

# Sermon: Faith Is Counter-Intuitive

Text: I Kings 17

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**Introduction:** What do I mean by “counter-intuitive?” Counter-intuitive is an adjective that means counter to what intuition would lead one to expect, e.g., the direction we had to follow was counterintuitive—we had to go north first before we went south. It also means contrary to what intuition or common sense would indicate.”

On the *Seinfeld* show (Season 5, Ep 22: *The Opposite*) George comes to the realization that he should try to do the opposite of everything (**one might say be counter-intuitive**), so he does, his luck changes and everything begins to go his way including getting a girlfriend, a job with the Yankees and moving out of his parents’ house. At the same time, things begin to be unlucky for Elaine after she buys a box of “Jujyfruits.” Kramer appears on Regis & Kathie Lee to promote his coffee table book. Rachel wants to break up with Jerry and he readily agrees, because his luck has been “even Steven.” Elaine’s eating of “Jujyfruits” causes Pendant Publishing to go under, and later she realizes that she and George have traded places.

Yet, faith is not about “working a system.” Faith is a love-based relationship where it is unimportant to get your own way. From a *human perspective* faith is counter-intuitive. It is a relationship that calls for being last to be first; dying, to live; and being humble in order to be exalted.

The story we have in I Kings 17 is about an unknown man, to this point, called Elijah (no not my grandson), a man called to be God’s prophet in a time when no one wanted to listen to any God-talk.

Before you think that **17:1** is abrupt we need to read a few verses before this.

**I Kings 16:30-33 (NIV)** <sup>30</sup>Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. <sup>31</sup>He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. <sup>32</sup>He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. <sup>33</sup>Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Whatever was going to be done to Ahab, he had it coming.

**I Kings 17:1 (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

For a man to come into the presence of the king and challenge him, you would think he had a death-wish. Yet it is clear that Elijah had already settled the question of whom he served.

It seems strange to us that God brings Elijah into the court of King Ahab and then has Elijah leave for a foreign country, but I think part of the reason may have been to perform miracles to help instill faith for the days ahead because:

## **I. We Want Results We Can See.**

**I Kings 17:2-6 (NIV)** <sup>2</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: <sup>3</sup>“Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. <sup>4</sup>You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.” <sup>5</sup>So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. <sup>6</sup>The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

There are many ways that God takes care of his children. He has promised to do that, but it takes faith to live it! One way is miracles.

### **A. Miracles are good.**

God is a great provider. He also is not restricted in his methods as to how he provides. Moses had seen manna from heaven, quail, and water from rock. This is all counter-intuitive to us.

Elijah could have hidden with the other prophets Obadiah was caring for, but God had another plan.

I have to believe that many of us could tell of times when God provided something and the process was extraordinary and even miraculous. Miracles are good!

### **B. Miracles don't always last.**

**I Kings 17:7 (NIV)** <sup>7</sup>Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

The question is not so much how do you receive miracles, but what do you do when water is running out, when food is in short supply, and when courage is changing to despair.

Miracles cannot be done continuously. That would require “no faith.” One does always need to listen to God, though, so that we hear him when he speaks through his word, through prayer and through his people.

## II. We Want God to Work for Us.

Jesus came to earth as a servant just as the prophet Isaiah had foretold. God has never been opposed to serving us because of his love for us. In fact, he died for us, but:

### A. God may want us to do something.

Many times we have said, why does God put up with that, or why doesn't so-and-so do something. Maybe God is waiting on you or me to confront a wrong or supply a need. In our story, it is not the rich person in the village that is asked to help the prophet of God, although God works with the rich, too. No, in our story, it is a lowly, desperately poor widow who has the worst of mental outlooks for the future.

God has a plan where from everyone:

### B. Sacrifice is required.

**I Kings 17:8-16 (NIV)**<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to him: <sup>9</sup>“Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.” <sup>10</sup>So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.” <sup>12</sup>“As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.” <sup>13</sup>Elijah said to her, “Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’” <sup>15</sup>She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. <sup>16</sup>For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

So, inspite of how the future appeared, the widow obeyed God; and as a result, she received a blessing.

No one likes to give up what provides them with security (That's counter-intuitive), yet God sometimes tells us: "I am all you need; trust me! I'll take care of you." John P. Casey says a wise thing about faith: "Our trust grows when we give to God in ways that make us dependant on him."

