

A Bible Study by
Melissa Spoelstra

Elijah

*Spiritual Stamina
in Every Season*

Abingdon Women
Nashville

Elijah

Spiritual Stamina in Every Season

Participant Workbook

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About the Author

Melissa Spoelstra is a popular women's conference speaker (including the Aspire Women's Events), Bible teacher, and author who is madly in love with Jesus and passionate about studying God's Word and helping women of all ages to seek Christ and know Him more intimately through serious Bible study. Having a degree in Bible theology, she enjoys teaching God's Word to the body of Christ, traveling to diverse groups and churches across the nation and also to Nairobi, Kenya, for a women's prayer conference. Melissa is the author of the Bible studies *Numbers: Learning Contentment in a Culture of More*; *First Corinthians: Living Love When We Disagree*; *Joseph: The Journey to Forgiveness*; and *Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World*; and the parenting books *Total Family Makeover: 8 Practical Steps to Making Disciples at Home* and *Total Christmas Makeover: 31 Devotions to Celebrate with Purpose*. She has published articles in *ParentLife*, *Women's Spectrum*, *Just Between Us*, and the *Women of Faith and Girlfriends in God* blogs, and she writes her own regular blog in which she shares her musings about what God is teaching her on any given day. Melissa lives in Dublin, Ohio, with her pastor husband, Sean, and their four kids: Zach, Abby, Sara, and Rachel.

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Introduction to This Study

Life has its ups and downs. One day it seems that everything is good—with relationships, finances, and emotions all as they should be—and the next it can feel like everything is falling apart. I mentioned to a girlfriend how quickly my emotions can change from one day to the next, and she retorted that hers can change between interstate exits on her drive to work! Sometimes these ups and downs are less momentary and more like seasons. In one season we're at a high point, feeling God's nearness, and in another we're at a low, full of confusion and questions for the Lord. Many times we spend a season between these two extremes, coasting along without much thought to the highs or lows of life. We need spiritual stamina to go the distance with God in *every* season.

The prophet Elijah was no different. He experienced highs and lows too. One moment he was hiding out in the wilderness during a drought, being fed by the ravens, and the next he was on the mountaintop where God showed up in a powerful way with fire and then rain. I can relate to Elijah as he navigated these extremes. He was bold and confident when he heard a word from the Lord and prophesied no rain would fall in the land of Israel, but he was surprised and disappointed when the drought he had predicted affected *his* life along with everyone else's. When the brook dried up, eliminating his water source, he struggled to make sense of God's promises and his very real problems. Have you ever been there?

Like us, Elijah had plenty of ups and downs in his walk with God. From the mountaintop where he called down fire, proving to the world that the Lord is God and exposing counterfeits, to the road where he outran a chariot, demonstrating supernatural strength, Elijah had times when God's power was alive and real to him. Other times, Elijah questioned God and grew weary of life. After the Lord showed up on the mountain, Elijah woke the next morning to learn that an evil queen had placed a price on his head. Elijah told God that he had had enough, even asking God to take his life (1 Kings 19:4). It seems he was worn out with the cycle of mountaintop seasons turning to hiding out seasons, likely with some blah times in between. Perhaps Elijah wasn't wanting death as much as an escape from life as he saw it in that moment: one problem to be solved followed by an even worse predicament. Have you ever felt that way? When the difficulties

of living on a planet affected by the curse of sin hit home, have you ever wanted to say “I have had enough,” just as Elijah did? I know I have.

Thankfully, there’s more to Elijah’s story. He expressed his questions, but he persevered as he learned to live by his faith in God rather than his feelings. He developed spiritual stamina, which is the ability to stay true to one’s faith and calling through all the ups and downs of life. Because of this spiritual stamina, Elijah was an ordinary person who was able to do extraordinary things for God. He not only finished the race; he finished it well.

We connect with Elijah on so many levels. Like him, we have seen God show up in real ways. God has encouraged us, comforted us, provided for us, and shown Himself real to us through His Word, His presence, and His activity in our lives. Other times the brook has seemed to dry up, and we’ve been unable to make sense of another challenge, disappointment, or frustration. Through all the highs and lows—and especially those times when we want to quit—we need to stay true to our faith and calling if we want to live fully and finish well. We need spiritual stamina to not only endure but thrive as we carry out the unique mission God has for each of us.

In this study, we will examine the ministry of Elijah, who came to be considered “the great prophet, the man who stands as the pattern for other prophets.”¹ Over the next six weeks we’ll learn some of the spiritual stamina secrets that helped him hold on and persevere in faith, including practical habits related to the following areas:

1. prayer
2. choices
3. soul care
4. surrender
5. mentoring
6. legacy

Together we’ll see that finishing well was Elijah’s greatest legacy, and we’ll explore how to make that our legacy too. Starting is easy, but finishing well requires stamina!

Whether we happen to be in a mountaintop season where we are experiencing God’s power and blessing, a valley season where we feel like running away, or somewhere in between, Elijah’s life will inspire us to go the distance in the life of faith. His story will challenge us but not shame us, because we’ll discover that he was just as human as we are. Elijah doubted and struggled, but ultimately he chose to believe God. As we study his life—delving into the end of 1 Kings and the beginning of 2 Kings, as well as other references to Elijah’s life and ministry in the Old and New Testaments—we will develop perseverance and learn how to hold onto faith regardless of our feelings or circumstances. My prayer is that we will dare to believe God can use us in extraordinary ways as we grow in spiritual stamina in every season!

Options for Study

Before beginning the study, I invite you to consider the level of commitment your time and life circumstances will allow. I have found that what I put into a Bible study directly correlates to what I get out of it. When I commit to do the homework daily, God's truths sink deeper as I take time to reflect and meditate on what God is teaching me. When I am intentional about gathering with other women to watch videos and have discussion, I find that this helps keep me from falling off the Bible study wagon midway. Also, making a point to memorize verses and dig deeper by looking at additional materials greatly benefits my soul.

At other times, however, I have bitten off more than I can chew. When our faith is new, our children are small, or there are great demands on our time because of difficult circumstances or challenges, we need to be realistic about what we will be able to finish. So this study is designed with options that enable you to tailor it for your particular circumstances and needs.

1. Basic Study. The basic study includes five daily readings or lessons. Each lesson combines study of Scripture with personal reflection and application (**orange** type indicates write-in-the-book questions and activities), ending with a suggestion for talking with God about what you've learned. On average you will need about twenty to thirty minutes to complete each lesson.

At the end of each week, you will find a Weekly Wrap-Up to guide you in a quick review of what you've learned. You don't want to skip this part, which you'll find to be one of the most practical tools of the study. This brief exercise will help your takeaways from the lessons to "stick," making a real and practical difference in your daily life.

When you gather with your group to review each week's material, you will watch a video, discuss what you are learning, and pray together. I encourage you to discuss the insights you are gaining and how God is working in your own life.

2. Deeper Study. If you want an even deeper study, there is an optional "Weekly Reading Plan" that will take you through the books of 1 and 2 Kings. This will give you fuller context for what was happening before and after Elijah's life and ministry. You'll find the chapters for the week listed in the margin at the beginning of each week. Feel free to read them at your convenience and pace throughout the week. Additionally, memory verses are provided for each week of study so that you may meditate on and memorize key truths from God's Word. (Though these verses relate to the specific theme of the week, not all are from the books of 1 and 2 Kings.)

3. Lighter Commitment. If you are in a season of life in which you need a lighter commitment, I encourage you to give yourself permission to do what you can. God will bless your efforts and speak to you through this study at every level of participation.

Bonus: 30 Days of Prayer for Spiritual Stamina. Whichever study option you choose (basic, deeper, or lighter), you also may want to participate in this thirty-day

bonus prayer challenge—whether you make an individual commitment or your group makes the commitment together. The challenge is to spend ten extra minutes in prayer each day, utilizing a variety of prayer methods throughout the thirty days. You can find some general introductions to different prayer methods or approaches online that you can use throughout the thirty days, or if you desire the structure of daily prayer exercises, you can order a copy of *30 Days of Prayer for Spiritual Stamina* (see www.abingdonwomen.com/Elijah for either option). With either option, you will find instruction for praying silently, praying aloud, praying through writing, praying with movement, and praying together. The idea is that these thirty days of prayer will help you to implement what you are learning about the connection between prayer and spiritual stamina.

