The last few years have been a very difficult time economically. Many people are suffering and things don’t seem to be getting better. In fact world economists are pretty much unanimous in their prediction that things are going to get worse worldwide.

The news media this week is repeatedly warning of our nation’s impending fiscal cliff. It is being widely portrayed as a looming financial crisis that could send the nation and the world into unrecoverable recession.

In the past financial recessions have been seasonal; they come and they go; in time adjustments are made, the economy rights itself and we return to general prosperity.

The prognosis this time is much more bleak and grim. Leading experts are telling us that the world’s economic systems cannot continue without dramatic reform and restructuring.

Economist Marc Faber, on CNBC Tuesday talked about the global financial markets and how we must prepare for a massive market meltdown. He warned that the global financial system will not be reset, after living beyond our means for the past three decades. It’s payback time.

Pain, sacrifice and austerity are the new normal. In the US the debt ratio to the (GDP) Gross Domestic Product is nearing 100%. Paying our debt will consume everything we are able to produce as a nation.

Almost 50% of the population receives their primary source of income from the government and less than 50% of the population paying federal income tax. In addition Greece has hit its debt wall. Spain, Italy, and France are not far behind.

Former British Prime Ministry Tony Blair stated that if Europe does not change its entitlement mentality, it would not survive. There is no way to tax our way out, spend our way out, borrow our way out, print our way out or even grow our way out.

Our politicians who are for the most part insulated from the pain, don’t have the will or the courage to deal with the problems.

A recent publication carried this unnerving gas station sign.

Of course economic drought is not something new. Mankind has suffered these things for centuries. This morning I want to turn to a similar story from
the OT to help us gain perspective and hope in spite of the world’s dismal prognosis.

This story from 1 Kings has convinced me that we need to approach the next few years using the OT prophet Elijah as our model. This story demonstrates how to function in a drought.

The historical event is recorded in 1 Kings 17. Let me begin by giving you the context. 1 Kings 16:29-31 “Ahab son of Omri began to rule over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of King Asa’s reign in Judah.”

Remember after Solomon died the nation was divided into two parts, a northern and southern kingdom. Israel is north and Judah is south. Ahab is now king in the north.

“He (Ahab) reigned in Samaria twenty-two years. But Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord’s sight, even more than any of the kings before him. And as though it were not enough to follow the example of Jeroboam (one of the most wicked kings), he married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and he began to bow down in worship of Baal.”

Now here is a problem. God told the Israelites not to marry outside their Jewish faith. He knew that if they did they would begin to worship pagan gods. Here is a king, king Ahab, and he does what many kings did in those times.

He marries the daughter of the king in a neighboring country in order to insure peace between the two countries. Everybody knows the name Jezebel. She is a most wicked woman. And sure enough she influences Ahab and begins to worship her foreign god.

Now Elijah was the first of a long line of important prophets God sent to Israel and Judah. Israel, the northern kingdom, had no faithful kings throughout its history. Each king was wicked, leading the people in worshiping pagan gods.

Thus God called prophets to try to rescue Israel from its moral and spiritual decline. For the next 300 years these prophets would play a vital role in both nations, encouraging the people and leaders to turn back to God.

Those who worshiped Baal believed he was the god who brought the rains and bountiful harvests.

Let’s pick up the story in chapter 17:1. “Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, ‘As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!’”

Now no rain, that’s bad, but no dew; that’s a real drought. Elijah confronts King Ahab and prophecies a devastating drought that, though he didn’t say it at the time, would span three years.
Ahab had built a strong military defense, but it would be no help against drought. And his priests of Baal, this god of rain would be no help either.

Ahab probably thought of Elijah as some kind of religious nut and ignored him. But, sure enough, the drought comes and along with it, dreadful famine that effects all Israel as well as surrounding areas.

Now God provides for Elijah sending him to camp out on the banks of a brook. “Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.” V.4

This was the first recorded fast-food delivery service. And for a while Elijah endured the drought. But then, “… the brook dried up, because there was no rainfall anywhere in the land” (v. 7).

