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1 Kings 17:7-24

2nd Message

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A WIDOW'S WORTH

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

What is your picture of God? Is God someone to fear, like a cruel taskmaster; someone who is just waiting for you to step out of line? Is God someone who is indifferent to suffering? Is God someone to blame for all the evil in the world and the struggles of our lives? Or is God someone who loves you, seeks you out and wants to give you life? What if God could bring life into the most hopeless situations? What if God is someone you could totally lean on and embrace?

In the days after king David, the nation of Israel began a slow decline. The country split in two and Israel, the northern kingdom, had a problem. She wandered away from the God who had saved her from slavery in Egypt and gave herself to worship the Baal gods of the Canaanites, seeking to gain life in the wrong places, from the wrong gods. King Ahab and his wife Jezebel were leading the parade. It was a dark time in Israel's history. But then the people of God have always been tempted to find life through the Baal gods of this world.

God called upon Elijah to speak to his people. Elijah showed up in Samaria and told Ahab there would be no more rain without God's consent, a direct attack on the power of Baal. Yahweh was determined to make a point as to who was in charge. And then God sent Elijah away, totally out of the picture. God directed Elijah to the wilderness, to the brook Cherith, where God provided for him supernaturally. But eventually the time came for Elijah to come out of seclusion. God had a new assignment for the prophet—not to bring down thunder on Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal, but to bring grace to an insignificant woman in an out of the way place. God is powerful. God hates idolatry. God confronts humanity with its sin. God doesn't let us do anything we want. But God loves and gives life.

The story we look at today is told in two scenes. It is one of those stories that engage our imagination. I encourage you to put yourself in the story and to receive what God has for you.

Elijah Brings Physical Life to a Widow and Her Son

It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." (1 Kgs 17:7-9 NASB)

For a second time Elijah receives the word of the Lord. The first time God directed Elijah to the brook Cherith. But we are told in verse 7 that the drought in Israel was taking its effect and the brook dried up. Now God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath, about 100 miles from Cherith. In the wilderness ravens provided for Elijah, but now God tells Elijah that a widow will provide for him. When a stream dries up in our life it may mean that God is moving us on to something new.

The text tells us that Zarephath was in Sidon. If you recall from last week, Ahab's wife Jezebel was from Sidon, where her father

Ethbaal was king. Zarephath was near Jezebel's hometown. Therefore God is calling Elijah to go from a place of seclusion and safety into enemy territory. God doesn't call us to live a safe life. His plans often include a call to uncomfortable places, places where we would rather not go.

So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." (1 Kgs 17:10-11)

Once again we take note of Elijah's willingness to obey, as we saw in the story last week. God said to arise and go; Elijah arose and went. The same words are used in the command and the response. Elijah comes to the city gate, an important location since it is the place where kings and elders sit, where judgment is handed out, where prophets prophesy. The city gate is the scene for a lot of action in the book of Kings, somewhat like the city square in many cities in the world.

When Elijah arrives in Zarephath he sees a widow gathering sticks and asks her for some water. We are not told how Elijah knew the woman was a widow or that this was the woman the Lord had in mind. Elijah asks the woman for some water in a jar. We are reminded of Jesus' encounter with a woman at a well in Samaria to whom Jesus said, "Give me a drink" (John 4:7). Jesus learned from Elijah. Elijah then makes a second request. Not only does he ask for water, but also for bread. Elijah is calling the woman to obedience in the same way that God has called him.

But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." (1 Kgs 17:12)

The woman's response tells us three things. First, she has a son. Second, she is out of food. The woman might be well off since she has an upper room as we will learn later, but at present she only has enough food for one more meal. We assume that her pantry is empty due to the drought. Third, the woman knows that Elijah is a believer in the God of Israel and that she is not since she describes God as "your" God. The woman is most probably a Canaanite. The action is staccato—she will go, prepare, eat, and die. She seems resigned to the fact that it is time to die and she is a contrast to the God who lives.

Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" (1 Kgs 17:13-14)

Elijah makes an extraordinary request and promise. He tells the woman to feed him before she and her son eat. He then promises her that the flour will not be exhausted and the jar of oil will not run dry. The indication here is that the bowl and the jar will stay at the same level, the resource won't be lessened, it won't decrease. The use of two different words here is for emphasis. Elijah also gives her an exhortation to not fear, something that God often spoke to his people.

So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah. (1 Kgs 17:15-16)

The woman responds with the same obedience that we see in Elijah. She went and did according to the word of Elijah. File that phrase away because it will be important in the next scene. Flour and oil are mentioned specifically for the third time, a direct attack on Baal as the source of life. The promise is fulfilled completely—the flour is not exhausted, the oil jar does not become empty.