Take time now to pray and decide which study option is right for you, and check it below. Consider also whether you plan to do the bonus challenge.

__ **1. Basic Study**

__ **2. Deeper Study**

__ **3. Lighter Commitment: I will _____.**

__ **Bonus: 30 Days of Prayer for Spiritual Stamina**

Be sure to let someone in your group know which option(s) you have chosen so that you have some accountability and encouragement.

A Final Word

As we begin this journey together, remember that the goal is not temporary behavior modification but long-term heart change. While this will include evaluating our spiritual habits or disciplines and asking God to reveal needed changes, we want to be led by the Holy Spirit rather than our own ideas. Elijah found spiritual stamina through a close walk with God, who protected and provided for him. The Lord rewarded Elijah with His presence and peace. Like Elijah, we can find spiritual stamina in every season as we draw near to our loving God.

Melissa

Introductory Background

Elijah the prophet delivered messages from God to the people of Israel. The Israelite people are descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob's name was changed to *Israel* by God, and his descendants are the Israelite people. Jacob's son, Joseph, brought them to Egypt during a famine where they multiplied to over a million people during 430 years of slavery. God then raised up Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Unfortunately, the people complained and rebelled and consequently had to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness before Joshua led them into the land of promise.

After conquering the land of Canaan, God later raised up judges including Gideon and Samson, who led the Israelites in battles against their enemies. Ultimately, the people asked God for a king even though He wanted to be their king, and God gave them what they wanted. The first king was Saul. Then King David and his son Solomon ruled over Israel. These three kings ruled under what is now referred to as the United Kingdom.

After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam made some unwise choices that led to a man named Jeroboam breaking off and ruling over the ten northern tribes of Israel. This brought about the years of the Divided Kingdom. When we read the books of 1 and 2 Kings, we find the author goes back and forth in speaking about a northern king and then a southern king. The Northern Kingdom is referred to as Israel while the Southern Kingdom became known as Judah.

Jeroboam was the first of nineteen kings who ruled the northern tribes, and he set the tone for turning away from true worship of Yahweh. He set up religious places and practices according to what was most convenient for his control and power over the people, and he promoted idolatry blended into the worship of Yahweh. Every king after him in Israel was evil. In 722 BC Assyria invaded Israel and exiled them into captivity, ending the monarchy and nation itself.

In contrast, the Southern Kingdom of Judah had a few good kings. Out of the nineteen southern kings and one queen, only eight followed the Lord. (Though that number is debated, I'm including two kings who did some good and some bad, following God

imperfectly.) Then in 586 BC the Southern Kingdom had a final fall and was destroyed at the hands of the Babylonians.

During the reigns of both the northern and southern kings, God always raised up prophets to call His people back into relationship with Him. This is where Elijah's ministry begins. He was one of these prophets sent by God as a mouthpiece speaking truth in a culture overrun with counterfeits.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah issues a statement to King Ahab—the seventh king in the succession of the nineteen kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab's father had been a very wicked man named Omri, and Ahab not only followed his father's bad example but also exceeded it. He married Jezebel, the daughter of the Sidonian king whose land bordered the land of Israel, and she brought Baal worship to the forefront, putting her and Elijah in direct opposition. You see, Elijah's name means "Yahweh is God." His name reveals his mission. He wanted the people of Israel to turn from their sin and turn back to Yahweh.

As we explore six themes in the life of Elijah—prayer, choices, soul care, surrender, mentoring, and legacy—we will see that he was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things for God by running the marathon of life with perseverance, yielding to God, and growing in faith. He was a man who stood in the gap between God and His people—humble but bold, strong but self-controlled, questioning but faithful, prayerful but decisive. As we get to know Elijah, I pray we will get to know God on a deeper level and find the spiritual stamina we need for every season of our lives.

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: INTRODUCTION (OPTIONAL)

The People of Israel

The _____

Abraham

Isaac

Jacob (Israel)

Joseph

Moses

Joshua

Period of Judges, including Gideon and Samson

Kings of Israel: Saul, David, Solomon

The _____ Kingdom

Rehoboam and Jeroboam bring division

The _____ Kingdom

Northern Kingdom: _____ / Southern Kingdom: _____

Jeroboam, King of Northern Tribes—Turned People from God

722 BC—Israel Conquered

Kings of Judah—Some Good, Some Bad

586 BC—Southern Kingdom Destroyed

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: INTRODUCTION (OPTIONAL)

_____—Called People Back to God

Elijah—Mouthpiece of God

King _____—seventh king of Northern Kingdom

Ahab Exceeded His Father's Evil

Ahab Married _____

Queen Jezebel—Lady Macbeth of the Old Testament

Elijah—"Yahweh is my _____"

Elisha—"Yahweh _____"

Themes: prayer, choices, soul care, surrender, mentoring, legacy

"*Elijah was as _____ as we are.*" (James 5:17 NLT)

For the prayer challenge, see www.AbingdonWomen.com/Elijah to find free resources or to order a copy of *30 Days of Prayer for Spiritual Stamina*.

Week 1

Prayer

1 Kings 17

Memory Verse

And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

(Hebrews 11:6)

DAY 1: TRUE GRIT

Weekly Reading Plan

Read 1 Kings 1-8.

Today's Scripture Focus

1 Kings 12:26-33

Have you ever felt spiritually dry? We all have seasons in our faith when we feel parched for living water. Even though we love God and have seen Him at work in our lives, sometimes He feels a million miles away. It can seem like our prayers are hitting the ceiling rather than reaching the ears of our loving, almighty God.

One of the contributing factors to my own dry seasons can be the discouragement that comes from sorting through what culture is streaming at me each day. Blogs, social media arguments, television, personal conversations, and the daily mail leave me worn out as I try to sift through all the information, which often contradicts the truths I know. This barrage of cultural messages tugs at my thoughts and emotions.

Relationships can be another source of spiritual fatigue. Let's be honest: relationships are difficult. I love my husband dearly, but I find marriage requires stamina. One day I think he is the greatest, smartest, and most handsome specimen I've ever encountered. Other days...well, let's just say I have to discipline myself to look for the good. (And he could say the same about me!)

Information overload and marriage are just two things in my world that require me to learn stamina.

What are some things that are wearing you out right now? These aren't necessarily bad or wrong things; they are simply situations, relationships, or routines that require your stamina in this season. List one or two things below:

Whether you thought of a job situation that is causing stress, a healthy eating plan you are battling to follow, or a relationship that requires some work right now, we all know what it is like to grow weary. Even great things such as church can wear us out. As a pastor's wife for more than twenty years, I love God's church, but there are some days when I get tired of the inevitable complaints, changes, and problems. I need stamina to keep loving and serving like Jesus.

Stamina is defined as "the ability to sustain prolonged physical or mental effort."² In our study of Elijah's life, we are going to identify some key lessons that can help us sustain prolonged *spiritual* effort. That is what spiritual stamina

Extra Insight

Elijah appears on the scene fifty-eight years after the death of King Solomon, when Israel had split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.¹

is—prolonged spiritual effort or perseverance—and we need it when circumstances are good, bad, or somewhere in between. Elijah encountered seasons of waiting and seasons of action, intense opposition and incredible victory, depression and bold belief. We do too. No matter what is going on in our lives today, tomorrow, or next week, we can develop spiritual stamina in the many different seasons of life.

Angela Lee Duckworth is a teacher whose TED Talk has been viewed by millions. In it she explains that when she left her consulting job to teach math in New York City, she was astounded by how children with high intelligence didn't necessarily do well in her classes. She went to graduate school and studied predictors of academic success, and she discovered that the reason was not social intelligence, good looks, physical health, or intelligence quotients. It was grit. She defines *grit* as "passion and perseverance for very long term goals." She goes on to say that "grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future—day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month but for years. . . . Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint."³

So, how do we become grittier? How do we develop stamina and help others develop it as well? We will unpack this question over the next six weeks as we study the life of Elijah, a man of true grit. My prayer is that God's Word will come alive and be active in our lives, so that our time in 1 and 2 Kings will strengthen our faith muscles and put some tangible "stamina resources" in our spiritual toolboxes.

This week we will focus on Elijah's prayers of faith and take some time to evaluate our own prayer lives. But before we delve into Elijah's prayers, we need to take some time to understand a little about Elijah's world, which was vastly different than our own. It's important to acknowledge, however, that while the government, customs, and daily life were different than ours today, the call for God's people to follow Him has remained the same.

