, not the whole story?

Doug isn't still living through the dry brook of 2017. His story is so much bigger than that. He'd be the first to tell you that the nightmare of that year, only strengthened his resolve. The story of his struggle wasn't the one he expected. It's much better.

Habakkuk mirrors this truth: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there is no fruit on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the flocks disappear from the pen and there are no herds in the

stalls, yet I will celebrate in the Lord; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!" (Hab. 3:17–18).

Through every setback, failure, and shortfall, God is whispering, "Do you trust Me?" There's a peace and quiet confidence when we're left with God alone. When we enter the fellowship of His suffering, we realize that we're not alone. We were never alone, even when our provisions fell short.

#### QUESTION 2:

***When have you seen God provide in an unexpected way?***

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## 1 KINGS 17:8–12

<sup>8</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to him: <sup>9</sup> "Get up, go to Zarephath that belongs to Sidon and stay there. Look, I have commanded a woman who is a widow to provide for you there." <sup>10</sup> So Elijah got up and went to Zarephath. When he arrived at the city gate, there was a widow gathering wood. Elijah called to her and said, "Please bring me a little water in a cup and let me drink." <sup>11</sup> As she went to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." <sup>12</sup> But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I don't have anything baked—only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the jug. Just now, I am gathering a couple of sticks in order to go prepare it for myself and my son so we can eat it and die."

There's a thread that runs through the Bible. God's plan is not a self-help, self-saving plan where we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and chart our self-propelled course on a solo journey. God's plan has always been connection. We were created to live in community, not isolation. The logical move for a sovereign God would be to take Elijah to the

door of a rich tycoon who had cupboards full of provisions and comfort food. You could imagine God bringing him to a prosperous shepherd with flocks of sheep so that his beloved servant could recover from the bird food and brook water. But Elijah was commanded to get provision from an unlikely person. He was instructed to go to a widow, the bottom rung of the social

ladder, with a handful of flour and a dash of oil. At first glance, this is an odd couple. Both had needs. The widow needed faith and Elijah needed flour!

Notice the widow's response when he asked for food: "As the Lord your God lives, I don't have anything baked—only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the jug. Just now, I am gathering a couple of sticks in order to go prepare it for myself and my son so we can eat it and die" (v. 12).

Our lives are limited by bank balances and heartbeats, but as participants of God's kingdom, glory happens! The widow didn't conceal her mindset. She catastrophized. I don't know about you, but my mind often goes to worst case scenarios. My heart drops when I get a call after 10 p.m. from one of my sons. I go straight to car accidents or marital strife before I say hello. But the words of Jesus echo through my head, "Don't worry about tomorrow" (Matt. 6:34). Elijah found Him trustworthy, and we will too. We all face catastrophes, both small and large, but I commit to dealing only with the ones that actually happen.

Remember the formula. It wasn't Widow + God. It was Widow + Elijah + God. God is always driving us back to community. It wasn't just coming from God. It was coming from God through Elijah. She had to choose to cooperate with this starving stranger.

In the same way, Elijah had to rely on the scant resources of the widow. He, too, had to look beyond himself to partner with someone. This is the same formula that Jesus taught us, "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:19–20).

### QUESTION 3:

***When have you seen God lead others to provide for someone?***

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## 1 KINGS 17:13–16

<sup>13</sup> Then Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid; go and do as you have said. But first make me a small loaf from it and bring it out to me. Afterward, you may make some for yourself and your son," <sup>14</sup> for this is what the Lord God of Israel says, "The flour jar will not become empty and the oil jug will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the surface of the land." <sup>15</sup> So she proceeded to do according to the word of Elijah. Then the woman, Elijah, and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> The flour jar did not become empty, and the oil jug did not run dry, according to the word of the Lord he had spoken through Elijah.

## Engage

### GOD'S PROVISION MIGHT BE ME

In these areas of life, who is facing a need? Spend a few moments in prayer, asking God to show you how you can help one or more of these people.

Write down what God says to you.

**Family:**

**Friend:**

**Neighbor:**

**Co-Worker:**

**Church member:**

**QUESTION 4:**

***What are some things that get in the way of our trusting God to provide for us?***

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God had a plan already in the form of Elijah, but it would require some faith on the woman's part. Faith compels us to trust what we can't see, so that we will give even when we don't seem to have extra. When we have that kind of faith, miracles follow. C.S. Lewis concluded, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."<sup>1</sup>

If we continue to live consumed by our own feelings of scarcity, afraid to make plans, afraid to give, we'll miss out on God's providential care. Christ-followers can live with extreme expectancy, optimism, and faith. When we choose this life, we see beyond the troubles of tomorrow and we catch a vision of God's storehouse of blessing that hides behind every challenge we will face. God's provision comes when we trust Him and believe He is who He says He is.

From her willingness to surrender the flour and oil, we can assume that the widow entered the realm of faith. God blessed the cooperation of these two strangers and His provision just kept going. Consider the truths we find in the wilderness of Zarephath:

- God has a plan, but it might cost you everything.
- You'll never regret giving anything away for the sake of God's larger story.

- We're in this thing together. It's hard for any believer to follow God without a community.
- Challenges we face today prepare us for greater challenges in the future.

There's another layer to this story. God graciously multiplied the oil and flour day by day because of the faith of Elijah and the poor widow, but it's also rife with symbolism.

**Oil.** Whenever we remember oil, let's remember that oil is connected to healing. God desires to heal us from our past wounds and struggles. We trust God that every day we are being recreated, renovated, and restored if we're willing.

**Flour.** When we remember the flour, let's remember the bread of God's Word. The Bible needs to be consumed daily. Also remember the bread that Jesus broke around the table representing His sacrifice. It was provision, not just for today and tomorrow, but for eternity.

**The only son.** The widow's son played a small role in this part of the story. Take note that he'll be raised from the dead in the verses that follow, which obviously reminds us of another only Son. When we remember the son of Zarephath, let's remember that when we're serving the lowly ones like the widow, we're also serving God's own Son.

**QUESTION 5:**

***What do we learn about God and ourselves during times of need?***

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## LIVE IT OUT

Every crisis we face is an opportunity to grow in our faith. Also, every struggle we encounter is an opportunity to be the hands and feet of our Savior. I'm so thankful that God has a plan even when I can't see it. He is the One waiting in the wings for His cue. His cue is our faith. He's the hero of this epic and, like Elijah, we get to be a part of the story. Choose one of the following applications:

**Write.** Reflect on and journal a list of times God has provided and cared for you in unexpected ways. Offer a prayer of thanks for His provision.

**Give.** Enter into your own story of faith and generosity by anonymously giving something to a person who needs encouragement. It doesn't matter how large or small! You won't regret it.

**Volunteer.** Find a shelter or feeding center and volunteer your time. This is a busy season for those who offer mercy. Don't miss the blessing of giving back.



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