Two things stand out to me in this first scene. First, we can understand that God loves the little people. “As Francis Schaeffer used to say, ‘There are no little places and there are no little people.’ Every person in every place is of infinite value to God.”¹ The widow in the story is a Canaanite woman living in enemy territory. She is down on her luck, out of resources for life. She has resigned herself to death. She is a woman of no regard and little means. But God sees not as man sees. He sends his prophet to save her, to save her both physically and, as we shall see, spiritually. Jesus mentions the woman in Luke 4 saying that there were many widows in Israel at the time of the famine, but “Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath” (Luke 4:24-26). Elijah's encounter explains her worth to God.

God loves the lowly, the humble, and the brokenhearted. The poor in spirit are close to his heart. He looks upon them with eyes of compassion.

**“A bruised reed He will not break
And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish.” (Isa 42:3)**
**“He will have compassion on the poor and needy,
And the lives of the needy he will save.” (Ps 72:13)**

Maybe you think that God doesn't care, but he does. Maybe you think that you don't count, but you do. Perhaps you have been without work for some period of time, struggling in your marriage, or having difficulty with one of your children. You might feel empty, out of resources, and alone. You may have resigned yourself to never having life again. God knows and sees. He can help you even if the circumstances of your life don't change.

The second thing centers on obedience and the provision of God. Elijah and the widow are called to obedience. Both respond in positive ways. God provides lavishly, but his provision is predicated on a choice. A chiasmic structure of the scene makes this clear:

- A Word of the Lord comes
- B Elijah obeys; meets widow; requests water and bread
- C Widow has only flour and oil
- D Widow to prepare last meal for herself and son
- X Elijah's word - do not fear; make a bread cake first
- D' Widow can prepare meal for herself and son
- C' Elijah tells widow that flour and oil won't run out

**B' Widow obeys word of Elijah
A' Word of the Lord fulfilled**

All of the action brings us to the point where Elijah makes the extraordinary request to feed him first and then herself and her son. We wait to see what the woman will do. Try to picture what might be going through this woman's mind. What would you have done?

The bread and oil are important symbols. The bread harkens back to Elijah in the wilderness, the passage we looked at last week, and also to Israel in the wilderness, when God supplied his people bread from heaven. We are also reminded that Jesus multiplied the bread and fed a multitude of people with plenty left over. In John 6 Jesus says that he is the bread of life, he is true food. If we believe in Him we do not hunger, we do not die.

Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. We are reminded of what Jesus says in John 7: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:38). Jesus is referring to the Spirit that flows from within us as an internal, life-giving stream.

Bread and oil represent the supernatural provisions of God. Elijah is passing on to the woman what he learned at Cherith—to trust in God's lavish and inexhaustible resources, even when doing so runs contrary to our natural way of thinking. We are careful to measure our resources. We are tempted to care for our own needs first and then to serve others with the surplus. We are concerned with having enough, not running out. This happens with our money, physical energy and emotional bandwidth. But God often calls us to extend ourselves beyond our limited resources. He tells us not to fear, not to worry about what we don't have. He tells us to trust in what he can provide. But it demands a step of faith, a step of obedience. If we believe in him, feed on him, trust in his provision, the bread of life and the wine of the Spirit are never exhausted.

God is not done with the widow yet as we see in the next scene.

Elijah Brings Spiritual Life to a Widow and Her Son

Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!” He said to her, “Give me your son.” Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. (1 Kgs 17:17-19)

We are not told how much time lapsed between the first and second scenes, but it may well have been significant. The woman has an upper room and therefore Elijah may have been living with her for some time. The boy becomes sick and he stops breathing. Imagine if you can the woman's desperation. This is a mother's deepest fear. She lashes out at Elijah, the man of God. She expresses the fact that her son has died due to her sin. She is searching her mind for the cause of this calamity. In the first scene she seems resigned to die. However, now that God has given her life and hope, she is distressed and angry. “Why would God save my life only to let me experience such misery?” Is God still God when something bad happens? For a second time the woman is in a helpless situation. Have you ever been there?

Elijah asks the woman to give him her son. This takes a huge leap of faith by the woman. Can you imagine a mother letting go of her

precious child? Elijah reaches into the mother's arms and takes the boy from her bosom. He carries him up to the upper room, and lays him on his bed, leaving the woman alone. This action would have made Elijah unclean by Torah standards, but that is unimportant. It was not important to Jesus either. The action really slows down at this point.

He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. (1 Kgs 17:20-22)

Elijah prays. He begins by questioning God about evil and death just like the woman did in verse 18. He sounds a bit like Job. We note that God does not answer him and he usually doesn't answer our questions along this line; he doesn't give us all the information we want. Elijah then stretches himself out on the boy three times in the same way that God stretches himself out on us. Try to imagine this scene. He prays again, but this time he doesn't want an answer to a question about death; rather he asks for life. The Lord heard Elijah. Elijah hears God and acts, so now God hears Elijah and acts. The boy is revived; literally he lives.

Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." (1 Kgs 17:23-24)

Elijah went up and now he comes down. He had taken the boy from his mother dead and now he gives him to his mother alive. The widow confesses belief. In the first scene she trusts in the word of Elijah. But now she trusts in the word of the Lord. Salvation comes to the house of the widow. She is a contrast to Jezebel who is surrounded with 950 prophets. Both the boy and his mother are given new life. The act of Elijah stretching himself out on the boy is the center of the scene as we see in the structure:

- A Widow's son dies; widow blames God
- B Elijah takes boy up
- C Elijah prays; no answer
- X Elijah stretches upon the boy 3 times
- C' Elijah prays; God hears
- B' Elijah brings boy down
- A' Widow believes in God

The story reads just like the gospel stories. In Luke 7 (7:11-17) we find a story about Jesus healing a widow's son. And in Mark 7 (7:24-30) and Matthew 15 (15:21-28) we read about Jesus going into the area of Tyre and Sidon where he encounters a Canaanite woman, a Gentile of the Syrophenician race who begs Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. At first Jesus refuses, telling her he has come to the lost sheep of Israel. But the woman persists and asks for crumbs from the table. Jesus applauds her faith and heals her daughter. Elijah is setting the pattern of ministry that Jesus follows.

There are two more themes that catch our attention. First the story tells us that the God of Israel is the source of life. Life is a key word in the chapter. Life comes from God, not Baal. He is the Lord of life and also the Lord of death. He is not only superior to Baal but also to Mot, the Canaanite god of the underworld. God breaks through

the barriers of sin and death. He enters into our world to bring the life of the new creation. He grants forgiveness and resurrection. God has power in the wilderness and he has power in enemy territory. "In him was life and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

This is the God of Jesus Christ, the God who comes to us in Christ Jesus. Will our God enter the wilderness for us? He has done, in Jesus. Will he cross into the territory of the "prince of this world" for us? He has done, in Jesus. Will he cross the boundary between the living and the dead for us? He has done, in Jesus.²

Second, God calls us to be agents of life and salvation, even in enemy territory. He plants us where he wants us to be and uses us for his purposes. There is a little word used in this chapter that makes this clear. It is the word "there" and it occurs 6 times in chapter 17.

"I have commanded the ravens to provide for you *there*." (4)

"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay *there*; behold, I have commanded a widow *there* to provide for you." (9)

...behold, a widow was *there* gathering sticks. (10)

"do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it (*there*) first." (13)

Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living (*there*), and laid him on his own bed. (19)

God gets Elijah to the brook, then to Zarephath, to the city gate, to a widow and finally to an upper room where Elijah prays for the son's healing. In the same way, God often takes us on a circuitous route from there to there in order to use us for healing and life.

Our life and journey might make no sense. We may be wondering why we ended up in this job or that city. We may think that we aren't doing anything significant for God. But God has us where he wants us for his purposes. Dave Roper writes:

Every place, no matter how small, is holy ground... Influence is a simple matter—often an unconscious matter—of human helpfulness: being there, listening, understanding the need, loving and praying. There is no greater service and no greater influence than that of a gentle, caring, unselfish neighbor... So, for those of us who wonder where to begin, we can begin where we are: by caring for those nearest to us and giving human help where it's needed, whether our lives are filled with mundane duties, or matters of international concern.³

A couple of weeks ago my wife drove up to our house to find an ambulance and fire truck parked in front of a neighbor's house where an elderly couple lives. The 93-year old man had fallen and could not get up. He was in need of significant medical care. The ambulance drove off to the hospital and Liz got involved caring for Amelia, Bob's 84 year-old wife. Bob and Amelia have no children and most of their friends have passed away. Liz drove Amelia to the hospital for several days to visit Bob. We have helped Amelia get to the store, get gas in the car, and learn to use the television remote. We have had dinner with her a couple of times, something she has enjoyed very much and we have too. We have heard the charming story of how an American serviceman stationed in Holland during World War II asked a young 19 year-old Dutch girl to marry him after knowing each other for a mere 10 days.

We have lived across the street from Bob and Amelia for 23 years. We have hardly seen them over the years. They are very self-sufficient

and keep to themselves. But when there was a need, we were there; right where God intended us to be to help care for this couple. There may not be some great fantastic story connected to all of this, but it feels like a God thing.

Elijah didn't know where God was taking him or have any goal in mind. He just listened to the word of the Lord, obeyed, and ended up bring life and salvation to a non-descript widow and her son in a nowhere kind of place. Maybe that is what God wants to do through us too.

Jean Pierre de Caussade wrote: "We must confine ourselves to the present moment without taking thought for the one past or the one to come. Love is the duty of the present moment."⁴

But what do we do when our love runs out, which it surely will? We rely on God's love. His love is never exhausted.

What is your picture of God? Hopefully the God of Elijah and a Zarephath widow has made an imprint in your mind.

1. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man Like Us*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997), 133.

2. Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 129.

3. David Roper, "The Hidden Life." <http://davidroper.blogspot.com>, September 7, 2010.

4. Roper, "The Hidden Life."

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