

He Gives and Takes and Gives Again

The Widow at Zarephath: I Kings 17: 7 – 24

Background:

The prophet Elijah was serving God in very hostile territory. King Ahab and Jezebel had made Israel an intolerable place for the faithful to live as the worship of Baal was not simply ignored but promoted and God's prophets put to death. Elijah speaks out against the king and pronounces a coming drought as a sign of God's anger against Israel. Since Baal was considered the god of rain, it was Yahweh's direct challenge to Baal worship to dry up the land. God promises to provide for Elijah by brook and raven and when the brook dries up, he sends him to Zarephath. Zarephath was 80 – 90 miles away (about where Lebanon is today) and into the heart of Baal country. It would be the last place that Elijah would want to go and then to rely on a poor widow for sustenance is strange indeed. Elijah continues to trust in God to provide and so he goes. Perhaps being fed by a widow was no less strange than being fed by ravens!

As we study this story together, we will be placing our focus primarily on the widow, rather than Elijah and her response to this strange request from this man of a foreign God.

As you begin . . .

Have one person read out loud Psalm 63: 1 – 5 and then allow for a few moments of silence before reading the passage again. Think of one area of your life where you feel dry and have a sense of longing. Pray that God might offer you some insight into where you might go to quench your thirst and how He might meet you there.

Read I Kings 17: 7 – 16

1. Do you think that Elijah was sent to this woman for her sake and her need or for his sake and his need? Why would God care about a poor widow outside of Israel and send his primary prophet quite a distance away to help her?
2. It is unlikely that this woman knew anything about Elijah or about his God. Consider what she might have been thinking as she was approached by him. If possible, imagine yourself in her situation and what might have been your first response.
3. What does God mean when he says, "*I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food*" (vs. 9) How could God command a non-believer? Compare this with vs. 4, "*I have ordered the ravens to feed you there*". Was the woman simply an instrument like the raven? Did she have a choice in the matter?
4. The widow did not take much risk in helping Elijah as she assumed her fate was sealed and she and her son would perish, whether after this meal or the next. Yes, she gave everything she had, but in other ways, she risked very little. Why do we believe that she was a woman of great faith? With faith the size of a grain of a mustard seed, God can

bless. Think of a time when you experienced great blessing even though your faith was small or weak.

5. Read Luke 4: 24 – 26. Jesus raises the huge issue of why blessing was bestowed upon someone outside of Israel and not upon Israel itself. He infuriated the people who heard Him speak and they tried to run Him off a cliff for His words. What made them so angry? In what ways do we like to box God into working where and when we think He should?
6. Could Jesus also be speaking to the Christian church? How does our theology handle it when God uses people outside of the faith to speak a truth or be a blessing?
7. God does provide for the needs of Elijah and the woman and her son through a miracle. The resources needed do not run out. Share some miracles that you have experienced great or small, where God provided for your needs.

Now Read 1 Kings 17: 17 – 24

1. The story becomes more difficult when the most precious person in the widow's life takes ill and dies. The fact that the woman owned her home is evidence that she was truly alone and had no other family or support system. She has lived dependent on God's hand to feed them day after day and suddenly this God seems to turn on her. What kinds of circumstances have thrown your faith or theology into a tailspin and life no longer seems to make sense?
2. How do you think Elijah felt about this tragedy? Did he also believe that God brought this sorrow upon the widow? If so, is he then trying to change God's mind with his actions? How do you reconcile your understanding of God as the source of blessing in your life and also the source of sorrow? Once again we are faced with the question of "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People".

Author's note: There is no correct answer to the problem of good and evil. We each need to come to a personal understanding of how we see God's hand upon our lives and how we accept the hard things in life. Does God cause illness or simply allow it? Does God heal some and not others and for what purpose? These are questions of faith. What I do believe is that God is comfortable with our anger and allows us to cry out to him when no answers make sense. The woman vents her anger to Elijah, the man of God and Elijah in turns vents his anger and frustration to God. But he moves beyond his anger to action. He does not know God's will for the son, but he prays the best way he knows how to change the outcome.

3. The Scripture paints a beautiful picture of Elijah's prayer; more than his words but his action of love as he laid himself upon the boy as if his own life source might flow out of him and into the other. It is an image of total abandonment to the will and power of God –longing and praying for the desire of Elijah's own heart though not for his sake (though I would believe that he had become attached to the boy over the time living in their

home) but for the sake of the woman. Compare this story with Paul's actions in Acts 20: 7 – 11. What might we learn from the connection of these two stories of healing?

4. Notice that Elijah does not ask why but rather raises the question, "O Lord, my God, have you brought this tragedy upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Even this man of God who has been hand fed by ravens and experienced God's power admits that he doesn't have the answers and doesn't understand the ways or mind of God. He does not spout theology to the widow or pat answers but joins her in her suffering and also in her questions. "Did the boy die because of my sin", asks the widow? "Have you brought this tragedy," cries the prophet? He joins her in her pain and struggle and brings her questions to God. What does this teach us about how we might come along side someone who has experienced tragedy and sorrow in their life?
5. This story ends much more joyfully than many of our sorrows. She receives her son back. She experiences resurrection. Oh, can you imagine how excited Elijah must have been when he placed a very alive boy back into the arms of his mother! Share a time when you received a reprieve from the worst case scenario and the joy you experienced.
6. Also think of a time when the worst you could imagine did happen and you lost a loved one. Has there been an experience of resurrection in your ability to laugh and know joy again in the face of your deep grief?

The greatest mystery of all is that when we experience the worst that we can imagine, God, our loving Father, still brings us hope and peace and joy and somehow we manage to live again, when we thought we could not face the day ahead. There is life after death, not only in the eternal sense, but in the day to day walk on this earth. That is our greatest hope and source of comfort.

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