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1 Kings 17:17-24

### Sermon Outline

#### INTRODUCTION

1. Image: When Josephine and I dated long distance, the distance limited our ability to connect.
2. Need: Distance strains relationships
3. Subject: What does God do when people find themselves distant from God?
4. Text: 1 Kings 17:17-24
5. Preview: We will look at three things that God does when people are far off.

#### BODY

- I. God allows people to experience the strain of distance (17:17-18)
  - A. God allows the widow at Zarephath to experience the strain of distance.
    1. The widow believes her sin causes the death of her son (17:17-18)
    2. Death creates a distance that no one can overcome.
      - a. Famine in the land indicated the death of Baal
      - b. She could do nothing to save the life of her son
  - B. Our experience of strain indicates distance in our relationship with God.
- II. God appoints his people to intercede for the distant (17:19-21)
  - A. God appoints Elijah to intercede for the widow (17:19-21)
    1. God sent Elijah to the widow when Israel experienced famine (17:8-9)
    2. Elijah takes the son of the widow into his room (17:19)
    3. Elijah prays for the son of the widow twice (17:20-21)
  - B. Pray for those who are distant because only God can overcome the distance.
- III. God overcomes the distance with resurrection (17:22-24)
  - A. God overcomes the distance of death by resurrecting the widow's son (17:22-24)
    1. Elijah laying on the child three times anticipates resurrection (17:21)
      - a. God creates seed on the third day (Gen 1:11-13)
      - b. Jesus teaches about a kernel of wheat need to die before it yields fruit (John 12:24)
      - c. Abraham finds the place to sacrifice Isaac on the third day (Gen 22:4)
    2. God answers Elijah's prayer by resurrecting his son (17:22-23)
    3. The woman recognizes only God's word spoken through Elijah has power to overcome the distance of death (17:24)

- B. No one is too far from God because of resurrection
- C. Embrace the resurrection that God offers you through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

1. Summary: God allows people to experience the strain of distance. God appoints his people to intercede for the distant. God overcomes the distance with resurrection.
2. Closing Image: A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too.

MANUSCRIPT

**When Josephine and I began dating, we dated long distance.** She lived and worked in southern California. I worked and went to school in Dallas Fort Worth. To see each other, one of us would need to fly three and a half hours. Since we had limited vacation time, we could only see other for a weekend every few months. The distance we learned limited our ability to connect.

For instance, if a new movie came out, then I couldn't take Josephine to go see it that weekend. I'd have to wait until our next planned in-person trip. If Josephine wanted to try out a new Japanese restaurant, she would need to wait until I came to LA. If I wanted to hold Josephine's hand, then I had to wait. She couldn't visit my small group. I couldn't visit hers. The distance prevented us from having more shared experiences. It limited our ability to connect.

After dating for a year, we began to talk about the possibility of marriage. I asked Josephine: what do you think about dating long distance for another three years until I finish seminary? Her look told me: "Are you serious?" She simply said: "No". Josephine recognized that three more years of dating long distance would strain the relationship. Three months later, I asked her to marry me. The rest is history.

But the takeaway from me reviewing my dating story is that **distance strains relationships**. Being far apart stresses relational connection. Relational bonds experience fatigue. Such separation is hard.

Let's think a little about distance. There are three types of distance that can produce relational strain. First, there's physical distance. Recall your senior year in High School. Spring semester. The last month before graduation. Everyone passes around year books for classmates to sign. Some of your friends will write: "Stay in touch! Let remain connected after graduation!" People move away for college. How many of these classmates do you remain in contact with? Social media doesn't count. I imagine that you have lost contact with many of them. Physical distance strained those relationships. Some of you don't have parents who live in Houston. Think about the strain the distance causes on your familial relationships.

First type of distance. Geographical distance. Second type. Mental distance. Imagine you're talking with a friend. He's sharing about a difficult week at work. He learned that his company plans on a companywide 20% lay off. He worries that he might receive a pink slip. As he shares with you, your mind wanders. Did I remember to lock my doors before I left the house? Oh! Before I forget, I must pay my credit card bill. I just received a notification. How long is this conversation going to last? I'm supposed to finish planning for small group tonight. You space out. That's why when someone catches you spacing out they might say: "Earth to Henry." If your friend catches you creating mental distance by spacing out, then it will lead to strain in the relationship.

