

The Widow of Zarephath: The Leap of Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 17; Job 38; 42:5, 6; Luke 4:24–28; Heb. 11:1; Rev. 1:17.*

Memory Text: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*Philippians 1:6, NKJV*).

She was no stranger to death. She had seen her husband die. And now she watched, helplessly, as everything around her died. The grass dried up, the trees dropped their leaves, the cows were gaunt skeletons, and the goats bleated pitifully. Every day she scanned the cloudless sky, hoping against hope for a cloud and rain. She had been rationing the flour and the oil in an attempt to make it stretch until the end of the drought. The little round, flat daily loaf was unevenly divided. Her son needed all the nourishment she could give him. It pained her to see the lad so thin and without energy. But her sacrifice seemed pointless, for she feared that both would soon starve to death. There was enough for one final meal. Holding her son's hand, the widow leaves the dusty town of Zarephath to scrounge for firewood in order to cook their final meal. And here the unnamed woman steps into the biblical narrative and into sacred history, where her story teaches us lessons that we can, thousands of years later, apply to ourselves. This week we see the great controversy between God and Satan played out in miniature in the life of an unnamed widow who chooses God and is led step by step into a journey of faith.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 11.*

To Zarephath

Although our story begins with God's command to the great prophet Elijah to go to Zarephath, we must remember what led to this command. The kingdom of Israel had fallen into idolatry. Baal worship had become the official state religion. God dramatically had "challenged" the storm god by declaring through His prophet Elijah that there would be no more dew or rain (*1 Kings 17:1*).

What irony is found in the idea that God tells a kingdom that was worshipping the storm god that there would be no rain? What does this tell us about God's power in our world in contrast to every other power? See also *Ps. 86:8, Jer. 10:6, Heb. 1:1–3, and Job 38*.

Elijah had been hiding at the brook Cherith (*1 Kings 17:3*) while the country of Israel withered under a devastating drought. The brook finally ran dry, and God commanded the prophet to leave and go to Zarephath (*1 Kings 17:1–9*).

God commands Elijah to leave Israel and go to a foreign land. Zarephath is located on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon. It is within the territory of Phoenicia, which is where the terrible queen Jezebel comes from. One of the important Phoenician national deities is Baal, and Jezebel, as King Ahab's queen, actively imported Baal worship to Israel from Phoenicia. In the ancient world, gods were normally thought of as belonging to a specific city or region. Zarephath, situated outside of Israel in a foreign country, is supposedly far removed from the Lord's area of influence. The people of this heathen nation also should be far out of God's reach. But no one ever is out of His reach. Right in the very center of Baal worship, God is going to make His presence and power known.

It's important to note that God uses the prophet's need to reach out to a woman in far-off Zarephath. As believers in Jesus, we do not have to project a perfect front to all those around us. We do not have to cover up our problems or pretend that we have no needs, because, as we all know, that's just not true. As Christians, we still suffer, we still hurt, we still need at times the solace and help of others who, in fact, might not be of our faith or of any faith at all.

What's wrong with the attitude that says we show a lack of faith when we seek help from others? What are ways that we might, through our needs, reveal to others the goodness and character of God?

An Unusual Instrument *(1 Kings 17:7–12)*

The widow, out gathering firewood to make a last meal for herself and her son, immediately recognizes Elijah as a believer in God. The text doesn't say what it was, but something let her know that Elijah was a worshiper of the Lord.

Read carefully verse 12. The woman acknowledges that God exists, but what does that, at this point, mean to her? Dwell on her phrase “that we may eat it, and die.” What does it imply?

What similarities can you detect between 1 Kings 17:3, 4 and 17:8, 9?

God directs and guides His prophet Elijah in order to save his life. First He tells him to hide by the brook Cherith. Ravens are commanded to feed him. Following this, God commands again and sends Elijah to Zarephath, where he has “commanded a widow” (*vs. 9*) to feed him.

She seems an unusual instrument for God. She is a non-Israelite. She is a widow with no social standing and no influence or power. She herself is on the brink of starvation.

What an incredible lesson can be learned from observing this divine strategy. More often than not God chooses us—not for a particular strength that we may have—but rather in spite of our weaknesses (*2 Cor. 12:9*).

Yesterday we saw that God is not limited geographically. Today we see that God is not limited by human limitations. God is the One who orders in this story. Throughout this narrative it is clear that God is in control, a point that also is very important in the larger context of Elijah's ministry in the great battle between the Lord and Baal. Nothing and no one can stand in the way of God's ultimate will. Later in the story we will see that even death cannot interfere with God's purposes. Even though things and events that are hurtful or detrimental to our lives will be thrown at us, God's purposes for us always are good (*Jer. 29:11*), although we may not see this immediately. We need to learn to trust Him in all situations, both the good and the bad, for we will inevitably find ourselves at some point in both.