Let's begin with the historical scene that Elijah entered. Several commentators agree that Elijah brought his message during one of the darkest hours in Israel's history.⁴ The political and spiritual leaders were living contrary to God's commands, and they had drifted from the close relationship with Yahweh that their ancestors once enjoyed.

Have you ever thought that we are living in dark times? If so, what are some of the things going on in the world that discourage you?

Although Elijah lived in dark times, he found hope and spiritual stamina by offering prayers of faith. And we can do the same. Faith has always been the vehicle by which people can draw near to God in the midst of the changing seasons of life. This week our memory verse is Hebrews 11:6, which holds a great promise related to faith that we can cling to as Christ-followers.

Read Hebrews 11:6 in the margin. What promise is tucked within this verse?

How has this verse proven true in your life personally—whether in the past or present?

And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

(Hebrews 11:6)

When we come to God in faith, we find the reward we seek: God Himself. While we can seek God in a variety of ways, prayer is a vital way the Lord has given us to connect with Him. He simply invites us to talk to Him. We won't find spiritual stamina apart from prayer.

We will explore Elijah's communication with the Lord later this week, but for now let's dig into the historical context a little more by reviewing some basic Israelite history that gives us the biblical time line:

- God revealed Himself to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- The sons of Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel who left Canaan during a famine and moved to Egypt.
- The Israelites multiplied greatly in Egypt, and over time a new pharaoh enslaved the Hebrew people in an attempt to control their population.
- When the Israelites were led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt, they initially wouldn't enter the Promised Land because they feared the people living there.
- They wandered in the wilderness for forty years until Joshua led them into the Promised Land and into battle, and finally they occupied the Promised Land.
- God then raised up judges such as Samson, Deborah, Gideon, and others to lead them as they continued to fight surrounding nations to keep the land.

When we come to God in faith, we find the reward we seek: God Himself.

- Eventually, they wanted to be like the other nations around them by having a king. This began the time of the kings.
- It is during the time of the kings that Elijah's story takes place.

Read 1 Samuel 8:1-9 and briefly explain how the nation of Israel transitioned from judges to a monarchy:

God gave the people what they asked for but issued a stern warning along with it. Even with a rough start, God appointed prophets to anoint and guide the kings.

Let's look at the first three kings of Israel. List them in order below according to the following passages.

1. _____ (1 Samuel 10:1)

2. _____ (2 Samuel 5:1-5)

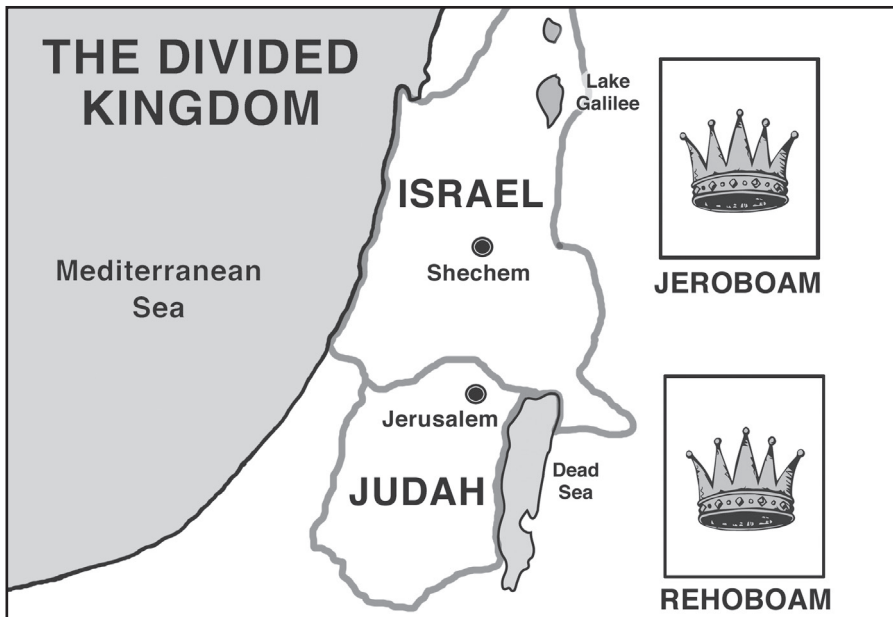
3. _____ (1 Kings 1:32-35)

Even though God longed to reign as king over His people, He had special relationships with those kings who sought Him in faith. As we read in Hebrews 11:6, He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. So, what kind of relationship did these first three kings have with God? Saul was overcome with jealousy and fits of anger, and he sought his own way. David made many mistakes, but Scripture refers to him as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). Even when David messed up, he believed God and continually looked to Him for forgiveness and help. Solomon asked God for wisdom initially but later was led astray by many wives.

These three kings ruled over what we refer to as the United Kingdom, but the kingdom would not remain united. This is why we read in First and Second Kings about different kings ruling simultaneously, because the kingdom split in two. Here's how it happened.

Major change came in the kingdom when Solomon's son Rehoboam began to lead. The people asked him to lighten the burden that Solomon had placed on them. Instead, Rehoboam threatened to increase it. So another man named Jeroboam led the ten northern tribes of Israel to rebel. Jeroboam ruled over the

Northern Kingdom of Israel while Rehoboam ruled over the Southern Kingdom of Judah and parts of Benjamin (1 Kings 12:1-20). Check out this map that shows how the kingdom was divided.



This caused Israel to be splintered into two nations. Jeroboam worried about keeping control of the people, knowing he was not a descendant of King David.

According 1 Kings 12:26-33, what did Jeroboam do to keep the people loyal to him?

How do you think this impacted the spiritual and moral climate of the nation?

Jeroboam disregarded God's clear instructions about where, how, and whom to worship. Here are some attempts he made to keep power and control:

- Made common people priests
- Moved the place of worship to make it more convenient
- Set up two golden calves

Jeroboam didn't have the grit to stay the course in following God's clear instructions. Instead, he compromised true worship to fit his preferences. One commentator observes that "Jeroboam's cult began the process of an ever-growing breach between the nation and their God, who had created them in the first place."⁵

Jeroboam put his faith in human wisdom rather than God's Word. He sought his own interests rather than closely following God's clear instructions, and His legacy of compromise filtered down to every king who ruled after Him. Not a single one led the people of Israel back to true worship of Yahweh. This outcome of Jeroboam's decisions is a reminder to us to be on guard against compromising God's Word.

Later this week we will find that Elijah sought God according to His Word and prayed according to God's prophecy and instructions. If we are to offer prayers of faith like Elijah, we must know God's Word. This drives us to seek God by studying Scripture, which involves learning the context of the original audience and then seeking to apply the principles in our modern culture. This means we must seek more information and understanding from trusted sources, ask questions, pray for wisdom, and allow the Holy Spirit to help us make application in our lives. Ultimately, we need faith to believe and then implement the truths of God's Word.

Danger comes when we compromise what we know to be God's clear instructions for our own pleasure or power. One commentator reminds us, "Whatever leads one away from clear biblical teaching about the Lord constitutes an opportunity for losing distinctive faith."⁶ In other words, we must be careful that the winds of culture don't sway us away from clear biblical principles without us even realizing it. In Jeroboam's case, he didn't abolish worship of God. He simply made some small tweaks to suit his *preferences*. Yikes. That hits a little close to home for me as I think about certain areas of my life. What about you?

Are there any areas of compromise where you sense God calling you back to a more complete obedience?

What came to mind for me wasn't some big area of sin but small compromises. I struggle with things like wasting too much time on social media and television and not making prayer the priority I know it should be in my life. Making compromises in our prayer lives, study of Scripture, church involvement, and other spiritual practices can lead us down the slippery slope

of disconnection from God. While we can make excuses for our lapses, we know they impact our attitudes and actions. True grit means that we guard against spiritual compromise and seek to get back on track when we falter.

Here's an important caveat. Conversations about obedience can cause us to revert into guilt and shame mode, and that certainly is not my intent here. None of us has mastered the art of obeying God fully; we all have missed the mark and are works in progress. But here's the good news: God loves us, and we don't have to perform to earn His love. When God calls us away from sin, it is not so that we can be good enough for Him. Rather, He knows that sin brings suffering, and He doesn't want us to suffer. Keeping this in mind will help us combat legalism and get to the heart of God's call to obey.