Mental Distance. Lastly, there's emotional distance. Imagine your daughter sharing about her day. She retells an episode from recess. A group of gals got together to organize a volleyball game. They chose a team captains. The captains begin to choose their teammates. Your daughter shares that she really wanted to be on Megan's team. But

instead, Ruth selected her. You can visibly see that this bothers her. This prompts you to say: “It’s ok, honey. Why don’t you just ask Ruth next time to select you for her time next time?” Wrong comment. This prompts your daughter to shout: “Dad! You don’t understand. You’re not listening! You don’t understand how I’m feeling.” Dad’s comment created emotional distance. Such distance strains the relationship.

Now if physical, mental, and emotional distance strains our relationship with one another, then it’s not too much of a stretch to say that distance also strains our relationship with God too. The longer you remain disconnected from a church community, God seems further off. When you fill your mind with thoughts of projects at work, chores to do, ministry that requires your attention, the next episode of a TV series, or the latest news instead of thoughts about God, God seems distant. When your heart focuses on your desires rather than an affection for God, your heart feels far from God. One might say it even feels cold.

Many of us can probably share times when God did feel distant. Reading the bible resembles a chore. You go through the motions of prayer. When members of the church frustrate you, you find yourself asking God: why are these people here? It’s normal to feel these things. As God’s people, there are times when we feel close to him. But at other times, he seems far off.

But what does God do in those moments? **What does God do when people find themselves distant from God?** What action does he take when people feel miles away from him? What does God do to close the distance when people struggle to sense his presence?

To answer this question, we'll turn to the passage that Akhil just read for us in 1 Kings. For the following weeks leading up to Easter, our church is participating in a church-wide prayer movement called *Awaken Houston*. Churches participating in this movement will be fasting and praying for revival our city. The planners hope to see 100,000 believers participating in praying and fasting and 1,000 people receive baptism in the next 40 days. Churches involved in Awaken Houston are going through the same preaching series called *The Dead Shall Rise*. In this series, we'll be looking at different accounts of when God raised the dead.

We will begin the series in this passage from 1 Kings. If you have your Bibles, then please turn there with me. **1 Kings, chapter 17**. 1 Kings, chapter 17.

Before we get into this morning's text, let me give you some background to 1 Kings. 1 and 2 Kings are one book in the Jewish Bible. But in our Bibles, we split them up into two books. 1 and 2 Kings. 1 and 2 Kings covers a specific period of Israel's history. It begins with the rise of king Solomon. Solomon's idolatry causes God to split the kingdom of Israel into two. The northern kingdom of Israel. The southern kingdom of Judah. The sins of both kingdoms cause God eventually to send them into exile.

Now some believe that the structure of 1 and 2 Kings resembles a Chiasm or the letter X. The middle of the Chiasm or the X is the focus of the book. If you trace the different accounts within 1 and 2 Kings, then you'll discover that the story of two prophets are in the middle of the book. Elijah and Elisha. Our text today is in that middle section. 1 Kings, chapter 17.

This morning, **we'll look at three things that God does when people are far off.**

We'll see three different actions that God undertakes. We'll look at three things he carries out.

Let's begin with the first thing that God does when people are far off. First, **God allows people to experience the strain of distance.** He allows them to feel the discomfort. He steps aside so that people can feel the unpleasantness of the distance. He permits people to experience the pain associated with distance. **God allows people to experience the strain of distance.**

In the text, **we see that God allows the widow at Zarephath to experience the strain of distance.** The pain of being of far from Him. The hardship of not being close to Him.

The widow believes her sin causes the death of her son. Look at verse 17. *After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, "What have you done against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and cause the death of my son!"*

She understands what caused the distance between her and God. Sin. Now she doesn't specify what the sin is. But the text reveals that she recognizes that sin has consequences. It separates. It creates distance.

Think about it. Sin creates distance between us and others. If we gossip about someone and they find out, then your relationship becomes strained. If we fail to complete

our work as our bosses direct, then our bosses will not trust us with future assignments. When we feel jealous toward other people for their relationships or their possessions, we think to ourselves: Why are they in that group? They don't deserve to be. Why do they have nice things while I get hand me downs? These thoughts create feelings of bitterness and estrange us from others. Sin creates distance between us and others.

But sin also creates distance between us and God. The sin of Adam and Eve causes God to cast them out of his presence. It prevents us from having a relationship with Him. If we fail to address our sin, then this distance between us will result in the ultimate strain. Death.

The woman believes that if Elijah had never entered her life, then her son would still have lived. Look again at the latter half of verse 18. *You have come to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son.* Elijah represents the presence of God. To God's people, he represented comfort. To those far from God, he represented judgment. The widow attributes the death of her son to the judgment of God.

