Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the favourite hymns of the church is *Trust and Obey*: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” We will sing it after the sermon and it’s a hymn that parents teach their children because it has a lovely melody, a refrain that is repeated after every verse, and because the message of the hymn – that the way of trusting and obeying the Lord is the way of true happiness – is a very biblical message.

But like many biblical truthes that we learn as children, it is much easier to sing these words than it is to live them out. Right? And this is because we typically like to be in control of things and we don’t like to be told what to do at the best of times, let alone when we are in complex or uncertain or painful life situations.

Well, a good way to be prepared for those moments is to look at the difficult trust and obey lessons in the Bible. And that is because they come to us from the Spirit of the Lord to instruct us and to fill our hearts and minds with the person and work of the Lord Jesus. And we will see this today as we consider some trust and obey lessons from a difficult time in the life of Elijah.

So let’s begin with **AN EXPLANATION OF** **THE CONTEXT**:

* We are in the period of OT history when the Jewish nation was divided into the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom. And the king of the Northern Kingdom was Ahab and his wife was Jezebel and they were worshippers of the Canaanite idol god, Baal.
* So Israel’s song in those days was ‘Trust and Obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Baal, but to trust and obey.’ And this was a very serious, first commandment violation, because God’s people were supposed to worship Him alone.
* Well, the prophet of the Lord at that time was Elijah. And he appeared before Ahab one day and like a phantom plumber he switched off the water supply as we see in v1 – “*There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word*.” Because God’s covenant people had turned their back on the God of the covenant they were going to endure the covenant curses of drought and famine.