As we explore Elijah's life, I believe we will be encouraged to develop grit in our spiritual habits. We will see the power and purpose that come from growing in spiritual stamina and living the life God created us to live. Even when our nation is having a dry season in its government, economy, and cultural morality, we can flourish in faith as individuals and communities of faith as we walk closely with our God.

Talk with God

Take a moment to evaluate the level of grit in your faith. Do you tend to give up quickly, or have you developed perseverance over time? Most of us are likely somewhere between those two extremes. Ask the Lord to grow your stamina over the course of this study. Pray that your ears will be open for the truths that you need to embrace and the practices He is calling you to implement. Ask Jesus to reveal any areas of compromise so that you can stay the course of following Him in faith.

DAY 2: CALLING US BACK

I sat across from my accountability partner in our favorite little tea shop, and she asked me how I was doing. I told her with a hint of sarcasm that I was writing about stamina so, of course, I wanted to quit everything. I tried not to cry, but the tears in my eyes betrayed my inner commands to stop them. I didn't have great reasons to feel so worn out. I was just weary from parenting, meeting the demands of ministry, making another dinner, and cleaning another toilet.

We'll discover that Elijah had some weary moments, but in the midst of them he had a firm faith in the truth of his name. You see, Elijah's name means

True grit means that we guard against spiritual compromise and seek to get back on track when we falter.

Today's Scripture Focus

1 Kings 15:25-30;
16:8-33

Extra Insights

Nothing is recorded in Scripture of Elijah's parents or tribal affiliation.

Commentators surmise that he was likely from either the tribe of Gad or Manasseh since Gilead was divided between them.⁷

The unshakable truth that Yahweh is our God changes everything.

"Yahweh is my God."⁸ Elijah's name signified his mission,⁹ because he spoke out against counterfeit gods and called his nation back to their Creator, *Yahweh* (Jehovah), which means the "Self-Existent One."¹⁰ No one created God; He always has been and always will be. The unshakable truth that Yahweh is our God changes everything.

Even though life can be hard, wearing us down with all sorts of problems and pressures, the assurance that God loves us is what sustains us. His presence, purpose for our lives, and love give us stamina even when circumstances are difficult and feelings are low. We will see Elijah cling to this truth in dry seasons as well as times of victory.

Yesterday we learned that the kingdom of Israel split into two nations when Jeroboam rebelled. While the Southern Kingdom of Judah had a few good kings who followed the Lord, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had none. Unlike King David or Solomon, the kings of Israel clawed for power and authority and strayed far from God's commands.

Read 1 Kings 15:25-30 and 1 Kings 16:8-28, and draw a line to match each king on the left to his description on the right:

Zimri	Son of Jeroboam. Ruled two years until he was assassinated.
Baasha	Son of Ahijah, from the tribe of Issachar. He assassinated Nadab and slaughtered all the descendants of Jeroboam.
Omri	Son of Baasha. He reigned for two years until Zimri assassinated him while he was getting drunk.
Nadab	Army commander of half the royal chariots who assassinated Elah and killed Elah's entire family, including distant relatives; he reigned for only seven days and then died in a fire he set.
Elah	Army commander who replaced Zimri and fought Tibni to win the kingdom. He reigned twelve years and made Samaria the capital of Israel.

Which of these kings was described as a spiritual and God-honoring leader?

That's right. Not a one! In fact, every single one of them except Omri was murdered. It plays out like an action movie.

- A drunk king was assassinated.
- Another king set a fire and then died in it after being betrayed.
- Men slaughtered entire families to protect their power.

Then, after many years of tumultuous leadership, King Omri stabilized the political and economic scene.¹¹ However, the *religious* scene only went from bad to worse. This is the scene Elijah would enter.

Read 1 Kings 16:29-33 and answer the following:

What did King Ahab do more than any other king of Israel? (v. 30)

Whom did Ahab marry? (v. 31)

Remember the descriptions of the previous kings? King Ahab did more evil than *all* of them. Yikes! And we're told that if that wasn't bad enough, his choice of wife was even worse.

Marrying princesses from surrounding nations for mutual trade and peace relations was common in Old Testament times. Solomon did it seven hundred times, but it caused his demise because these wives influenced him with their foreign gods, eventually leading him into idolatry. While Solomon's wives subtly influenced him in regards to idolatry, Jezebel dominated Israel with her gods from Tyre and Sidon. She didn't fade into the background as many other foreign princesses did when they came into the palace.¹³ In fact, we'll discover that she ruled the roost in the royal home and wanted the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth to supersede if not fully replace the worship of Yahweh.

The nation of Israel had already compromised God's instructions for worship, but Jezebel brought things to a new level of rebellion. One source observes: "The earlier sin of Jeroboam, establishing the golden calf worship, had been serious enough, but this introduction of the Baal cult was much worse. It involved an outright substitution of deity as well as degrading, licentious observances including religious prostitution."¹⁴ These practices grieved God's heart as He watched His chosen people trade their one true God for a myriad of counterfeit gods who would not lead them to life and peace.

Extra Insight

Jezebel was the daughter of the king of the Sidonians.... Solomon set the example of marrying Sidonian women (1 Kings 11:1). Praised for their skillful workmanship by the ancient Greek writer Homer, they were a people committed to the worship of their god Baal and goddess Ashteroth.¹²

“You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And if you love and obey the LORD, you will live long in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

(Deuteronomy 30:20)

Take hold of my instructions; don't let them go.

Guard them, for they are the key to life.

(Proverbs 4:13)

Loving God and following Him is the key to life.

Extrabiblical records show Ahab was a powerful and influential ruler according to secular criteria. However, we find that God cares more about faithfulness to Him than popular measures of success. These stories compel us to consider faith and obedience as we evaluate history rather than just social, political, and economic factors.

In the world's eyes Ahab was a success, but in God's eyes he did more evil than any of his predecessors. There's a lesson here for us. We must be careful not to determine success by the standards of power, money, prestige, or dominance. Whether in our nation, churches, or families, the key to success is knowing and loving God. Elijah's name holds the key to life: “Yahweh is my God.”

Read Deuteronomy 30:20 and Proverbs 4:13 in the margin. According to these verses, what is the key to life?

Loving God and following Him is the key to life. The nation of Israel got off track by determining success according to worldly pursuits and by adopting the sinful practices of surrounding nations. We can get off track, too, as culture subtly pressures us to embrace truths that go against God's Word—whether through logic, emotion, peer pressure, or situational ethics.

What are some current cultural messages we find embedded in movies, advertising, media, or everyday conversations that contradict God's way? (These may or may not be outright sins, but they are ideas that are not aligned with God's ways.)

Here are some that stand out to me:

- The person with the most toys wins.
- Revenge will make you feel better.
- A vacation is the answer to your problems.
- Life is supposed to be easy.
- Having extramarital sex has no emotional or physical consequences.
- You only live once.

While the wickedness of Ahab was extreme and Jezebel's false gods constituted clear idolatry, we can fall into more subtle forms of idol worship. When we

make people, things, or power more important than God, that is idolatry. Elijah was God's voice crying out to wake the people of Israel from their reverie of sin. Idolatry beckoned God's people away from the key to life, and Elijah was God's mouthpiece to call them back. One commentator writes that Elijah "makes it his mission to teach that Yahweh lives, that Baal does not exist, and that ethical standards flow from a commitment to the living God."¹⁵ While we may not be able to relate to Baal worship, we all battle at times to keep our commitment to God central in our lives. Yahweh is our God; He is the key to our lives.

Take a moment to evaluate your commitment to God. If He sent a prophet to your home right now, what would His message to you be? You don't have to write anything down, but take a moment to reflect, asking God if there is something you need to hear. Is there . . .

- a sin He would call you away from because sin brings suffering?
- an encouragement He would give you from His Word?
- a tangible reminder of His great love?

The Lord is always calling us back to relationship with Him. That's why even when His people completely turned their backs on Him with drunkenness, murder, and idolatry, Yahweh still sent a prophet to call them back. He loved them, and He never gave up on them. When it comes to His people, God is the definition of true grit. He passionately pursued the Israelites, and He passionately and persistently calls us as well, beckoning us through His Son to turn away from our sin and toward Him.

Write a sentence or phrase to summarize each verse below:

From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

(Matthew 4:17)

¹⁶"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."