How has the Lord been able to use you despite your weaknesses? How much more could you do were you, through His power, able to overcome those weaknesses?

Total Surrender (1 Kings 17:13–16)

Read 1 Kings 17:13–16. What’s the first thing Elijah says to the widow, and why? What great leap of faith is Elijah taking in asking her to do this?

Widows were marginal characters in the biblical world at the best of times. Especially if they had no grown children to take care of them, they easily were victimized and had limited legal recourse. A widow in the time of a great drought was even worse off. Each family was fighting for survival, and there would be no handouts to poor widows. This woman is now asked to feed the prophet. She is really the most unlikely candidate, when we consider her social and economic reality. Only a handful of flour and a little oil stands between this poor woman and starvation.

Whom does he tell her to feed first? What kind of thoughts must have gone through her mind when she heard that? What kind of faith was required on her part?

In many of our cultures it is more appropriate to offer to others before taking for ourselves. However, to add insult to injury, the prophet not only wants to take from a person who cannot afford to give, but he wants to be served first.

Remember that throughout this story the prophet really is standing in as a representative of God. By asking the woman for her last bread, the prophet is inviting her to take a leap of faith, to surrender all she has.

What other examples can you find in the Bible in which the Lord asks for complete surrender? See, for instance, *Genesis 22*.

When we give God everything we have, we always gain in the end. The woman originally had enough for only one meal. In giving that meal to the prophet first, this pagan woman reached out in raw faith, trusting in what she could not see or understand. In a sense, isn’t that what faith is all about (*see Heb. 11:1*)—trusting in a God we can’t see and in promises we don’t fully understand? What’s amazing, too, is that this isn’t even an Israelite woman but a woman from a pagan land who practiced a degrading form of worship. And yet God somehow communicated with her (*see vs. 9*), and she responded in faith, doing what she had been commanded to despite how foolish, from a worldly perspective, her actions might have seemed.

When was the last time you had to reach out in raw, naked faith, trusting in what you could not see or did not understand? What lessons did you learn about what it means for us, as fallen beings, to live by faith?

Remembering My Sins *(1 Kings 17:17, 18)*

The widow gave her last loaf of bread, and God performed a miracle. She and her son miraculously escaped starvation and had a constant source of food. It's hard to imagine the astonishment she must have felt to see this incredible miracle happen, not just once but day by day.

What is the natural human response to contact with God? *See Job 42:5, 6; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 10:8; Luke 5:8; Rev. 1:17.* **Why do you think that reaction is so common?**

Through the prophet Elijah, the widow came into contact with God. As we come into contact with a holy God, our sins become more apparent. And then, when something terrible happens, we may feel that the Lord is punishing us. In 1 Kings 17:18, the widow blames God's prophet for being there and consequently bringing her to God's notice.

Look at her reasoning (*vs. 18*). **Why might she have thought the way she did?**

Perhaps she saw the kind of faithful and holy life that Elijah lived, and she felt convicted in his presence when she contrasted herself to him. Or, living day by day with such a miracle, perhaps she felt the presence of God and His holiness as never before and thus felt her sinfulness more than ever before. Thus, in that context, she saw her sins as the cause of this tragedy.

In many ways this is such a common reaction. We often blame ourselves and our sins for the tragedies that hurt us or our loved ones. What did I do that caused my child to get sick? What sin has caused this calamity in my life? Though it is true that many times pain and suffering result directly from the sinful choices we make, it's also true that tragedies come for which we see no apparent reason and certainly through no fault of our own. Remember the story of Job. Even God admitted he was a righteous man, and look what happened to him. We need to be very careful in how we seek to explain the cause of tragedy in our lives. What's more important is how we respond to those tragedies, and fixating on the supposed cause most likely won't help.

We all face unexpected and inexplicable tragedy, don't we? It's part of what it means to be fallen beings in a fallen world. How can you learn to trust and love God, even amid painful times?

Testing Faith

How was the faith of both the widow and Elijah tested here? *1 Kings 17:17–24*.

Notice the struggle that Elijah himself had with the death of the boy. It doesn't seem as if he knows for sure that the Lord will raise him. His prayer seems to reflect some of the attitude of the woman herself, blaming God for the death. What this shows is that even prophets can struggle with understanding things that happen (*Matt. 11:1–3*).

No question, for quite a while both the widow and Elijah were living in the presence of a miracle—the continual supply of flour and oil—which should have been more than enough to keep their faith strong. And yet, even with something as dramatic as that, their faith was put to the test.

