FIRST KINGS 17:1–6. (EHV)

> Elijah from Tishbe, one of the settlers in Gilead, said to Ahab, "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." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "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." So Elijah went and did just as the LORD had said. He lived in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening, and he drank from the stream.

One of the first things I noticed when we moved here was that people measured rainfall in hundredths of an inch. That by itself told me right from the start not only how much you valued rain, but also that it maybe wasn't the easiest to come by. Not too long after we moved here, I read a history of South Dakota that backed that up. It included a rainfall map that shows that, generally speaking, the annual rainfall decreases in South Dakota as you go from east to west, and that most of Tripp County averages only 18–20 inches of rainfall a year, and that Todd County only averages 16–18 inches. And even during a year with good rainfall, the moisture levels can still be spoiled by evaporation, due to low humidity, high temperatures, and of course persistent wind.

It's no wonder the farmers value rain so much. It's no wonder that, in an area largely dependent on agriculture, we talk about it so much. It's no wonder that, even after a good rainfall, I will commonly hear people say that we could still use some more. I once commented to one of you that it seems like no amount of rainfall is ever enough, and I asked him if he could ever think of a time in his life when he thought we had had enough rain. He thought for a moment and said, "Once."

So can you imagine if there was not any rain and not even any dew for *years*? This passage only records Elijah prophesying that there would not be any dew or rain "during the coming years." James in the New Testament tells us it ended up being three and a half years. Can you imagine what that would do the local economy? And isn't that prospect perhaps what is behind many of the conversations about moisture and rainfall? Isn't there perhaps the worry in the background that, if we had a serious, prolonged drought, we would be ruined?

But is that true? Would we be ruined? That's what God wants us to wrestle with this morning, as he shows us how he provided physically for Elijah, even during a drought, just as he does for us.

Elijah is one of the most well-known prophets in the Old Testament because of all the interesting experiences he had. But in spite of the fact that we have so many stories about his ministry, we don't know much about his background. These verses are the first time he is mentioned in the Scriptures, and he sort of just bursts upon the scene. Suddenly there he is, making a prophecy about no moisture. We're only told that he was from Tishbe in Gilead, but we don't even know exactly where that was, except that it was on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Now, in the larger context, it is clear that the Lord didn't just have Elijah make this prophecy randomly. He clearly intended it as a spiritual wakeup call for the people especially of

the Northern Kingdom under King Ahab. They were worshipping the gods of Baal and Asherah. We find out later that there were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah that were supported by the king and queen of Israel. And there were only a couple hundred prophets of the Lord, including Elijah, who mostly had to live and work in secrecy for fear of punishment.

So, since Baal was a weather-god, God wanted to show them how powerless their god was and how useless their false worship was. So he had Elijah prophesy that there would be neither dew nor rain during the coming years, until he said that the rain would return.

Now there are a couple things to note here. First, God controls the weather, including the rain. There isn't one drop that falls that he isn't responsible for, and when it doesn't fall, he is responsible for that, too. God actually underscored this truth in a gripping way, which we find out when he tells Elijah to go to the Kerith Ravine and that Elijah drank from the stream there. The Hebrew word for "ravine" is more properly translated *wadi*. A wadi is a ravine that only has water during the rainy season. During the dry season it dries up. So the fact that Elijah was able to drink from the stream there, and was able to do so for some time, probably several months, means that Elijah made his prophecy, and that it therefore stopped raining, right in the middle of the rainy season.

In other words, it didn't matter what was normal. It didn't matter what the forecast was. And of course, it didn't matter how many sacrifices and prayers they offered to Baal. God was in control of the weather, and he still is.

And second, the Lord had a good reason for withholding rain. In South Dakota, generally the rainfall decreases as you go from east to west, but in Israel it was and is the opposite. Generally the rainfall decreases as you go from west to east—where Elijah lived. So Elijah didn't take any pleasure in making this prophecy. It was going to affect those in his own hometown and homeland worse than it affected others. He made the prophecy because the Lord had him make it, and the Lord decreed it because he had to for the sake of the spiritual welfare of the people.

So, too, today, if the Lord withholds rain, he has his reasons. And we do well during times of drought to examine ourselves and to reset our priorities and to make sure we are seeking first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and not pursuing other things and people as gods. Actually, we do well to do that all the time, so that God doesn't have to withhold rain to give us a spiritual wakeup call in the first place.

So it's all well and good for Elijah to make the prophecy. But what is he going to do now? Outwardly speaking, his life depends on the agriculture and economy of the area just as much as anyone else's does.

Well, God was not about to abandon him. The word of the Lord comes to him: "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."

Note how God underscores for Elijah not just that he is in control of the weather, but also that he is responsible for our livelihood and provision, not the rain, not the economy, not any other earthly factor. First, right after decreeing that there would be no dew or rain, he has Elijah go east, where there is ordinarily less rainfall to begin with! That would like if there was a drought here, and God said, "Don't worry, I will provide for you. Just pick up and move eighty

miles farther west." And second, he tells him that he is going to have ravens provide for him. I don't know if he could have picked a more selfish, non-sharing species to provide for Elijah.

But sure enough: "Elijah went and did just as the LORD had said. He lived in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening, and he drank from the stream." The ravens didn't just share with him. They shared with him every single day. Twice a day. This regular bizarre activity by these otherwise selfish birds showed Elijah that it was clearly God providing for his physical needs through these birds.

God certainly didn't provide in a miraculous way like this for all of his faithful people. But we can be sure that he did provide for all of them one way or another, in spite of the lack of rainfall for three and a half years. As Jesus himself told the devil, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." God will provide for our physical needs, and if he needs to drive us further into a barren area to do it, he will. If he needs to use selfish ravens to do it, he will. If he needs to take five loaves and two fish and multiply it to feed a crowd of five thousand-plus, he will.

What does this mean for us?

At funerals we often talk about how Christians grieve like everyone else, but the difference should be that they don't grieve like those who have no hope. A similar thing should be true for us when talking about the weather. Christians talk about the weather and the rainfall like everyone else, but the difference should be that there isn't any worry, hopelessness, or despair hanging in the background that would come to the foreground if the rain actually stopped falling. He who did not spare his own Son for us, but gave him up for us all, he who has already richly provided for our eternity, will certainly see to it that those who put their trust in him have food and shelter here on earth, no matter what the weather or economic circumstances are like.

Not too long ago I read an article in *The Farmer & Rancher Exchange*, in which the author was cataloguing some sayings that her parents' generation had. She said her father had two sayings: "It always rains a half-hour before it's too late," and, "It will rain when it's supposed to." I would be very surprised if that author's father was not a Christian man. It always does rain a half-hour before it's too late. Even if it doesn't rain for three and a half years, the rain will still come a half-hour before it's too late, because it will rain when it's supposed to. And of course our gracious, all-powerful, and all-wise God is the one who determines when it's supposed to.

So we can say with David, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). And we can say with Habakkuk: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Hab. 3:17–18).

Why can we still rejoice? In part because, just as the Lord provided for Elijah's physical needs, he will also always provide for ours. He controls the weather. He is responsible for our food and shelter. He controls everything. And most importantly, we have the guarantee that he loves us in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.