(John 3:16-17)

“When God raised up his servant, Jesus, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways.”
(Acts 3:26)

God used His prophets and ultimately His own Son to share His message of love. He is Yahweh, and like a good Father, He warns us in love when He sees us, His children, headed in the wrong direction. We need attentive ears to hear His words and responsive hearts to allow Him to correct our course. When you feel weary as I did with my accountability partner, cling to the fact that Yahweh is calling you back to Him. He longs to renew your heart and strength.

Talk with God

How is the Lord calling you today to turn away from sin and brokenness and toward Him? How is He drawing you close? When you lean into Him, you will find new strength. Reflect during your prayer time on these verses from Isaiah:

*Have you never heard?
Have you never understood?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of all the earth.
He never grows weak or weary.
No one can measure the depths of his understanding.
He gives power to the weak
and strength to the powerless.
Even youths will become weak and tired,
and young men will fall in exhaustion.
But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint.*

(Isaiah 40:28-31)

Now ask God to reveal some tangible ways you can draw close to Him in this season of your life. Make notes in the margin if you like.

DAY 3: HIDING OUT

One of the reasons we need stamina is that life often includes many seasons of waiting. The first time we took our children to a theme park, one of them

Today's Scripture Focus

1 Kings 17:1-7

commented at the end of the day that we had spent most of our day waiting in lines. However, this same child also said that the thrill of the rides had been well worth it. Following God sometimes feels like a day at a theme park. It has some exciting ups, some scary downs, and a lot of waiting in between.

I remember a season when I was waiting and wondering. About the time that our first child entered the toddler phase, my husband and I were excited to be expecting again. So, we were devastated when I had a miscarriage at seventeen weeks. We wanted to get pregnant again soon after that loss, but after eighteen months of trying, I wondered if perhaps we were going to have only one child. While I was grateful for my son, my heart longed to have more children. Those were long weeks and months of waiting, wondering, and praying.

Can you think of a time when you were in a season of waiting for something to happen?

For most of us, waiting isn't our favorite thing. Today we will find Elijah during a season when God hit the pause button in his life. He was hiding out by divine direction. Let's get into the text to discover four truths where we find common ground with the prophet Elijah.

1. Walking with God usually includes some long seasons of waiting.

Arthur Pink calls Elijah somewhat of a "sacred mystery."¹⁸ This is because there is no mention of his parents, education, or really anything else about him except his hometown.

According to 1 Kings 17:1 in the margin, where was Elijah from?

Though scholars do not know the exact location of ancient Tishbe, we do know that Elijah entered the scene with an oath and a threat before King Ahab, making a life-changing prediction that affected the entire nation.

Look again at 1 Kings 17:1. What did Elijah say would not happen in Israel until he gave the word?

Extra Insight

Scholars cannot locate the town of Tishbe with certainty,¹⁶ though one commentator suggests that Tishbe has been associated with the monastery of Mar Elias in southeast Jerusalem, overlooking Bethlehem, since Byzantine times.¹⁷ Other Christian traditions associate the monastery of Mar Elias as a place where Elijah rested when Jezebel was chasing him.

Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, "As surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!"
(1 Kings 17:1)

God's heart breaks along with us when we experience difficulties, including the consequences of sin.

Elijah was commenting on a sensitive topic. In an agrarian society, rain wasn't just a picnic spoiler; it was necessary for life. Rain watered crops, and crops brought food and wealth. Warren Wiersbe has estimated that Elijah likely went to see King Ahab around the month of October. There had been no rain for six months, and he was proclaiming that no rain would fall for three years.¹⁹ This would have been an incredible statement because the rainfall pattern was consistent and predictable, and the duration of the drought that Elijah prophesied far exceeded the occasional variances in rainfall. By prophesying a drought, Elijah was predicting a downturn in their economy, which ultimately would impede their ability to survive. Yet he wasn't making up this scenario himself. Rather, as he had sought God in faith, God had spoken to Him; and then Elijah communicated what the Lord had said.

Elijah's prophecy drove the entire nation into a season of waiting for rain. Rain was a sign of God's blessing and provision. Ultimately God would bring rain; but until Elijah gave the word, the people would have to wait. We don't like to wait. Do you ever pray about things for a week or two expecting a quick answer? We must learn to pray and wait on God's timetable rather than our own.

What are some things God has taught you during seasons of waiting?

"But be careful. Don't let your heart be deceived so that you turn away from the LORD and serve and worship other gods. If you do, the LORD's anger will burn against you. He will shut up the sky and hold back the rain, and the ground will fail to produce its harvests. Then you will quickly die in that good land the LORD is giving you."

(Deuteronomy 11:16-17)

God did bring the famine Elijah predicted, but let's not forget that, like a loving parent, God does not delight in our suffering. This brings us to our second concept.

2. God does not delight in the consequences of sin but longs for His people to repent.

God's heart breaks along with us when we experience difficulties, including the consequences of sin. His desire is always for us to turn from our sin and toward Him so that we might have the abundant life He wants to give us.

Long before Elijah, God had warned the Israelites about the consequences of disobedience.

According to Deuteronomy 11:16-17 in the margin, what did the Lord say would cause a famine in their land?

Yahweh wanted to remind His people that He is the rain-maker. According to Psalm 104:10-11, we know that God pours water into the streams and provides it

for the animals. In Job 38:25-30, we find that God laid out the path for lightning and brings rain to the desert. He alone controls the weather on the planet He created. The Lord repeatedly told His people not to worship other gods. He even gave them the consequences in advance. I don't know if they didn't believe Him or just didn't think He would follow through. In any case, what the Lord wanted them to do was turn toward Him.

Many years before Ahab's reign when Solomon was king, God had made a promise.

Read 2 Chronicles 7:13-15 in the margin. If God were to shut up the heavens so that no rain fell, what three things did He want His people to do?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What did God say He would do in response?

God used the famine Elijah predicted to get His people's attention because He cared about their spiritual condition. He was calling them back to Himself so that He could be a rewarder of those who would seek Him. We must be cautious not to read into Elijah's message from God, drawing the conclusion that God delights in droughts or punishments of any kind. Many verses in the breadth of Scripture support the notion that God takes no pleasure in punishment but longs for people to repent, often holding back consequences with patience as He waits for people to turn back to Him.

Read Ezekiel 33:11 and 2 Peter 3:9 in the margin, and underline the words *turn* and *repent*. What do these verses reveal about God's heart?

While God has the power and authority to bring consequences, He does not delight in them. His heart is for us to turn toward Him and away from the

¹³At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or command grasshoppers to devour your crops, or send plagues among you. ¹⁴Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land. ¹⁵My eyes will be open and my ears attentive to every prayer made in this place."
(2 Chronicles 7:13-15)

"As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?"
(Ezekiel 33:11)

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.
(2 Peter 3:9)

Extra Insight

Elijah hid himself near a brook called Kerith, or Cherith.

"It is believed that Cherith was one of several streams which thread their way down into the Jordan valley making sharply chiseled gorges as they go."²⁰

harmful activities He has forbidden so that we may enjoy unhindered intimacy with Him. God clearly told His people that if they worshiped other gods, He would hold back the rain; so, He sent His prophet Elijah to let them know the timing of His follow-through.

Read 1 Kings 17:2-7, and summarize the instructions God gave to Elijah in a few sentences:

Why do you think Elijah needed to hide?

Someone recently texted me these words: "Don't shoot the messenger." Then they gave me some bad news. Ahab wanted to harm Elijah even though he was merely the messenger. God told Elijah to hide for his own protection. Hiding out doesn't always mean we are scared or in trouble. Some seasons require withdrawing in obedience. Elijah's seclusion provided time for solitude to prepare him for ministry in the years to come.

Have you ever sensed God calling you to withdraw from something or someone in obedience to Him? If so, what were some things you discovered about God or yourself during that time?

God designed us for community with other believers, but there are times when we must rely on Him alone.

God designed us for community with other believers, but there are times when we must rely on Him alone. Elijah was hidden away at the Kerith (or Cherith) Brook because he was not just prophesying hardship but challenging the gods that Queen Jezebel had brought from her Sidonian background. Though there were several Baal gods, many scholars agree that the Baal worshiped by Ahab and Jezebel was likely a storm god. Yahweh didn't delight in the earthly drought but was willing to allow temporary suffering in order to expose the counterfeits that brought graver consequences of spiritual drought.