Now even God’s prophet was feeling the effects of the drought. And God sent him to Zarephath to find shelter outside Israel in the home of a Gentile widow.

1 Kings 17:8-11 “Then the LORD said to Elijah, ‘Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. There is a widow there who will feed you. I have given her my instructions.’ So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, ‘Would you please bring me a cup of water?’ As she was going to get it, he called to her, ‘Bring me a bite of bread, too.’”

When Elijah showed up in the little village of Zarephath he discovered his room reservation was with a widow collecting some sticks to cook a final meal.

Trying to keep her son and herself alive without a husband, she’s seen her supplies diminish to where she didn’t have a fridge full or a shelf full. She had a handful—her last handful—and she had already accepted the fact that when she ate this meal, that would be the end. She responds,

“I swear by the Lord your God that I don’t have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.”

There was no recourse, no forms to fill out, and no government assistance that would come. She was going to watch her son die, and then she would die.

Elijah discovered the situation when he asked the woman for a drink and a snack. But he responded to her difficult situation with this hard sentence: “Don’t be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you’ve said, but make a little bread for me first.” (v. 13a).

He’s like, “Last meal? Ok, I hear you. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me, and “Then use what’s left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son.” (v. 13b).
“Go ahead and split your last meal, ma’am, because here is what’s going to happen. ‘this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the Lord sends rain and the crops grow again!’” (v.14)

He was saying, “You take this step of faith, you do this thing I’m asking, and God will make sure this drought is not the death of you and your son.”

“So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her family continued to eat for many days. There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the Lord had promised through Elijah.” (vs. 15-16).

Keep in mind this is no random story, for the NT asserts that “These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

This Bible that we are using this morning is the record of God’s interaction with mankind from the very beginning. After God created man in the garden he made certain to have recorded for our benefit exactly what he was doing so we could learn to trust him.

The economic drought we are facing is as real to people in our country as the drought killing the widow of Zarephath was to her and her son.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A DROUGHT

1. Diminished Resource.

The vast majority of people in this country are using about half the peanut butter to cover the same piece of bread. They are trying to meet growing need with less financial capacity; they are stretched in faith and strained in all the ways diminished resource impacts a family.

2. Damaged Confidence.

People used to gut it out in economic recession, expecting a turn around by next fall— or surely by the following summer—but now we’re being told by economists this is “the new normal.”

This drought seems to have no end in sight and people are searching for ways to cope that include major adjustments in lifestyle with no expectation for improvement.

3. Doubtful Future.

Some people are saying “You know, Ralph, I used to look to the future and I kinda knew what was going to happen. I thought I could see myself making it, saving it, and growing it.

We were going to retire at this age. We had a plan. Now I can’t see a particular future and just hope to make it through the month.”
4. Deficit Living.

A lot of people are living on savings, still spending more than they are making. That can’t go on much longer. If people living in a past, deficit living, because they expect the drought to end, things will only get worse for them as that capacity is depleted.

5. A Desert Mentality.

A desert mentality hoards resources, hides any excess, and resents requests for generosity, slipping quickly toward “I’ve got to protect what’s mine.”

In the desert, you think only of survival and how to get water. God may lead us through a desert in our lives, but he doesn’t want us to make plans to settle down and be at home with a scarcity, stingy, survive-at-all-cost way of thinking.

SO WHAT DO WE DO IN A TIME OF DROUGHT?

The answer is to do what Elijah and the widow did. Let's isolate some principles of God’s provision that are still operative today.

#1 - GOD ALWAYS HAS A GOOD REASON AND A SUFFICIENT SUPPLY FOR EVERY NEED HE ALLOWS.

There's been no rain and Elijah, like everyone else needed food and water. Even believers and true followers of God are affected by circumstances around us - drought, famine, recession.

And, there is also a widow in the village of Zarephath for whom God is concerned.

But, when God allows a need in the lives of those who trust in Him, there will always be two other things present. (1) a good reason (2) a sufficient supply

(1) a good reason - Romans 8:28  "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

What are some of the Possible Reasons for Elijah's experience?

