

I have a challenge for you this morning. Is there anybody in this audience, sitting here right now, who would be able to stand up and, in order, list of all the kings of Israel and Judah? It is a daunting task, to be sure; one that I have not mastered. Between the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Judah and Israel, there were more than 40 kings before both kingdoms faded into oblivion.

So is there anyone who would like to take a stab at it? I'll give you the first three for free: **Saul, David and Solomon**. How's that for a start? Those are probably the only three that you already knew!

A few years ago, when I entered the seminary, I had to take a Bible Knowledge Entrance Exam. Every student has to take it to see if they can pass a basic Bible knowledge test. If you don't get a certain score—I don't remember what it is, 60% or something like that—then you have to enroll in a class that teaches these things. The test, for the most part, is pretty easy. They even give you a review sheet with all the things you have to know. You know, stuff like, how many books in the Bible there are; or where certain cities are geographically located. But then you come to the list of Israel and Judah's kings, and it's a whole other ballgame. That was one of the biggest challenges for me, trying to remember where each king fit in sequential order.

Have you ever had that problem? You heard that name Omri, for example, and your mind is racing, thinking, "**Now was he a king in Judah or Israel? When did he reign?**" Fortunately, I

was able to commit the names to memory successfully, and I think I missed one or two questions on the exam, but do you think I still remember the list of those kings? Hardly!

So even now today, all of those names seem to roll around in my mind and I have a hard time placing them. So as I prepared for this sermon, I decided to turn to one of my best friends so that the confusion could be cleared a little bit: **Google**. Yup, that's right, Google gave me a nice, quick list of all the kings of Judah and Israel, and who lived when and what prophets were ministering during those times. In this age of quick information, Google did not let me down. I wanted a context for our passage today.

And as I looked down this list of all these kings in the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdoms—**there was Joash, and Jehu, and Hezekiah**—there were three vivid things that jumped out at me that I couldn't help but notice.

You want to hear those three things? **The first thing I noticed was that Israel *never once* had a good king.** You know, occasionally in Judah there was a good king that would come along, but I had forgotten that Israel *never* had a good king. I scrolled down that list, waiting to see a good king, but there wasn't one. It's no wonder that Israel's end came about 150 years before Judah's.

The second thing I noticed, which is quite sobering, is that no matter how many times a good king came along in Judah and tried to install reform, they *always* fell back into idolatry. You know how it went: a king would come along and discover a part of the Torah—which means “law,” or the first five books of the Bible—and he would immediately make a decree that

everyone had to start keeping the law. Yet no matter how many times this happened, without fail, God's people would find themselves right back at square one. They would fall into idolatry.

And you know why that was? Because the king would try to install Old Covenant—you remember that term?—reforms. He would come along and say, **“We’re going to start keeping the law and that will change everything!”** Unfortunately, while he tried to change people's actions, he was not able to change their hearts by simple outward reform.

And you know what happened? Because of those Old Covenant mandates, Judah fell further and further into apostasy until, finally, they self-destructed. Were the king's motives admirable? Should the people have been faithful to the Torah? Of course! But obedience that does not come from the heart only produces bondage. And that is the reality of Judah's sad history.

The third observation I made, simply by looking at Israel and Judah's list of kings, was the refusal of God's people to humble themselves and listen to God's prophets. Time and time again God would send a man or woman who would say to His people, **“Return to the Lord!”** There was never a time in the history of God's people when He did not have a prophetic Word. I can't help but think of **Amos 3:7**, where it says, quite plainly in the NIV, **“Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”** Make no mistake about it, friends: **if God is up to something, He will first tell His prophet, who will then forward the message along to His people.**

Sadly, however, Israel and Judah would hear nothing of it. They refused to humble themselves and heed the advice of God's divine messengers.

And what about us?

So those are three preliminary observations that I recognized as I looked over this list of Israel's and Judah's kings. Those three things kind of give us a context for our story today—the story of another “**Nameless Hero.**” We read part of the setting in our story today for the scripture reading. You remember the person, don't you? One of the worst kings of them all: Ahab. Quickly, without looking, was Ahab a king in Judah or Israel? No cheating! He was a king in Israel.

You remember Ahab, I'm sure. He was married to Jezebel, one of the most despicable characters in all of scripture. She single-handedly did more to wreak havoc in Israel than just about everyone else combined. She led God's people into Baal-worship and down the path of apostasy and idolatry. She even went so far as to kill some of God's prophets. Not coincidentally, the book of Revelation mentions Jezebel in an apocalyptic sense, telling the church of Thyatira that it is guilty of aligning itself with Jezebel, and falling into apostasy.