Canaanite gods ²¹	
Anath, Astarte, and Ashera	Three goddesses of fertility and war
Baal	Son of El and the god of thunder who spoke through storms
Baal Berith	A god worshiped in Shechem
Baal-Melqart	A god worshiped in Tyre
Baal Shamem	A storm god
El	Father of Baal and head of all the Canaanite gods
Mot	The god of the dead

Extra Insight

Baal is often mentioned as a fertility god, and rain-making was associated with his role of making the land fertile.²²

3. God supernaturally provides for the needs of His servants.

Another key concept we find in Elijah's story is the supernatural provision of God. Because all of the Baal gods were associated with rain and crops in some fashion, Elijah's prophecy of a drought was an assertion that Yahweh had control of the storms, not Baal. Elijah would soon learn firsthand about God's power. After he obeyed God and walked the fifteen miles from Jezreel to the Kerith Brook,²³ he experienced God's supernatural provision while he was in hiding.

Read 1 Kings 17:4-6. How did God provide for Elijah?

God hid Elijah away where no one would find him and had ravens bring him bread and meat. Ravens were considered unclean animals, yet these were God's choice instruments in taking care of His servant. God supernaturally provided for Elijah in his time of need—even bringing him meat, which was a luxury item at that time.²⁴

How has the Lord provided for you in a supernatural or unexpected way at some point in your life—whether it was a physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational need?

During my first year of marriage when we lived in Canada, we struggled financially because I wasn't allowed to earn any money while I waited for my immigration paperwork to come through. God moved the heart of a widow in our church to pay our rent on a particular month when we had no idea how we were going to pay it. She wasn't even aware of our need! God is able to supply *all* of our needs (Philippians 4:19). He doesn't promise that every whim and wish will be granted, but He does promise to provide for true needs. He has proven that to me time and time again just as He proved it to Elijah.

What are some needs that you have right now? Write a brief prayer below asking God to provide for your specific needs:

God will go to great lengths to take care of His people, providing for us emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. God used ravens and the Kerith Brook to care for Elijah in his time of need. And then something happened: the brook dried up. The very famine that Elijah predicted affected him as well. This brings us to our final point.

4. Bad things happen in this fallen world, and the Lord wants to help us through each one of them.

While God provides for us and loves us, we aren't living in heaven yet. We live on a planet that has been cursed by sin, and we shouldn't be too surprised at some of earth's harsh realities. Yet things that shouldn't surprise us still can catch us off guard, can't they?

I have a tendency to freak out when the brook dries up in my life even though God has always provided for me.

- My family has never missed a meal, but when an unexpected expense comes up, I can get overwhelmed and fearful.
- We've weathered some scary health situations including septic shock, blood clots, and auto-immune disorders, but every new symptom can put me in Google-worry mode.
- Calls have come with news of car accidents, deaths of loved ones, and friends moving away, and God has been present and faithful to see us through. Still, I sometimes fear the worst when my phone rings.

- We drive old cars in our family, and there are three teenage drivers under our roof. You'd think I'd get used to car repairs, yet whenever one of the vehicles breaks down, I always seem to be shocked.

These are true confessions of someone who needs to grow in recognizing a dry brook isn't a sign of God's abandonment. It is just another symptom of living in a broken world—a world where cars break down, houses need maintenance, people get sick, and famines cause brooks to dry up.

When and how has the brook dried up in your life? In other words, God was showing up in very tangible ways, and then suddenly you couldn't see His provision anymore. If something comes to mind, write it below:

The Lord wants to walk us through each and every challenge, just as He did for Elijah.

The good news is that the Lord wants to walk us through each and every challenge, just as He did for Elijah. And tomorrow we will learn more about that as we see just how Yahweh continued to supernaturally provide for Elijah's needs.

Of the four key concepts or truths we've explored today, which one resonates with you most and why?

Sometimes following God means standing alone and waiting while the brook we are drinking from goes dry, but we can trust God to take care of us. As we see Him continually show His faithfulness in our lives, we develop spiritual stamina that enables us to "freak out" less and trust Him more!

Talk with God

Spend some time evaluating what you are asking God for currently. Are they needs or wants? Do your requests have more to do with internal growth or external ease? Ask God to continue leading you in what to pray as you study His Word. Write any thoughts or new prayer requests for yourself or others in the margin.

Today's Scripture Focus

1 Kings 17:8-16

Extra Insight

Zarephath is the modern city of Sarafand, Lebanon.²⁵

DAY 4: CHANGING PROVIDERS

Carrie found out her breast cancer was back, and unfortunately, this time it was much more aggressive. Within a week of the diagnosis she was undergoing chemotherapy treatments. Even though God had provided faithfully through the last cancer battle, she was once again concerned about finances. They had decent insurance, but with one income and three kids at home, she knew she would need to trust God.

Her nine-year-old nephew had an idea to help raise money for her medical expenses. He loves to draw squirrels—funny, skinny, little squirrels. He asked his parents if he could set up a roadside stand on their rural lane and advertise his idea. His parents also created a Facebook page to let people know about his initiative, and he drew up a pile of squirrels in anticipation. He and his brother set up a table and waited. In about three weeks, they raised well over \$5,000. The boys have been drawing squirrels as quickly as possible to keep up with the demand. They were even featured on the local morning news in their hometown. Carrie is absolutely in awe of how this innocent idea has spiraled into an international effort to show love and care for her and her family. The blessing is not only financial; it has been a faith-building lesson that will forever impact her nephews' hearts. They offered the little they had, and God has blessed and multiplied.

Carrie's family saw God provide in an unexpected way. Yesterday we saw God provide for Elijah through ravens and a brook. When the brook dried up, Elijah had a problem. He needed a new source of water. People can go weeks without food, but they will die in a matter of days without water.

Read 1 Kings 17:8-16 and summarize where God told him to go and who would provide food for him.

Where:

Who:

Elijah didn't get a three-year plan for his personal provision when he spoke God's message to Ahab about the drought. As he sought God in prayer, his first instruction was to go east and hide by the Kerith Brook. The new plan was to go to Zarephath and find the widow God had instructed to feed him. Now let's

God sometimes sends us to places of scarcity to showcase His abundant provision.

explore some interesting application points in our lives regarding the *where* and the *who* in these instructions.

1. God sometimes sends us to places of scarcity to showcase His abundant provision.

We know that “Zarephath lay between Tyre and Sidon, eight miles from Sidon to the north and twelve miles from Tyre to the south.”²⁶ Three things stick out to me about this place:

1. Sidon is a land at the heart of Baalism. God brought his prophet Elijah to defeat Baal on his home turf.
2. Jezebel was a Sidonian. The evil queen who wanted to replace worship of Yahweh with worship of Baal was from the same land where the Lord sent Elijah.
3. The widow who helped Elijah was a Sidonian. God seemed to be highlighting that He isn't against people groups as a whole. God always has cared about all people, not just those of Jewish descent. It is not ethnicity but a heart bent toward God—a heart that obeys and respects God's Word out of love for God—that separates people in God's economy. Both Elijah's enemy Jezebel and his sustainer of life were both Sidonians.

Jesus infuriated people in the synagogue when He mentioned this exact example to communicate that God's love and message were not limited to the Israelites. He said, “Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon” (Luke 4:25-26).

God's love is for everyone, and He desires to help people find their way back to Him. Many times He uses unlikely places and people so that we won't get hung up on the mode and miss Him as the source of our provision.

Yesterday you considered a supernatural or unexpected way God provided for you. Let's narrow that a bit more. Has God ever used an unlikely *place* or *event* to provide for you? If something comes to mind, record it here:

Extra Insight

Elijah had likely been at the Brook Kerith (Cherith) about one year before he went to Zarephath.²⁷

God's love is for everyone, and He desires to help people find their way back to Him.

My friend Kris mentioned that she was battling depression and was pretty miserable in the small town where she lived with her husband and children. For a few months she prayed for God either to help her settle in where they were or enable them to move two hours north to a larger city, closer to extended family. Then one day her husband told her about an opportunity to move back to another state where they had lived previously. She never dreamed to ask God to move them back there, but she knew without a doubt that God had placed it on her husband's heart. It was the best thing for her family—far better than the “options” she had been presenting to God.

Though God can use us anywhere, He wants to guide us along step by step as we seek Him. Even if we find ourselves in a desolate place like Zarephath, He can provide in supernatural ways. So, God sent Elijah to an unlikely place to showcase His abundant provision. And there He used an unlikely person.

