

### *1 Kings 17:24 Now I know...*

In Sunday School, little Jimmy was asked to define the word *faith* for the rest of the class. Precocious young man that he was, Jimmy quickly summed up what he knew and boldly said, “Faith is believing in stuff that you know can’t be true.”

That statement was put before our summer Bible Study class a few weeks ago for their evaluation. (This summer we are looking at aspects of God’s Word that are offensive to others in order to be more confident as we take the Word to them even in the face of criticism and skepticism.) I’ll ask all of you this evening/morning, too. Again, Jimmy defined faith this way, “Faith is believing in stuff that you know can’t be true.” If you were the Sunday School teacher, how would you respond?

Over the next two weeks we are going to look at faith through the lens of God’s Word under the theme *faith trusts...both completely and deeply*. More on faith trusts *deeply* next week, but as we consider how faith trusts *completely* this week, please, join me in prayer...

When it comes to defining faith, one needs to look no further than Hebrews chapter 11, the great *faith* chapter of the New Testament. The writer to the Hebrews explains, *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see*. Some of you, when you were thinking of how to respond to young Jimmy a few moments ago, may have thought of this passage right away. Reading it again...how off the mark was Jimmy? *Was* he off the mark?

As we look at faith, especially as defined by the Book of Hebrews, it is important to understand that the Greek words there for *faith* and *hope* and *being sure* are not based in experience. Jimmy defined faith as “believing in stuff you know can’t be true.” Thomas wanted to believe *after* seeing. But God wants believing, trust, faith, without it.

And yet, faith is not wishful thinking. It is not playing the odds or percentages. It is not crossing your fingers wanting things to go your way. Faith is quite literally a *confidence* of the heart regardless of experience or sight. The truth is, while we’d probably word Jimmy’s definition of faith a little differently, he has captured the essence of faith in a round-about way – *sure of what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see*.

Now, as you may have experienced or imagined, volumes have been written on the concept of faith. Quite frankly, we could spend the next several hours dissecting, defining, and differentiating the finer points of it. But as is often the case, we are best served not with doctrinal dissertations (though they have their place). No, we are best served with a story, as the writer to the Hebrews continues, *For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture* and then he goes on to give example after example of the ancients and their faith in action.

And that’s what we’ll be doing too this week and next, looking to the accounts of the *ancients* to help us understand, appreciate, and grow in faith, specifically looking at the Prophet Elijah and a foreign widow who would come to know the Lord by faith.

It was really a tough assignment Elijah had been given by the Lord. He was sent as a prophet not to the kingdom of Judah but to the rebellious northern ten tribes of Israel and their wicked king in Samaria, King Ahab. Elijah’s assignment was to preach repentance to this almost hopeless people and their leaders, people who were firmly grounded in the worship of the false god Baal.

The fact that God sent him into this seemingly pointless job is a real testimony to God’s long-suffering love for his people. Despite their rebellion against him, God still wanted to try to rescue the souls of Israel for eternity.

And so, as a caring father with a rebellious son, God had to resort to harsh disciplinary measures with them. In this case he sent Elijah to announce that there would

be a famine in the land—that their streams and fields would turn to dust and their bellies would hurt with hunger until they saw fit to own up to their evil ways.

Oh, and Elijah wasn't just sent to announce this from a safe distance. Oh no, he was sent straight to the king himself—to Ahab—to lay down the law. This is the first time the Bible records that these two met. As you might imagine, accusing and threatening is not the best way to get to know somebody—particularly a king who has an army. Understandably, though not innocently, Ahab's hatred for Elijah would grow from this time forward to the point that eventually Ahab would even try to kill Elijah.