And the Hebrew writer quoting the OT ([Deuteronomy 31:6](#) and [Psalm 118:6, 7](#)) adds: [Hebrews 13:5-6 \(NIV\)](#) <sup>5</sup>Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." <sup>6</sup>So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

As a congregation we need to be in serious prayer, not so much about our financial condition, but our relationship with God. We need to sacrifice that precious commodity called time and pray more - and pray for Kingdom victories. We need to give more money to the Lord's work. We need to clear our schedules for the study of God's word and the support of the church's programs.

Elijah was known as a man of prayer. It may have started at the brook, but it was actualized on Mount Carmel and in his mentoring of Elisha and through his experiences of listening to and obeying God. [James 5:16b-18 \(NIV\)](#) <sup>16b</sup> The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

**Illus.** The story is told of a small town in which there were no liquor stores. Eventually, however, a nightclub was built right on Main Street. Members of one of the churches in the area were so disturbed that they conducted several all-night prayer meetings, and asked the Lord to burn down that den of iniquity. Lightning struck the tavern a short time later, and it was completely destroyed by fire. The owner, knowing how the church people had prayed, sued them for the damages. His attorney claimed that their prayers had caused the loss. The congregation, on the other hand, hired a lawyer and fought the charges. After much deliberation the judge declared, "It's the opinion of this court that wherever the guilt may lie, the tavern keeper is the one who really believes in prayer while the church members do not!"

The older you are and the longer you are on this earth, the more you will probably experience trials and heartache. These are meant to help us develop faith. Never are our troubles meant to move us away from God. We all know: just when things are going pretty well, something may happen.

**Illus.** Let me see if this sounds familiar. You have just paid all your bills and you actually have some money left over and something happens to take that sum and a little more. Kids need braces, you get laid off, the car quits. You name it! I have had people come to me and wonder how God could allow something awful, like a sudden death, to occur - after all they had been faithful to God.

Let's continue to listen to the text.

**I Kings 17:17-24 (NIV)**<sup>17</sup>Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. <sup>18</sup>She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" <sup>19</sup>"Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. <sup>20</sup>Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" <sup>21</sup>Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" <sup>22</sup>The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. <sup>23</sup>Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" <sup>24</sup>Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

Throughout our text we hear time references: years, stayed, some time later, until, and even as we peek at chapter 18 we hear:

**I Kings 18:1a (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>After a long time, in the third year,

I know most of us don't like to wait on much of anything or anyone:

### **III. We Want Results Now.**

We live in a world that demands results now and instant gratification.

#### **A. God's timing may be different from ours.**

Just like Moses, Elijah approaches the king and may have expected Ahab to change his evil ways. But just like Pharaoh, Ahab goes from bad to worse by refusing to submit to the authority of the one and only king of the universe.

It took Elijah nearly 4 years to get to a point where there would be a God-sponsored "contest" to help the people decide who they should serve.

Sometimes it takes years to accomplish what God has in mind. After Judah falls, it would still be almost 600 years before the Messiah would come from a less-than-perfect list of relatives.

**B. Strong faith happens over time.**

Elijah was not always fearless for the Lord. Sometimes he would run for his life. He made mistakes like everyone, but he learned from them. He learned that God was dependable and trustworthy in every circumstance. It was only later he could pass on the strength that came from these life-experiences to Elisha.

Last week we talked about the eldership some. One of the qualifications to be a shepherd of God's flock is that the man not be a novice (young and inexperienced), but has seen God work in his life and others.

Even the widow finally came to understand the fullness of God's love when she said to Elijah: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth (17:24)."

**Conclusion:** Man's way of thinking says: "God, show yourself now, and I'll have faith." God says sometimes "you need to do what I have commanded, and then you will see me."

There is a pattern in the story of Elijah we need to notice: God commands, someone obeys; and *then* there is a miracle. If we are not going to obey God even when it makes little sense, how will God bless us with a miracle? We will only get what we expected and that is hardly something we can call faith or grow from.

J. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China once said. "In every great work attempted for God, there are always three stages: impossible, difficult, done." The hardest step of any great work for God is the first one, the impossible part. Eventually the impossible can only be seen as difficult, and that is when the difficult can be done.

We are certainly living in uncertain times not unlike Elijah and the widow in today's OT text. The question is whether we will obey God by giving more to the Church even though that may be counter-intuitive in these economic times. I personally think it makes more sense to follow God and let Him be our supply of *whatever* we need!