2. God sometimes uses unlikely people to meet our needs.

God chose to use a widow who was at the end of her rope to help Elijah.

Read 1 Kings 17:12-16 again. What did Elijah ask the widow to do? (v. 13)

How did she respond? (v. 15)

God chose to use a widow who was at the end of her rope to help Elijah. She basically said, “I’m just going to do this one last little thing and then die” (1 Kings 17:12). The nameless widow represents “the powerless, uncredentialed, disadvantaged, and hopeless” in the culture of Elijah’s day.²⁸ What set this widow apart was her obedience to God’s command. Elijah asked her to go against her maternal nature and feed a stranger before feeding her only child. Now whether or not you’re a momma, you know that would require some faith in God!

I love all of God’s children, but my own children have a very special place in my heart. I might give strangers leftovers, but probably not the only plate of food in the house. The widow followed Elijah’s instructions in faith. She believed and was blessed.

Can you think of a time when God required an action step of faith on your part as He worked in your life? If so, describe it below:

One thing that comes to my mind is when my daughter was fifteen and really wanted a new wig. You see, she suffers from alopecia, a condition that causes hair loss, and she was completely bald. It was a special wig that cost \$3,500, which wasn't in our budget at the time. I hated telling her no. The next day she asked if her dad and I would mind if she did a Facebook post with a link to a fundraising page for the wig. We both didn't like the idea at first. We didn't want to broadcast to the world that we couldn't pay for something our daughter wanted. It was humbling. The amazing thing was that in thirty-six hours the entire amount was funded! We bought the wig, and she loved wearing it.

One of the things I remember most about those days is all of the comments people posted when they contributed. A boy at my daughter's school gave twenty dollars and an encouraging word. In fact, most of the donations were small. It wasn't large amounts that funded the expensive wig so quickly but a lot of little contributions given with supportive statements that really boosted my daughter's confidence. God used the givers not only to fund the wig but also to show my daughter what an amazing community of support He had provided for her.

When the brook dried up, the Lord "changed providers" so to speak as he cared for Elijah's needs. If Elijah was my right-hand person and I was responsible for providing for him in a drought, I doubt that a poor widow would be my first thought. I would look for a rich guy with big supplies of food and water, perhaps. But as I have found to be true in the life of my own family, God often uses unlikely sources to provide for us. These unlikely sources remind us not to trust in logic or riches. God is always our source.

Watchman Nee was a church leader in China who spent thirty years in prison for his faith. He wrote about God's provision in relation to Elijah's story this way:

Because of our proneness to look at the bucket and forget the fountain, God has frequently to change His means of supply to keep our eyes fixed on the source. So the heavens that once sent us welcome showers become as brass, the streams that refreshed us are allowed to dry up, and the ravens that brought our daily food visit us no longer; but then God surprises us by meeting our needs through a poor widow, and so we prove the marvelous resources of God.²⁹

God colors outside the lines so we won't forget that He is the source of our provision.

I can certainly relate to having a proneness to look at the bucket and forget the fountain. God provides in unlikely places with unlikely people, and God changes His methods to help us remember that He is behind it all. Carrie saw God do that through her nephew's squirrel pictures. Kris saw God answer her prayer outside of the two options she brought to God. God colors outside the lines so we won't forget that He is the source of our provision.

It is not our job or a spouse's job that gives us the resources we need to live. God gave us the bodies, abilities, and resources to get us where we are today. He is the source of life. When we start trusting in the bucket, He might change it so that we can see Him as the fountain again.

This principle of the bucket and the fountain extends beyond the scope of material goods such as Elijah's food and water. God is the source of *all* we need emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. We might feel that our lack is in one of these areas. Maybe a relationship with a friend, spouse, or child is a place of scarcity in your life right now.

In what area(s) do you need God to give you some reassurance or direction in regard to His provision for you?

How is the principle of God's abundant provision in our scarcity hitting home with you?

Whenever you begin to question or worry about God's provision, think of the prophet Elijah. Recall times and ways God has provided for you and others in the past. It just may be in the most unlikely places and through the most unlikely people that you see Him at work.

Talk with God

Take a moment to meditate on this verse:

And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:19)

Now, pray over the area(s) you listed above where you need God's reassurance or direction regarding His provision. Would you like to see a relationship restored, a marriage revived, or a bill paid? Maybe your need has to do with a job, your schedule/time, or a move to a new city. Tell God what you need. He has promised to supply it.

DAY 5: WHEN LIFE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

A father was diagnosed with colon cancer. With a wife and three children in elementary and middle school, this was tragic news. Then his wife discovered she had breast cancer, and tests revealed it was stage four. Both cancers were terminal, meaning arrangements would need to be made for the three children who would be orphans in a matter of months or years. Dad passed away first, and his wife followed him a little over a year later. While extended family took in the children, the loss seemed overwhelming for all those around them. This is a story I know personally. Something in us grieves when we hear such tragedy. Why so much pain for one family?

It all doesn't make sense. I know there are stories that rival even this one. I bet you could write a paragraph or two recounting a story of hardship you've either lived or heard of. As we come to the last few verses of 1 Kings 17 today, we find Elijah grappling with the question of *why* when tragedy strikes around him. We will be able to relate to his struggle with honest questions but also be reminded of the power of our God.

In our previous days of study this week, we saw how God sustained Elijah with food brought by ravens and a stream of fresh water. Then after about a year, the brook dried up, and God directed Elijah to move to Zarephath, a Sidonian town steeped in Baal worship. There He guided Elijah to a destitute widow and miraculously provided for Elijah, the widow, and her son through an unending supply of flour and oil. They had enough provision for each day, and God promised to supernaturally feed them in this way until the drought ended. God changed the bucket of provision but continued to be the supernatural source.

I wonder how Elijah filled his time during those days of waiting for the famine to end. I would guess he spent much time in prayer, reflection, and solitude. This was a season of waiting and watching for him. Maybe you can relate by recalling a time when you had to slowly recover from a surgery or illness. Or perhaps you remember a time when you were anticipating something but couldn't do much except sit tight and wait on God's timing.

Today's Scripture Focus

1 Kings 17:17-24

Extra Insight

"Reared in the rugged Gilead, Elijah was a rugged individualist, a man of stern character and countenance, zealous for the Lord."³⁰

Recall a season of waiting and reflection in your life, and write a phrase or two below describing it. (How did you fill your time? Did you know when the season would end?)

During some waiting seasons, I have resorted to watching Netflix and scrolling social media when I feel restless. We have so many choices to fill our time. Some things aren't inherently wrong, but if they keep us from prayer, reflection, and spiritual growth during our waiting seasons, then we won't develop the stamina we need for the trials ahead.

What are some practices that can help build spiritual stamina during a season of waiting?

Whether it is redirecting our minds, meditating on Scripture, making prayer a priority, or surrounding ourselves with the right voices, we must be intentional to prepare in seasons of waiting. Elijah spent much time waiting on God's sovereign plan to unfold. Then tragedy hit in the home where he was experiencing God's supernatural provision.

Read 1 Kings 17:17-18. What happened, and how did the boy's mom respond?

What does this reveal about her beliefs about why bad things happen?

Many people in Old Testament times believed that death and sickness were the result of some hidden sin that now had been brought to light.³¹ Scripture does not support this notion. God *allows* but does not *cause* these things—and the distinction is important. We must guard ourselves from adopting the thinking of the widow of Zarephath, assuming that every tragedy in our lives is God punishing us for something we did wrong. So many passages of Scripture reassure us that God is for us. Our memory verse this week is one of them. God

is a rewarder of those who seek Him. He is not out to get us. While we know that God disciplines like a good Father, He is not punitive. He loved us so much He sent His only Son to save us (John 3:16).

Now turn back to 1 Kings 17, and read verses 19-24. How did Elijah respond to the death of the widow's son?

What did he do first? (v. 19)

What did he ask God? (v. 20)

What did he do next? (v. 21)

Elijah didn't get into a discussion with the widow about cause and effect. Instead, he asked for the boy. The widow had exercised faith by feeding Elijah ahead of her child when they first met, and now she had another opportunity to trust Elijah. We don't know if Elijah had grown close to her son or what their relationship was like, but we do know that Elijah had been there for "some time" when the child died (v. 17). So, Elijah took the boy upstairs to his room and cried out to the Lord. He asked *why*.