But faith trusts and, in the face of a difficult and depressing ministry to which God called Elijah, Elijah took up the work he'd been given. He went to Ahab and announced: ***As surely as the LORD lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand, there will be no dew or rain during the coming years, except at my word.***

It must have been difficult to announce God's discipline even if it didn't directly impact Elijah, too. But he needn't worry. The Lord would take care of him. Soon after Elijah had made his announcement to Ahab, the word of the LORD came to Elijah again: ***Leave this place and turn east. Hide yourself by the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the stream, and I will command the ravens to provide for you there.*** And provide for Elijah he did—just as he promised – by means of an unusual miracle. We're told, ***The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening, and he drank from the stream.***

First, what a strong statement God was making to the people of Israel here. By causing famine he shows the impotence of Baal, the supposed “nature” god. But secondly, what a strong statement this must have been to Elijah! By demonstrating that he was completely in control of the famine, of Israel, of Elijah's circumstances, God provided the means, the power, and the circumstances for faith to trust completely. Because you see, faith is being entrusted

with the ability and the opportunity to completely and confidently place the heart in line with the will of God. Let me say that again...

You see, this was the first time the Word of the Lord had come to Elijah. This was the first time Elijah proclaimed the Word of the Lord. This was the first time he had been entrusted with the power to both will and work the mission set before him by the Lord. Elijah's evaluation of the situation would have been simply this: God said it. I believed it. So I did it. But don't think for a moment that there was something special about Elijah, that if it were you and me things would have gone drastically differently. No, the Apostle James described it this way, ***Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.*** (James 5:17)

What a strong statement to the likes of you and me! Elijah was just like you and me. You and I are just like him – redeemed children of Christ, bought to be God's own, washed clean in the blood of his Son, empowered by the strength of his Spirit, called a mission—just like Elijah.

And when we do the work God has assigned to us, we have nothing to fear. He will feed us and clothe us, and he will demonstrate to us that he's fully in control. God never hangs his people out to dry. He stays by our side as we live our faith and share his love.

Just look at Elijah. The Lord showed his love to Elijah, encouraging Elijah's faith. But the Lord also wanted Elijah to share that love and faith with others. ***After some time the stream dried up because there had been no rain in the land.*** <sup>8</sup>***Then the word of the LORD came to him:*** <sup>9</sup>***“Get up! Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there. I have commanded a woman there, a widow, to provide for you.”*** <sup>10</sup>***So he got up and went to Zarephath. He came to the city gate, and there he saw a widow gathering sticks. He called to her and said, “Please give me a little water in a jar, so that I can have something to drink.”*** <sup>11</sup>***When she went to get it, he called to her, “Please bring me a piece of bread.”***

The famine that had plagued Israel had spread over her northern borders into present-day Lebanon. The poor widow that Elijah met at the town gate was suffering too. She had no husband to provide for her and her only son. She and her son were on the brink of starvation themselves, as she explained: *As surely as the LORD your God lives, I have no food except a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a pitcher. See, I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go and prepare it for myself and my son, so that we can eat it and then die.*

Understand, this woman was a Canaanite—one of the people the Israelites had been commanded to avoid because of their wicked religion. And yet somehow, she had come to the God of Israel. Maybe she had a passing faith in the Lord, or a basic respect for all gods in a polytheistic way, or at the very least recognized Elijah for *his* faith because of his ethnicity. Regardless, the Lord was using what she knew and the circumstances she endured to once again provide both the power to trust and the opportunity to do so.

*Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid. Go and do just as you said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and bring it out to me. Then go and make another for you and your son. <sup>14</sup>For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says. The jar of flour will not run out and the pitcher of oil will not become empty until the day the LORD sends rain to water the surface of the ground.” <sup>15</sup>So she went and did exactly as Elijah said.*

Sometimes God pushes *us* to the limits of our faith, too, doesn't he? Sometimes he sends tests and challenges and seemingly impossibilities and completely crazy situations – the droughts of life...all to provide the power and opportunity for faith to trust *completely*. We don't always like it. We don't always appreciate it. We often wish that the Lord didn't have such high expectations of us. But when we see his power at work in us, faith trusts all the more, even completely. For our jars of flour never run out and our pitchers of oil never run dry just as the Lord promises. Amen.