1. So that brings us to **vv2-6** and the **FIRST** trust and obey lesson for Elijah. For what happened next is that Elijah was told by God to go to the brook Cherith, which we are told was “east of the Jordan,” which means it was a place *outside* the Promised Land. And there we see a kind of prototype for Uber eats as God caused ravens, which are birds that usually steal food, not deliver it, to bring meat and bread to Elijah. So this really was an astonishing scene!
   1. And to see how this was a trust and obey lesson we have to try and step into the sandals of Elijah. You see, in the PL the covenant people were experiencing covenant curse - drought. And this would only end when the people turned back to God in repentance. So what did the people most need now? Surely they needed the prophet of the Lord to preach the word of the Lord. Right? And we can imagine that having delivered his message of judgment to Ahab, Elijah probably expected the Lord to have him travel through the land and call the people to repentance. But that is not what happened, is it. Instead God commanded Elijah to go *away* from thePL! So while the whole congregation of Israel was enduring covenant curse *inside* the PL, Elijah was enjoying covenant fellowship with God *outside the PL*!
      1. And this was a trust and obey lesson that Elijah must surely have pondered as he ate his McRaven burger each day. Why am I here? How long will I be here? When will I begin my preaching tour, Lord?
      2. But the lesson God was teaching Elijah was: Trust me and obey me, Elijah. I know what I am doing! I have a plan for you and for the people of Israel. Trust me and obey me.
   2. Now, Elijah, just like you and me, was a mixed bag when it came to trusting and obeying, because he was a sinful human being. So even when he did trust and obey, it would not have been perfect trust and obedience. And that is why we read from **Luke 4** earlier in the service for that is where Jesus used this episode from Elijah’s life to reveal Himself as the greater Elijah. So here is where I want to introduce you to a NT theme verse that we will return to throughout this sermon. It is a verse that speaks about the perfect obedience of Jesus. It is **Hebrews 5:8**, which says,“*Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered*.”
      1. And to understand what this verse is saying we need to remember what we have seen in recent weeks about the wonderful mystery of Jesus being fully God and fully human.
         1. So, as God, He knew all things and did not need to learn anything.
         2. But as a human, though He was sinless, He had to learn, like we have to learn. So in the same way that He started speaking with ‘go go ga ga’ and then ‘Mama’ and then ‘ eventually mastering language, without ever sinning along the way, He also had to first obey His parents and then His school teachers, and then more and more of the commandments of God that He learned in Sunday school and catechism. And as He studied the OT, He learned that one day He would have to go to the cross and die there for the forgiveness of sins.
         3. And as His understanding of what that meant grew, He submitted to every aspect of it and eventually endured every aspect of it. **Philippians 2:8** says, “*He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*.”
         4. So He wasn’t born knowing everything about the cross and needing to do it all as a day old baby; He had to learn it and do it later in life.
         5. So while His obedience was always perfect, as He learned more about His Father’s will throughout His life, there was an increasing fullness to His trust and His obedience.
      2. So the first lesson from Elijah for you and me is **look to Jesus**. Look to the perfect and lifelong obedience of Jesus.
         1. You see, when we think about our salvation, we often think only about His death on the cross. But His whole life of obedience is just as essential. We need Jesus’ willingness to tidy His room when Mary told Him to and the fact that He never littered just as much as we need what He did on the cross. And this is because for us to be able to enter God’s presence, we need our guilt taken away and to be perfectly obedient. And we get that perfectly obedient status from Jesus when we believe in Him; His obedient life becomes ours.
      3. But the second lesson from Elijah is that **we too must always trust and obey**. There will be times when we don’t understand the circumstances that we are in. But we must remember that God knows what He is doing and that He is in control and that He has promised to work all things for good to those who love Him through Christ. So even when we don’t understand what He is doing and why He is doing it, we must trust and obey.
2. Well, that brings us to **verse 7** and the next trust and obey lesson. For that is where we read, *“after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land*.”
   1. And it’s easy to imagine Elijah getting used to food by raven each day and wondering when his preaching tour might begin. But then the brook dried up!! And this would surely have brought with it the temptation to despair and question God and to wonder where his next meal was going to come from. But think about what we read here. You see, it sounds very natural and normal, right, because when there is a drought, brooks will dry up! But remember that this is the same God who has been providing Elijah with food by raven. And He is also the God who brought water out of rocks when His people were in the wilderness and manna from heaven and quails from the east, etc. So surely if God had wanted to feed Elijah here at Cherith for the whole three and a half years, then not even a drought could have stopped Him! So this was not God having to come up with a new plan to feed Elijah because the brook unexpectedly dried up! No, what happened here is that according to the eternal decree of the Lord, at the appointed moment in time and space, the very last drop of the brook dribbled down past Elijah.
      1. So what was God teaching Elijah? Well, one lesson was that he was teaching him was ***NOT TO TRUST IN THE GIFTS GOD SENDS BUT IN THE GOD WHO SENDS THE GIFTS***.
         1. And this was Israel’s problem in the wilderness, wasn’t it. God delivered them from Egypt, He brought them through the Red Sea, He gave them water from rocks and manna from heaven, but while they loved the gifts, they never learned to trust in the God who gave them the gifts!
         2. And this is an easy mistake to make. I think I have told you before about the man who faced an operation that he only had a 50-50 chance of surviving. And he survived. So the day after the surgery his minister visited him in hospital and the man said, Pastor, God is sooo good! And the minister said, Jim, you are right. But you do know that even if you had not survived, God would still be good, right?
         3. It’s easy to speak about the goodness of God and how you trust Him when you have work and it’s a good job or there is money in the bank or you are married and happily married or you get on well with your teacher or there is harmony at church or you are healthy, etc, but what about when you are made redundant or you are being picked on at school or there is abuse or strife in the home or conflict in the church or finances are tight? Has God stopped being good? No. God is always good!