But in our portion of scripture in **1 Kings**, along comes a man. His name is Elijah, which literally means, “**Yahweh is my God.**” Here was a man whose name was a shining example to an apostate nation. Every time his name was pronounced, its speaker stood reprobated, reminding the person of the need to make Yahweh his or her God as well.

But Elijah comes along and goes up to Ahab—who, according to the previous chapter, committed more evil than any king before him—and tells him that there is going to be a drought. That wouldn't exactly be met with excitement or good feelings from the king. This thus forced Elijah into hiding, indicating that Ahab was, more than likely, after the prophet.

But God tells Elijah to go to the Brook Cherith, which would have been a subsidiary of the Jordan River. This was nothing more than a temporary stream that would have dried up at some point, anyway, regardless of whether there was a drought or not. And every day, morning and evening, ravens brought “**bread and meat**” to Elijah. It's amazing to think about God's provision for His people. Whereas many people probably weren't even eating one meal a day, God provided two square meals for Elijah every day. And he did it through the mouths of ravens. Talk about nameless heroes! Certainly humanless heroes.

Eventually the brook dried up, however, and so we read in **1 Kings 17:9** God's instruction to Elijah: “**Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.**” Now, we could easily pass over this one part and miss a few very important details that the author is trying to get across to his readers.

Notice, first of all, that the Lord instructs Elijah to go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon. Sidon was a pagan, godless place that was not under the hand of Israel. As you may recall, in the New Testament, Jesus criticizes Chorazin and Bethsaida and says that Tyre and Sidon would have repented already if they were the beneficiaries of His miracles. He is implying, of course, that Sidon was a terrible place. Yet God instructs Elijah to go find refuge outside of Israel.

What was most intriguing to me, though, is that there was an infamous woman that hailed from Sidon. Who was that? Jezebel! We just read that in **chapter 16**, where the author tells us that Jezebel was the “**daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians.**” So as Elijah is being hunted down by Ahab and Jezebel, God tells him to go find refuge in Jezebel’s own front yard.

It would be the same thing as being chased around by Hitler 65 years ago and choosing to hang out in Berlin, Germany. I suppose he may not suspect that you would be so bold as to take refuge in his own country, but I still think it’s a crazy idea! Yet this is what God tells Elijah to do, as illogical as it sounds.

But Elijah obeyed the Lord, didn’t he? He went there to Sidon—a godless place—and sought refuge with a widow, whom the Lord had commanded to provide for him. Jesus, Himself, comments on this strange turn of events when He says in **Luke 4:25, 26**, “**But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.**”

There was no one in Israel who would receive God’s own prophet. So, instead, the prophet had to turn to an “**unclean pagan.**” It is a frightening thought. Do you realize the implications of this? When God’s prophet approached his own people, they wanted nothing to do with him. So, instead, Elijah has to turn to an outsider.

There are so many lessons we can draw from this, we could be here all day and we probably wouldn't exhaust the richness of the implications from this little truth.

The sad reality is there are many people who walk through our doors that do not feel welcome. They feel as though they have to go get fed somewhere else.

I know of a church, less than a thousand miles from here, where this is a relevant topic. They say that they want to grow, but there are a couple of people who have started coming to their church who do not feel welcome. They may stop going to that church. And why? It's because the people don't look right, act right and, in all honesty, even smell right.

What a sad day it was for Elijah when God's people were apostatizing so much that he had to find a welcome mat on the doorstep of a pagan. Are we as guilty as they?

Even sadder, however, is the terrible indictment of God's chosen people rejecting their own prophet. When the prophet came to call God's people into repentance, they refused to humble themselves and heed the prophet's call.

The reality is, an outsider appreciated Elijah's prophetic gift more than the people for whom he was sent. I have to be honest with you, friends: northern New England has the reputation of being a very "**conservative**" area when it comes to Adventism. Of all places, this is the region in the United States that supposedly "**beats**" people over the head with Ellen White. In the seminary, they train pastors to teach people how to use her "**in moderation.**" Maybe I'm all wet

on this, though, friends, but I just don't see it. I think the pendulum has swung the other way and there are more people who despise that prophetic gift than appreciate it.

Believe me, I know that there are a number of people who do abuse her writings. Trust me. I am not diminishing that reality. But I find that they are actually in the minority these days. And what surprises me the most is when I find non-Adventists who seem to be more appreciative of her writings than Adventists.

I want to tell you friends: when I picked this passage for today's sermon about a month or so ago, I had no intention that I would even touch on this subject. But as I looked at Israel's sad history, and I went through this passage a few times, both in Hebrew and in English, I couldn't help but notice that unfortunate reality. Maybe I'm preaching to the choir, I don't know. But to a large degree today, God's people have come to despise the prophetic gift and office, rather than appreciate it.