* To get the attention of His people, Israel and Ahab.
* To show Elijah an example of miraculous provision.
* To demonstrate the importance of obedience to the widow.
* To grow Elijah’s faith.
* To grow the faith of the widow and her son.
* To grow our faith
(2) a sufficient supply - Philippians 4:19 “And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches…” There’s no drought or famine in heaven – no recession, either.

#2 - GOD KNOWS OUR NEED BEFORE WE ASK. v.9

Verse 9 "Go to Zarephath" - Elijah hadn't even asked yet. "I’ve instructed a widow" - God had already made provision. He knows our need before we ask. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:8 “Your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!”

This widow is not from among God's people. Zarephath is a Sidonian town – these people are Baal worshippers. God has the power to supply through the unbelieving world. Many of you receive your income from unbelievers. Even those who oppose God's kingdom support it. God uses unbelievers to accomplish His will.

#3 - GOD USES CRISIS TO GET OUR ATTENTION. vs.11-12

We in this country have had our share of crisis lately. Did you hear the Oakland Raiders football practice was delayed on Wednesday for nearly two hours. One of the players, while on his way to the locker room happened to look down and notice suspicious looking, unknown white powdery substance on the practice field.

The head coach immediately suspended practice while the FBI was called to investigate. After a complete field analysis, the FBI determined the white substance unknown to the players was actually the goal line.

Practice was resumed when FBI Special Agents decided that the Oakland Raider players would not likely encounter the substance again.

What Elijah asks is an extraordinary request. If she responds she must be the widow that God had previously instructed.

Listen to what she says, “I swear by the Lord your God, I don’t have any bread.” "The Lord your God," not my God. Not Baal. She swears by Elijah’s God.

Now we begin to understand why God is concerned about this widow and why he got her involved. Even though she doesn’t really know him yet, she’s heard of him, and she really wants to believe in him. She is really close.

She's lived near enough to Israel, she's heard enough to believe intellectually, but no personal experience. 59% of Americans believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Do all 59% have a personal relationship with God? No.

They are unconverted, self-reliant believers. Believe from a distance - no personal experience. Many who come to church are unchanged or unconverted believers, not atheists, don't deny god, but no personal experience.
James 2:19 “Do you still think it’s enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!”
The primary reason God allows struggle is to help people turn to God; to teach them the futility of self-reliance. "I don't have any bread" - this woman is destitute.

If she'd had a credit card, she could have delayed the inevitable. Our society has developed an extravagant system of credit that allows us to delay this confrontation with helplessness.

This woman has arrived at a very important point of crisis - her pride is gone. She readily admits she has no hope. What little is left is about to be consumed and there is no more. We as people don't generally turn to God until all other alternatives have been exhausted.

You've possibly heard the story of the tourist who stopped at a turn-out on a mountain road to snap a picture of the breathtaking view of the valley below. As he approached the edge of the cliff, suddenly the ground gave way beneath his feet.

He frantically turned just in time to grab a root that was sticking out of the side of the mountain. There, dangling between sky and certain death he began to yell for help; but no one was around to hear. In desperation he cries out, "Oh God, help me."

A deep voice from the clouds above answers, "Just let go, John, and trust me." Hesitating only a moment to contemplate his situation, the man responds, "Is there anybody else up there who can help me?"

As long as there is anyone or anything else to put our trust in, we will. This woman had nothing left. She had to let go and trust.

#4 - MIRACLES OFTEN REQUIRE A STEP OF FAITH. v. 13

V. 13 Elijah says to her, “Don’t be afraid! Go ahead and cook that ‘last meal,’ but bake me a little loaf of bread first. Afterward there will still be enough food for you and your son.”

Whoa! Do you hear what he asked? Fix me something to eat first. She only has a little left, and Elijah asks her to feed him first! She could have easily argued, "women & children first," or "charity begins at home."

But remember, God has already spoken to the widow and told her she is to feed Elijah. This is her test of faith - "let go and trust me."