         4. Earlier in the service, we also confessed that everything in life comes to us not by chance but from God’s fatherly hand. And the Catechism article before that one says, I believe “*that the [God who] … upholds and rules [all things] by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father because of Christ his Son. I trust him so much that I do not doubt He will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and He will turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; He desires to do this because He is a faithful Father*.”
      2. Do you believe this, people of God? Do you live this? Do you trust in the gifts God sends you or the God who sends you the gifts? I have to say that in the two years that I have been here I have seen some amazing examples of people trusting and obeying God when precious things have been taken away. And people can only do that when they find their joy and purpose and meaning in Jesus. We may certainly enjoy the good gifts that God gives us but we must never attach our happiness and peace to them; it must be attached to our Lord and Saviour.
3. But that brings us to **verses 8-9** and the command for Elijah to go to Zeraphath in Sidon and the widow who would feed him there. And this was the next trust and obey lesson that God wanted Elijah and all who would later read this account to learn.
   1. And it was a trust and obey lesson for Elijah because Zarephath means ‘**crucible’** or ‘smelting place.’ And a crucible, boys and girls, is a big pot that you use to purify gold. You put the gold you have taken out of the earth into it, add in various chemicals, and then you turn up the heat underneath to burn away whatever is not gold until only pure gold is left. So God was saying to Elijah, ‘Go to the crucible. Go to the place of trial by fire.’ And this was a crucible for Elijah for several reasons:
      1. You see, while Cherith was outside the PL, it was only just outside the PL, and it was a private place in the wilderness. But Zeraphath was a walking journey of about 110km, which is about from here to Hamilton, through the wilderness in a time of drought and famine, and it was way outside the PL!
      2. And it was a Gentile city, which means it was full of Gentiles! Yuk! And it wasn’t just any old Gentile city; it was in the region of **Sidon**. Ch. 16:31 tells us that Ahab married Jezebel daughter of EthBaal king of the Sidonians. So Elijah was being sent to Jezebel land and Baal land! He was basically being sent into the heat of enemy territory, where he would be cared for by a widow. And everyone knows that in Bible times widows couldn’t even look after themselves, let alone anyone else!
      3. So the command to go to Sidon was the next part of how the Lord was training and preparing Elijah for future activity in the service of the Lord. You see, later on Elijah would have a big showdown with the gathered priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. It was basically a religion competition for the hearts of the people. But Elijah was being trained for that moment here at Cherith and soon at Sidon. For in Sidon he would learn that God can guard His people *and do miraculous things* even in enemy territory. Do you remember what happened in Sidon? Elijah miraculously multiplied food for the widow and her son and then raised her dead son back to life after he had died, all while in enemy territory. So his time in Sidon was a part of Elijah’s training for the showdown on Mt. Carmel.
      4. And here we return to our **NT theme verse** about the Lord Jesus, “*Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered*.” The Lord Jesus was also prepared for the cross with the trials and temptations of infancy, and then childhood, and then adolescence, and then His adult years. Think of the wilderness temptations and the storm on the Sea of Galilee and the attempts to arrest Him. In all of those moments, He was being prepared for the cross.
      5. And it is the same with the trials and temptations that we face today, Brothers and Sisters, young people and boys and girls. God prepares us for our Mt. Carmels with Cheriths and Sidons. And **Hebrews 4:15-16** tells us that in Jesus we have a high priest who can “*sympathize with our weaknesses, because in every respect [He] has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*.” So when trials and uncertain situations come our way, we can, “*with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*.”
4. Well that brings us lastly to **THE** **BIG PICTURE** trust and obey lesson from the whole story of Ahab and Elijah and Israel. You see, when it comes to God’s people, His dealings with them are not punishment but discipline. And you might want to write that down and remember it because there is a world of difference between these two things!
   1. And this is made crystal clear in Hebrews 12 where we read that the Lord disciplines those whom He loves like a Father lovingly disciplines his child. And I know you find the word punishment used in the context of God’s people, but the Bible is clear that all of the sins of God’s people have been fully punished in Jesus on the cross of Calvary. So God does not punish His people; He disciplines or trains them. And that means that with Ahab and this drought **God had not abandoned His people**. He was using these circumstances to cause them to turn to Him in faith and repentance so that they enjoyed covenant communion with the Lord again. But it really is the basic message of the OT, isn’t it – Israel fails, God disciplines them, they repent, and communion is restored. And typically, the communion is deeper than it was before the discipline.
   2. And this is a wonderful **lesson of encouragement** that we need to hear again and again because it is very much our story too, isn’t it. We fail, God disciplines us, and we turn to Him in repentance, trusting in the finished work of the Lord Jesus, and fellowship is restored.
   3. So let’s end with this little story: **Felix Mendelssohn** was a great composer and musician. He once visited a cathedral and having heard the great organ, which was known as the cathedral thunderer, he went into the organ loft and asked to be allowed to play it. But the old resident organist didn’t recognize Mendelssohn and he didn’t trust strangers on the magnificent instrument, so he refused to let him play until he was told that he had to. So he was walking away in a bit of a huff when the most beautiful organ music imaginable started to cascade around the cathedral. So he went back to the organ and said, “Who are you?” And Mendelssohn replied, “I am Felix Mendelssohn.” And the resident organist said, “Just imagine that I nearly refused to let Mendelssohn touch this organ!”
   4. And we can be just like this with God, can’t we, brothers and sisters! Often we also refuse to trust and obey God because we are afraid of the outcome. But you see, God knows how to make us beautiful. **Hebrews 12:11** says, “*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*.”

So remember Elijah and these trust and obey lessons. But more importantly, remember the Lord Jesus and His perfect obedience. For His obedience, in all its fullness, is your salvation and your example. And then trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey. Amen!