How often, too, we might have had some incredible experience with God, something that really touched us in a powerful way, only to question Him later when events unfold that we don't like. That's why, though miracles can have a role in the building of faith, they shouldn't be the center of it.

How does Elijah refer to the Lord? What does that tell us about his relationship with God?

Elijah has a very intimate relationship with God; he calls God “my God.” Having a close relationship with God does not mean that one has all the answers. Elijah cannot understand why God has permitted the child to die. But it is when we have an intimate relationship with God that we best can experience the power of God in our lives. The miracle does not occur by a special magic formula or even the attempt of the prophet to keep the boy warm. The writer of the account makes it clear that it is God who resurrects the boy.

Elijah himself is thrilled at the results. “Look, your son is alive!” he probably shouted to the widow. No doubt, whatever this incident did for the faith of the woman, it surely helped Elijah, as well.

The widow's response ends in a faith statement. She now knows that the God of Israel is able to sustain life and also give life.

Read Luke 4:24–26, where this widow is mentioned again. How do Christ's words here help us better understand this story as a whole? What lessons might we draw from it for ourselves, we who are part of a privileged group?

Further Study: “ ‘And He said, verily I say unto you, No prophet is acceptable in his own country. But of a truth I say unto you, There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and unto none of them was Elijah sent, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman, the Syrian.’ Luke 4:23–27, R.V.

“By this relation of events in the lives of the prophets, Jesus met the questionings of His hearers. The servants whom God had chosen for a special work were not allowed to labor for a hardhearted and unbelieving people. But those who had hearts to feel and faith to believe were especially favored with evidences of His power through the prophets. In the days of Elijah, Israel had departed from God. They clung to their sins, and rejected the warnings of the Spirit through the Lord’s messengers. Thus they cut themselves off from the channel by which God’s blessing could come to them. The Lord passed by the homes of Israel, and found a refuge for His servant in a heathen land, with a woman who did not belong to the chosen people. But this woman was favored because she had followed the light she had received, and her heart was open to the greater light that God sent her through His prophet.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 238.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is the connection between sin and suffering? The widow of Zarephath thought that her sin caused her son’s death. In the New Testament the disciples thought that being blind was the result of the individual’s or his or her parents’ sins (*John 9:2, 3*). Should we relate differently to people who are suffering as the result of their own sins as opposed to those who seem to be suffering through no cause of their own? Or should we not even make that judgment call? Defend your answer.
- ❷ A child is born with a rare genetic disorder, and the mother feels that God is punishing her for her rebellious youth. What advice and comfort can you as a class offer her?
- ❸ Ask if anyone in class ever witnessed a miracle, something that could have come only from God. What was the person’s reaction? How has the impact of the miracle in the person’s life changed over time? Did he or she ever struggle with doubt again, despite having witnessed something so amazing? What lessons can we learn from these experiences about what it means to live by faith?

Hopeless Case: Part 2

by LIONEL WALCOTT

My life had been dismal and hopeless until I noticed a tent near my brother's place. Evangelistic meetings were being held, and I went out of curiosity. But there I found hope.

One night I skipped the meeting to buy some drugs for my brother. In a quiet moment I heard a voice saying, "Is this what you want for yourself?" I had heard that voice once before in prison. It was God. I knelt down and for the first time in my life I prayed. "Jesus, help me! I'm a sinner, and I want Jesus in my life." That night I gave God my addictions, and He took them away.

I bathed and cut my long hair. People noticed that I was changing. Church members were glad, but my brother was angry. When he heard me playing Christian music, he smashed my radio. Normally I would have reacted violently, but peace filled my heart, and I didn't become angry. This surprised both of us.

Church members nurtured me in my new faith. I was baptized, and a year later I left my job in construction to become a literature evangelist—even though I couldn't read or write.

Because I couldn't read, I listened to the Bible on tape. I listened to Adventist books on tape, and God gave me the memory to remember what I had heard. God taught me how to speak in public and present my canvass. I became a successful literature evangelist. I would memorize a list of Bible texts so I could give Bible studies. During evangelistic meetings I volunteered to be a Bible worker. God blessed me in this job. Eventually I became the associate publishing director in Barbados.

One day I met a schoolteacher in the Adventist bookstore. We talked, and eventually I asked her out. I married her. She worked hard to teach me to read and write.

God has blessed me with so many souls through the literature work. A woman living nearby owned a rum shop, a bar. I invited her to study the Bible with me. She became an Adventist, closed her rum shop, and reopened it as a children's day-care center.

I met a young woman who had lost her parents. She wanted to commit suicide. I told her a bit of my past, and we prayed. She and her sister accepted Jesus into their lives, and God turned their lives around.

I know that God can change anyone; after all, He changed me.

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