**Death creates a distance that no one can overcome.** The woman could do nothing to save the life her son. No amount of prayer. No amount of grief. No amount of sacrifice could bring her dead son back. Death creates a chasm that no person can bridge.

What does this mean for us? If distance exists between us and God and we have experienced the strain, then we must express it. We need to convey how we feel. Tell God. Tell other believers.



Look at the woman's response. She doesn't quite yet have a relationship with God. She has seen God miraculously provide food for her family during a famine. But the text does not express that she believes in God. Despite her unbelief, she complains to Elijah.

We can express our complaints to God. When we read the Psalms, we read accounts of people of people experiencing the strain of distance between them and God. The strain doesn't lead them to despair. Instead, the strain causes them to pray. It leads them to pour out their hearts to God. Would we do the same? Do we allow the strain of distance to lead us to our knees? Does it prompt us to pray?

First thing God does do when people find themselves far from God, he allows them to experience the strain of distance. Let's look at the second thing that God does.

**God appoints people to intercede for the distant.** He sends individuals to help. He selects people to serve as mediators. He uses his people to help those who feel far from him. **God appoints people to intercede for the distant.**

We see in the text that **God appoints Elijah to intercede for the widow.** He specifically sends Elijah to help the widow. God provides help through Elijah in two ways. First, **God sends Elijah to save the widow and her son from starvation.**

Before this section, Elijah informs the king of Israel that God will withhold rain from the land because Israel had begun to worship Baal. Baal controlled storms and rain. Elijah by his pronouncement essentially said: "If your storm god, Baal, is so great, then let him provide rain for you. But the Lord, your God, will withhold it." Israel's worship of Baal created distance between them and God.

The lack of rain caused the land to experience drought. It didn't only cause drought in the land of Israel, but it caused drought in the neighboring land of Sidon. The widow resides in the city of Zarephath within the land of Sidon. Baal worship originated from Sidon. One might call it the home of Baal worship. If you read the end of 1 Kings, chapter 16, then you'll discover that Jezebel, a Sidonian princess, introduces Baal worship to the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 16:31).

During this time of famine, I'm sure that many widows in the kingdom of Israel experienced hunger and potentially starvation. But God didn't send Elijah to any of them. Instead, he set Elijah specifically to a widow in Sidon.

God sends Elijah to this widow to show that his rule extends even to the homeland of Baal worship. Baal could not take care of the widow and her son. But the God of Israel could. His intervention saved the life of the widow and her son from starvation.

God could cross the boundaries of land to save the widow and her son from hunger. But could he cross the boundary of life and death to save her dead son?

Let's look at the second way that God helps the widow through Elijah. **God sends Elijah to save the son of the widow from death.** Look at verse 19. *And he said to her, 'Give me your son.'* *And he took him from her arms and carried him into the upper room where he lodged and laid him on his own bed. And he cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son? Then he stretched himself out upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my god, let this child's life come into him again."*

Note that Elijah prays to God twice. **His first prayer express belief God has power over death.** Look again at verse 20: “*O Lord, my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?*” Elijah does not know why the boy died. But he acknowledges that God had allowed her son to die. Elijah’s question raises another question. Is God’s power limited? God can save the son from starvation. But can God rescue him from death?

This leads to the second prayer. Elijah asks God to restore the life of the boy. Look again at verse 21. *O Lord, my God, let this child’s life come into him again.* He knows if God caused the boy’s death, then God has the power to also restore his life.

We see that God is not limited by the borders of Israel. Even death cannot hold God at bay. If God can overcome any distance, then it should prompt us to ask others to pray us. **Ask others to pray for us when we feel distant because only God can overcome the distance.**

To admit that God feels distant requires a lot a humility. We often prefer to project that we have it all together. Our work. Our studies. Our family life. Our walk with the Lord. But if we begin to invite people to pray for us so that God would draw near to us, then I wonder if more of us would experience greater intimacy with God.

Imagine what might happen if we ask people to pray for us when God feels distant. It would change things. We might sense a renewed delight in God’s word. God may prompt us to return to community. We might find ourselves led to pray more frequently. God might allow us to experience a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Second thing that God does when people find themselves distant from God. God appoints his people to intercede for the distant. Let's move on to the third thing that God does.

**God overcomes the distance with resurrection.** He closes the distance because he alone has the power bring life out of death. He draws near by brining to life dry bones. He revitalizes and refreshes that which has died. **God overcomes the distance with resurrection.**

**God overcomes the distance of death by resurrecting the widow's son.** Let's look at some details within the text.

First, **Elijah laying on the child three times anticipates resurrection.** Look at verse 21. *Then he stretched himself upon the child three times.*

Normally, no Israelite would not touch any dead body. To touch a dead body would make them ceremonially unclean. But Elijah lays on top of the dead boy not once but three times. Elijah may have laid on the boy to depict two spiritual realities.