Well would it be for us to understand God's graciousness in giving us, as well as every generation, a prophetic voice from Him. In His mercy, He has blessed every generation with a Word from God. And all of His warnings that He declares—indeed, just as Elijah declared a drought because God lovingly wanted to get Israel's attention—are for our own good. As we read in Amos, God does not do anything without telling His servants the prophets.



This pagan woman appreciated it, however. When God told Elijah to go to Zarephath because He had already commanded a widow to provide for Him, the Lord knew that the lady would respond positively to His command by faith. He knew what her heart's response would be.

So Elijah comes to Zarephath and sees this woman by the gate of the city. And he asks of her a huge favor. Now, remember, this is in the middle of a drought. The land has been parched for a little while. And you can be sure that, at this point, Elijah has been on a long journey. No matter which way you slice the pie, he has traveled a long distance. Earlier he was told to hide "East" of the Jordan, and Sidon is all the way on the Mediterranean Coast, which is, at its closest point, no less than 20 miles from the Jordan River. Chances are, though, is that Elijah traveled a lot farther than that because Sidon is way up north, and he was probably East of the Jordan somewhere down near Samaria or Gilead, which would probably be more than 100 miles from Sidon. In other words, he traveled a long ways to find a widow with faith.

But amidst this drought, Elijah asks this widow for a little cup of water. He doesn't ask her for a big cup. He doesn't want to inconvenience her too much, but he does ask for a little cup. And the text almost seems to imply that there is no hesitation on the woman's part. After asking her, the next thing that the text says is that "**as she was going to get it**" he asked her for another favor. "**Throw in a morsel of bread, too,**" he asks her.

Now he's pushing it, isn't he? This nameless hero was willing to bring Elijah a little cup of water, but she is not sure that she can spare some bread, too. And then notice what she says, "**As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in**

**a jar.**” All she had was a little flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar. Sounds like enough to me, doesn’t it? Did the widow of Zarephath not hear our sermon last week? I guess not. If she had, she would have understood that God could take a little flour and a little oil and do great things through it.

Instead, she tells Elijah that, in essence, she and her son will be having their last supper. This is the last meal that she is going to enjoy and then the two of them will die. That’s it. Game over. The end.

But Elijah will hear nothing of it. In response to her declaration, he says to her, **“Make me a cake first, bring it to me, and then make one for your son and you.”** Now, you have to remember something. Where does it say that Elijah is talking with this woman? At the gate of the city. In other words, somewhere inside that gate is her house. In order for her to go home she has to walk all the way to her house. We have no idea how far away the house was. It could have been a few hundred feet away. Who knows? But she would have to walk to the house, make the cake, walk back to Elijah and give it to him, and then walk back to her house before she could even see if there was any flour or oil leftover to provide for herself and her son. Elijah is really asking her to step out in faith, isn’t he?

But he assures her that the flour and oil would not be used up until God sent rain again. So the woman does exactly that. She walks home, makes the cake, comes back to Elijah, gives the cake to him, and then walks home. Can you imagine the anticipation on her mind as she walked back and forth to Elijah, wondering if there would, in fact, be flour and oil left. Talk about walking by

faith! Maybe there were no doubts in her mind, I don't know. For all I know, she probably had full confidence that whatever Elijah declared would come to pass. After all, she, though a pagan, already has some understanding of the Hebrew God. God has already spoken to her and she recognizes Him when He talks.

And what does **verse 16** say? “**The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry.**” In the Hebrew, it is pretty much recapping word-for-word what Elijah has just declared, indicating that this man speaks for the Lord.

Talk about a lady who was willing to give up all! A woman who was not even an Israelite, at that. And I can't help but see the same character of that little lad we talked about last week. He gave up his whole lunch for Jesus. It wasn't life or death for him, though. No, certainly his little tummy's cravings would be satisfied as soon as he got home that day. This widow and her son, however, gave up their last meal for God's prophet. Rather than make a cake for herself and then use the remaining flour and oil for Elijah, she put his interests ahead of her own.

So what's the point? The point is simply this: church members should provide for pastors before they should provide for themselves! No, I'm just kidding, of course. In all seriousness, we should not miss the incontrovertible fact that this nameless widow, who was not even a professed follower of God, was willing to put Elijah's interests ahead of her own.

Which is the exact, same thing that God has done all along with us, isn't it? He was willing to endure death for us—which is precisely what He did. How appropriate that we see a picture of

God in an old nameless widow. After all, God’s character is such that He reveals Himself with humility. Paul declares that when God became a Man, he made of Himself “**no reputation.**” You remember that text in Philippians? In many ways, Jesus didn’t try to make a name for Himself. He revealed Himself through humility.