Someone has said, "Giving to God is not only a debt we owe, but a seed we sow." A farmer must be willing to plant seed if he ever expects a harvest. If he eats his seed in winter there’ll be no planting in spring or crop in summer.

29 x's in the Bible God speaks to us about "first fruits"
2 Chronicles 31:5 (NIV) "...the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything."

What are firstfruits? That's what’s gathered at the beginning of harvest, not at the end. First fruits means giving to God first – like he asked the widow.

Jesus said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

I get paid twice each month. I used to write my tithe for the month out of my first check. Now that's no big deal, but to me it represented firstfruits. Now I pay online and it comes out automatically.

Why is that important? Because it not very honoring to God to give him what's left over, but rather, we should give to Him first.

#5 - INHERENT IN GOD’S COMMANDS IS AN ENABLEMENT TO OBEY.

The flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry. Paul said, Philippians 4:13 “I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.” God will never ask of you, that which he does not first provide, both strength and resources. Do you believe that?

#6 - GOD REWARDS FAITH AND OBEDIENCE.

Luke 6:38 “If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in giving—large or small—it will be used to measure what is given back to you.”

In v.15 we get the test results. Will she do it? Will she trust God? Will she take that little that she had and use it as seed? The widow did what God had told her to do and God provided miraculously for her, her family and Elijah until the famine was over. The widow personally placed her faith in God and found Him trustworthy.

FOUR BRIDGES TO GOD’S PROVISION

1ST BRIDGE: BELIEVE IN THE BENEVOLENT CHARACTER OF GOD.

Until Elijah came and the widow had not heard the word of the Lord, she had no chance of rescue.

Romans 10:14 “How can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?”
Marc Nuttle, an economic advisor who just happens to be a Christian believes that the church and Christians should prepare for a great harvest of souls during the imminent financial disaster.

We should be fiscally prudent, so we can be financially generous, demonstrating Christ like compassion and love when people around us are struggling and are in desperate need of help.

This will provide an unprecedented chance to demonstrate our faith in God’s provision, but we will need to be faithful people to experience the divine provision.

2ND BRIDGE: UNDERSTAND THE TOTAL SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

Deuteronomy 8:18 (NIV) “Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.”

We dare not forget that it is God alone who blesses and gives prosperity. Once we begin to think that it comes from us or anywhere else we are in danger of losing it all.

3RD BRIDGE: OBEY THE COMMANDS OF GOD TO GIVE.

If Elijah had disobeyed and not gone to Zarephath or if the widow had been unwilling to obey the command she had received from God, there would have been no miracle. We put ourselves into a position to receive God's miracles when we obey him.

Exodus 20:6 (TLB) "I lavish my love upon thousands of those who love me and obey my commandments."

Isaiah 1:19 “If you will only obey me and let me help you, then you will have plenty to eat.”

On Tuesday of this week we had 11 turkeys in our freezer for our Thanksgiving distribution of food. 105 families came to the pantry on Friday and each one received a turkey or game hen depending on the family size.

4TH BRIDGE: HAVE FAITH THAT GOD WILL COME THROUGH.

V.13 The widow was afraid she and her son were about to die. God had instructed her to give away her last meal. Elijah reassures her, "Don't be afraid, God will provide." But, you’ll never be able to see God’s miraculous provision unless you put your faith in him.

Psalms 34:8,10 (TLB) "...Put God to the test and see how kind He is! See for yourself the way His mercies shower down on all who trust in Him. Even strong young lions sometimes go hungry, but those of us who reverence the Lord will never lack any good thing."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:
Some of you are crying out to God, “I need more money!” and God is saying a “No you don’t. If you needed more, I’d give your more. What you really need is to learn contentment. What you need is to learn to be grateful. To be faithful in giving from what you have. I can’t give you any more until you first learn these important lessons.”

In times of drought, one of the first things some people stop is giving to God, and that’s a big mistake, as our story this morning illustrates.

But as we are faithful, we are going to be a blessed people. Our church will be blessed. Our families will be blessed. And, our community, many, like the widow of Zeraphath, who didn’t yet know God personally, will be blessed. As surely as our God lives, he will be faithful!