Are you asking *why* about something in your life right now? If so, write a prayer to the Lord below, crying out to Him about whatever isn't making sense in your life or the lives of those you love:

I have cried out to the Lord many times with prayers such as these:

- Why is there so much suffering in the world, especially for children?
- Why is my daughter's hair falling out? (At times I even convinced myself that I had caused it with certain foods, stress, etc.)
- Why did my uncle, who loved God with all his heart and was such an example to so many, have to die when he did?

Elijah cried out to God with honest questions when life didn't make sense. Then he did something very bold: he prayed for the child's life to return to him.

Elijah cried out to God with honest questions when life didn't make sense.

No doubt you're familiar with other stories in Scripture of someone coming back to life after they have died. Here are some examples:

- Elijah's assistant, Elisha, raised the son of a woman who had provided for him. (2 Kings 4:35)
- A man was raised to life after touching the bones of Elisha. (2 Kings 13:21)
- Jesus resurrected a widow's son. (Luke 7:13-15)
- Jesus raised Jairus's daughter. (Matthew 9:25)
- Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. (John 11:43-44)
- Many were resurrected when Jesus was crucified. (Matthew 27:52-53)
- Jesus himself was raised from the dead. (Matthew 28:5-7)

While resurrections are certainly rare in the biblical record, we have heard of them. But Elijah didn't boldly ask God to restore life to this boy because he had heard stories that God had done it before. His is the very *first* story in all of Scripture where a dead person comes back to life.

Elijah asked boldly because he knew his God and believed in Him by faith. He had seen the Lord bring food with ravens. He could see a bowl of flour and a container of oil in the kitchen where he was living never being depleted. He knew that if God could do these things, then He could do anything.

By seeing God work in one area, he developed boldness to ask for something even greater. He asked God in faith to restore this child's life. But God didn't answer the first time.

Look again at 1 Kings 17:21. How many times did Elijah stretch himself out over the child and make the request?

Elijah boldly asked repeatedly until he got his answer. There have been times when I've asked for something once and then have given up when an answer didn't come. No doubt I've missed out on answers to prayer by not persisting. Perhaps you have too. More than one pastor has mused that we might find a storeroom in heaven full of all the things God wanted to give us but we never asked for in prayer.

As you consider what doesn't make sense in your life, is there a bold request you would like to make of God? It may seem unlikely, maybe

even impossible. If so, would you bravely pen the words, perhaps asking God for something you may never have dared to ask before?

I believe God can do anything. He can command ravens to feed us. He can cause oil and flour to miraculously appear. He can raise the dead. I also believe we can boldly ask Him for anything. He *invites* us to ask. In Matthew 21:21-22 we find these words of our Savior: “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don’t doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, ‘May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.”

Jesus taught much about prayer to His disciples. He used the story of a friend knocking on a neighbor’s door and asking for bread to illustrate that we should ask with shameless persistence. Then he said, “And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9-10).

I wonder if you, like me, sometimes suffer from prayerlessness or wimpy prayers. We will see that Elijah’s prayer life will be a great key to his faith and spiritual grit. It will be the key to ours as well. As Christians living in today’s world, we could use a little more shameless persistence when it comes to prayer. So many other options vie for our attention, and prayer is certainly a discipline. It takes focus and wrestling.

Of course, we must acknowledge the mystery surrounding prayer. Some prayers are answered immediately while others are not answered for many years. Still other prayers seem to go unanswered. God chose in His divine sovereignty to heal the boy when Elijah prayed, but sometimes God chooses to wait or to answer in a different way than we expect. Even so, there may be times when we do not receive simply because we do not ask or persist in prayer.

Having said that, let’s be real. Sometimes we stop asking because of the disappointment we have felt in those times when we earnestly prayed and saw little or no results. It doesn’t make sense to us. In his excellent book *Prayer: Does It Make a Difference?* Phillip Yancey affirms his belief in the power of prayer to change people and circumstances while acknowledging that prayer does not follow a fixed formula, which can bring disappointment and pain:

I have a file drawer full of letters in response to a book I wrote titled *Disappointment with God*, and every so often I read through those letters. They would silence the mouth of any prosperity-gospel evangelist and break the heart of any sensitive soul. Some tell of relatively trivial unanswered prayers: for example, a baby that refused to sleep and cries louder every time the harried mother prays for relief. Some tell of unanswered prayers with more serious consequences. Scars from abuse not by bullies but by family members. A child with cystic fibrosis. A mother with severe Alzheimer's who has suddenly turned violent. Breast cancer, a brain tumor, pancreatic cancer. The correspondents give a virtual diary of prayers, begun with high hopes, buoyed by support of friends and church, dashed into disappointment.³²

We all can relate in one way or another, can't we? For some of us, there have been times when unanswered prayer has caused us to stop praying. Others of us have continued on but with deep disappointment and confusion. We wonder why some prayers bring miraculous results, such as in Elijah's story, while others seem to lead only to disappointment. After wrestling with this question, looking to Scripture and other resources such as Phillip Yancey's excellent book, I've come to some conclusions. Here are some personal prayer concepts that I hope will help as you sort through your own questions about the mysteries of prayer:

- **We pray because Jesus told us to.** Prayer isn't a magic vending machine to ensure a life of ease and prosperity. Prayer is the way we connect with God. God desires to have a relationship with us, and so He invites us to pray.
- **When we pray, we help realign ourselves with God's kingdom.** Prayer helps us remember things of first importance and loosen our grip on lesser things and worldly distractions.
- **Prayer changes things, so we should ask boldly.** God is loving and patient, and by His very nature He desires to draw us away from sin and toward Him, opening us to His love and blessings. We do not pray to change God's mind about things—though as we see in Scripture, God responds to our humility and repentance with grace and mercy. Rather, prayer changes things most often by changing us. We pray because we know that God loves us, welcomes our prayers, and desires to be active in our lives.
- **Prayer requires perseverance.** Just because we pray doesn't mean that good things will happen. It also doesn't mean that bad things will happen. What it does mean is that as we continually seek God during

both the difficult and dry times as well as the times of peace and joy, we will develop a closeness with Him that sees us through every situation.

- **We should acknowledge the mystery that surrounds prayer.** When something goes well for us—such as a new job, a rescue from danger, or a recovery from sickness or disease—we must be careful about saying that this means God is good. What about those who don't recover or who lose a loved one or job? Was God not good to them? God is good all the time, and there is great mystery surrounding prayer. It is good to praise God at all times, and the ability to do this is a sign of spiritual maturity and stamina.

Take a moment to reread the preceding prayer points in bold, and put a star next to the one that most resonates with you in this phase of your life. Then reflect on the questions below. If you want, make a few notes in the margin.

Where is God asking you to grow in prayer?

Do you need to work through some disappointments in prayer?

Is God calling you to more boldly ask of Him and believe Him?

God invites us to cry out to Him, and I believe He cries with us in the tragedies of life. He is both compassionate and powerful. When things in life don't make sense, we have two choices: we can give in to despair, or we can continue to cry out to God with shameless persistence. I pray we will choose to cling to God in faith so that we can grow in spiritual stamina as we experience His love and peace.

Talk with God

Pour out your heart to God, asking Him for glimpses of grace in the obscurity of life.

Weekly Wrap-Up

Take a moment to review what we've studied this week. Flip back through the lessons and on the following page write an insight from each day that you would like to apply in your life. (Feel free to summarize in your own words or copy an excerpt.) I've provided an example for Day 1.

God invites us to cry out to Him, and I believe He cries with us in the tragedies of life.

Day 1: True Grit

Example: Small compromises can lead me off track in a big way, so I need true grit to stay the course of obedience.

Day 2: Calling Us Back

Day 3: Hiding Out

Day 4: Changing Providers

Day 5: When Life Doesn't Make Sense

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: WEEK 1

1 Kings 17:1—Elijah's first words in his ministry

James 5:17—Elijah prayed earnestly for no rain

Prayer is the _____ between the natural and supernatural.

James 5:16—Prayer is powerful and produces wonderful results

We can recognize the value of _____ seasons.

1 Kings 17:2-6—Elijah is in a season of being cut off

John 21:3—Peter went fishing

1 Kings 17:7—The brook dried up

God often guides through how He _____.

We must _____ in prayer even when we feel like giving up.

1 Kings 17:8-16—God provides for Elijah through a widow