I came across this wonderful quote this past week, just yesterday, in fact, as I have been reading through *The Ministry of Healing*. I am going through it for my devotional time, and I have been extremely blessed by it. Listen to the point she makes, though:

**Jesus did not seek the admiration or the applause of men. He commanded no army. He ruled no earthly kingdom. He did not court the favor of the wealthy and honored of the world. He did not claim a position among the leaders of the nation. He dwelt among the lowly. He set at nought the artificial distinctions of society. The aristocracy of birth, wealth, talent, learning, rank, He ignored. . . . Jesus sought to correct the world’s false standard of judging the value of men. He took His position with the poor, that He might lift from poverty the stigma that the world had attached to it. He has stripped from it forever the reproach of scorn, by blessing the poor, the inheritors of God’s kingdom. He points us to the path He trod, saying, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Verse 23.<sup>1</sup>**

Yes, friends, make no mistake about it. We see a picture of God in that nameless widow. She, who was willing to give up her last supper for Elijah, is one of the greatest testimonies to what a follower of God looks like. After all, doesn’t it say somewhere in the New Testament that “**inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, My brethren, you have done it unto Me**”? Who was it that said that?

Sure, this nameless hero had to step out in faith. She had the assurance that she would not lack food. And—you know what?—we talk so much about how she provided for Elijah, but what about how God—through Elijah—provided for her. Do you think that it was just a coincidence

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 197, 198.

that Elijah showed up on her doorstep a few hours before her last meal? That was going to be her last meal. But God impressed Elijah to walk all the way to Sidon because He had a nameless widow there who had a heart-experience with Him, whom He cared about greatly. He saw her need from afar off and sent provision for her in the form of His prophet.

Indeed, we echo Jeremiah's sentiments in the book of Lamentations, God's "**mercies are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness.**" He has treated all of us better than we could ever deserve. And that's the beauty of the story of this nameless hero this morning, friends.

In closing, I'd like to read a story for you from a book I read this past summer that was very inspiring. It was a *New York Times* bestseller and it is called *Three Cups of Tea*. The book details the heroic experience of a man by the name of Greg Mortenson, who lost his way while trying to summit K2, the second highest—and perhaps toughest—mountain in the world. He got so lost, in fact, that he found his way into a remote village in Pakistan. Ultimately, the people in the village looked after him for a month or two, and nurtured him back to health. In response, he promised the villagers that he would return some day and build them a school.

When he returned to the United States, he had very little money to his name. He decided he would go on a letter-writing campaign, writing to a bunch of rich and famous people who could afford to contribute a few dollars, as well as U.S. Senators. He wrote to people like Oprah, Bill Gates and so on. Out of 580 letters he sent out, he only got a response from one person: Tom Brokaw, who was a fellow alumnus of the University of South Dakota. He contributed \$100 for the cause, not much, but at least a response!

Mortenson, of course, lived a life of self-denial. He stopped renting an apartment and lived in the backseat of his car to save money for his cause. Eventually, he did raise enough money and was able to return to Pakistan to build the school. He realized, however, that the need was far greater than just one school and so he decided to make it a life's mission—to build schools for the underprivileged in Pakistan and Afghanistan, two of the most war-torn and dangerous places in the world.

But money was always tight for his projects. And I'd like to read a little excerpt from his book—a little lengthy, to be sure—but illustrating our passage today very appropriately.<sup>2</sup>

Here was a man who was in need. He was not in need for personal gain, however; he was in need because he wanted to help other people. And God provided for him, didn't he—this humble and selfless man who has now built over 50 schools in one of the most desolate places in the world?

And what about us? Do you think God looks after and cares about our needs? After all, we serve a God who came to the most desolate place in the universe. Worse than Afghanistan is in comparison to the rest of this world, our planet is the absolute bottom of the barrel compared to the rest of the universe. Yet God's humility forced Him to reach lower and lower still, until He found Himself at the bottom of the barrel with us.

So what's my appeal today, friends? Ponder Christ's character. Understand His humility. Know that He gave up all for us. But, in response, He asks us to give up all for Him and for others. You

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 225-228.

can be sure, then, that as we give of ourselves for our fellow man, God will provide for us. The more we reach into our bins of flour, and jars of oil, attempting to feed others, the more God will place there—not for our own consumption, of course, but for the well-being of those whom we serve.

There are thousands of people in this area who don't even have as much as a little flour in a bin, or oil in a jar. We are living through a mighty drought, spiritually speaking. But we have the opportunity to pay God's goodness forward. We can be co-laborers with God and, just as with that nameless widow, we can reach into the bin and jar and extend ourselves to other people. This city, this area, indeed, this whole world, is starving for that to happen.

We can be a part of it. Would you like to be?