First, **Elijah identified with the death of the boy.** It resembles how Moses identified himself with the nation of Israel when they committed idolatry. In other words, if God didn't save the child, then God should consider Elijah dead. One might say that Elijah offered himself as a substitute for the boy.

Second, **Elijah as a man of God representing the word of God confers life.** The word of God provides life. Recall how God speaks, and creation comes into being. Later in

the book of 2 Kings, there is an account of marauders throwing a dead person into the grave of Elisha. It causes the dead person to return to life. Elijah laying on the boy depicts how encountering God's word brings life.

There is also another odd detail in the text. Elijah lays on the boy three times. If Elijah wanted to act out substitution and restoration of life, then he would have laid on the boy once. But he did it three times. Why?

Some believe that the number three is associated with the idea of resurrection. We see this in creation account. If you recall, God creates seed on the third day (Gen 1:11-13). Jesus uses an illustration of a seed to describe resurrection. He teaches about a kernel of wheat needing to die before it yields fruit (John 12:24).

The number three occurs also in the account of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. He finds the place to sacrifice Isaac on the third day (Gen 22:4). Recall how the sacrifice of Isaac resembles a resurrection account. Abraham offers up Isaac believing that God could raise him from the dead.

The number three also occurs when Israel reaches Mount Sinai after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 19:11). It takes them three days for Israel to prepare before God descends and gives them the law establishing them as his people. Israel undergoes a metaphorical resurrection. They go from being slaves in Egypt to the covenant people of God.

Think of Jesus Christ. He kept telling his disciples that he would die and rise three days later. Jesus laid in the tomb for three days and rose again from the dead.

Hence, Elijah likewise lays on the boy three times to anticipate a resurrection. After he lays on the boy three times, he prays for God to restore the life of the boy.

God answers Elijah's prayer by resurrecting the son. Look at verse 22. *And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See your son lives."*

Note that this is the first time that resurrection occurs in the Bible. But this prompts a realization in the woman. **The woman recognizes that only God's word spoke through Elijah has power to overcome the distance of death.** Look at verse 24. *And the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord is in your mouth is true."* The woman now believes. Only the resurrection of her son results in faith.

What does this show us? **No one is too far from God because of resurrection.** God can cross even the boundary of death to bring someone back to life. He can enter the underworld and restore to life the dead. It validates the power of God.

No sin is so severe that God cannot draw near to you. Maybe you struggle with body image issues. You think that God cannot come close to you. Maybe you struggle with holding a grudge. You think that God cannot come close to you. Maybe you struggle with a cold heart toward spiritual things. You think that God cannot come close to you.

But he can. Resurrection means that if you allow Him to kill these struggles, then he can bring new life out from the ashes. You give up trying to have a body that resembles the

ideal body of the world, and you believe that God has made you beautiful in the image of God. This allows you to experience a new freedom. You decide to let go of a grudge toward others because God has forgiven you in Christ. Therefore, you kill your grudge holding self and God raises up a new person able to extend forgiveness toward others. You admit that your heart is cold toward spiritual things because you cannot admit that you are a sinner that needs a savior. But you know deep down that you need help. God transforms your heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Resurrection has power.

**Embrace the resurrection that God offers you so that he might draw close to you.** Allow Him to kill the desires of life and raise up new desires to please him. This begins with a deep understanding of the gospel. Jesus drew close to us by becoming a man. But through his death and resurrection we are even closer to God because his spirit indwells us. No one is too far from Him.

To summarize, God does three things when we find ourselves far from him. First, **God allows people to experience the strain of distance.** Second, **God appoints his people to intercede for the distant.** Lastly, **God overcomes the distance with resurrection.**

**Let close with an illustration that I've used before to describe again the power of resurrection.** A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had insignias put

all over the slab saying, “I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don’t believe in it.”

Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and said, “if an acorn, which has the power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God’s resurrection power do in a person’s life?”

Just as an acorn can split that slab, so does the power of resurrection remove any obstacle that creates distance between you and God. You receive the power of resurrection when you believe in Jesus as your savior and Lord. God through the Holy Spirit removes obstacles such as bitterness, insecurity, fear and self-doubt. He enables you to draw closer to God. May God help us recognize that because of resurrection no one is too far from God. Let’s pray.