

# ***“A Single Mother’s Obedient Faith”***

**SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 2): 1 KINGS 17:8-16**

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If you were with us two weeks ago, then you might remember that we started a series of lessons based on scenes from the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Elijah, of course, is one of the most powerful and one of the most unique characters in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, John the Baptist is said to have preached with the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Many thought that the Lord himself was Elijah (Matthew 16:14). It was Elijah who was chosen to appear along with Moses and the Lord at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:30). And so we find that Elijah is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament. Two weeks ago, we also looked very briefly at James 5:17. Sometimes we tend to put these Bible heroes on a pedestal – they were up here with almost superhuman faith, but we are down here just struggling to get through another day. But that is not the case with Elijah. In the context of prayer, James says in James 5:17-18, ***“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”*** In other words, Elijah was like us. So, there is a value to studying the life of Elijah.

Two weeks ago, of course, we had a one-point lesson, and in our text (in 1 Kings 17:1-7) we learned that Elijah was a man of tremendous courage. Ahab was one of the most evil kings in the history of the nation of Israel. He was married to Jezebel, a name that is now synonymous with evil. The strange thing, though, is that the economy of Israel was booming. Outwardly, things were going very well, but the nation had been led into the worship of Baal. God was torn up over this, and that is what leads us to the prophet Elijah. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah basically appears out of nowhere, and he comes with a message to the king. The simple message is found in 1 Kings 17:1, where Elijah approaches the king and says, ***“As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”*** Elijah, then, was a man of tremendous courage. We applied that to ourselves – in our culture, there are many situations where we also will need courage – courage to speak up when we need to speak up, courage to not compromise what we believe. Elijah, then, was a man of courage. At that point, Elijah went to live in the wilderness. He lived by a dry creek bed that seems to have been miraculously supplied with water. The prophet was fed by ravens that came and supplied him with food. But after a time, the creek dried up. Since the flow seems to have been miraculous in the first place, it seems that God was giving Elijah a bit of a nudge. It is time to move on. And that is where we pick up with the next major scene in the life of the prophet Elijah – 1 Kings 17:8-16,

***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.” 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." 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." 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.'" 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.*

As we think about this passage, as we let it sink in, as we absorb what happened here, as we apply this passage to our lives today, I would like for us to notice a lesson from this woman's **OBEDIENT FAITH**. And again, as with our study two weeks ago, this morning's lesson only has one point, and the point is: **THIS SINGLE MOTHER'S OBEDIENT FAITH SERVES AS AN EXAMPLE AND AN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR ALL OF US ASSEMBLED HERE THIS MORNING NEARLY 3000 YEARS LATER.**

So we find that Elijah runs out of food and water in the middle of a 3-1/2 year drought, and to solve this problem, what does God do? God sends Elijah to a poor widow who is about to starve to death herself! He is not sent to the palace of a king, he is not sent to the home of a wealthy merchant, he is not sent to the home of a farmer or a shepherd, but he is sent to the home of a destitute widow, a single mother. I love the last part of verse 9. God is basically saying, "Don't worry, Elijah, I've got this covered. I have commanded a poor widow to take care of you!" [paraphrased]. I think of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1 where he explained that God often uses those things that are weak and despised to accomplish his will, and the reason is: So that we are not able to boast in our own power. We think of what Paul said about the Lord in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, where God said to Paul, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."*** Paul then went on to say, ***"Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."*** God, then, obviously has something very powerful in mind for Elijah, something that would bring glory, not to Elijah, but to God.

And with this, we come to the challenge. Elijah comes to the city gates and finds a woman gathering sticks. He asks for water, and then, as she is going, he calls out, "Oh, and by the way, could you also bring me some bread" [paraphrased]. The woman then explains that she is gathering wood for a fire so that she and her son can bake and then eat their last bit of bread and then wait to starve to death. Now at this point, we might expect Elijah to say, "Oh, I am very sorry. Please forgive me for asking." We might expect Elijah to maybe move on to somebody else. After all, maybe he had the wrong widow. And yet that is not what happened, is it? Instead, Elijah says, ***"Do not fear,"*** and then he orders the woman to go ahead with the plan, with one little twist: Instead of feeding herself and her son, the woman is told to feed Elijah first. Elijah then brings a message from God, ***"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.'"*** At this point, confronted with the word of God, the widow faces a decision. We remember the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1, ***"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** From a human point of view, this woman had no way of seeing the future, but in an act of faith, she put her trust in the word of

God and decided to give her very last meal to God's prophet. Verse 15 tells us that she went and did according to the word of Elijah. She bakes the last of her flour and gives it to Elijah.

What a challenge that must have been! God was asking her to give up something that was very, very important to her. In fact, God was asking for all that she had. We certainly think of our situation today. Sometimes God asks us to do some things that are very difficult. I enjoy living the Christian life, but there are some challenges, right? In fact, I might even say that if you truly think that the Christian life is easy, you probably aren't doing it right. Yes, the Lord did say that his yoke is "*easy*," but it is a yoke – there are certain things that the Lord has asked us to do, and many times we come to some very difficult decisions. The Christian life might challenge our finances. The Christian life might put some strain on some of our relationships. After all, the Lord himself said that he came to this earth not to bring peace, but a sword. Because of the Christian faith, brothers and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives, will sometimes face some tough decisions. Sometimes God is challenging us to let go when we really want to hold on. And that is what happens with this single mother. She is presented with a challenge of faith.

And I would point out here that in some ways, the focus of this challenge was rather insignificant. We are talking, here, about maybe two or three cups of flour. Right? Most of us here this morning probably wouldn't even miss that. While I'm here this morning, if a thief breaks in my house and steals three cups of flour, I am probably not even going to miss that. I probably won't even notice it. The actual amount that she was asked to give, then, was rather small, but it was, of course, significant to her. That flour was all she had. Sometimes we might be tempted to think that God is asking us to do big things, and when we have something big to do for God, we will do it. But we find here that God is asking us to be faithful even in the small things. What do we have just a little bit of that is very valuable to us? What about time? We have 168 hours in a week. 60 or 70 of those hours are used for work. We use maybe 56 hours for sleep. We might spend 10 or 15 hours eating. Then we have homework and chores, and there is not much time left. Our limited time has tremendous value.

- Is God asking you to take some of that valuable time to help teach a Bible class?
- Is God asking for 3-4 of your valuable hours on a Saturday afternoon to get ready to teach a class of children on Sunday morning?
- Is God asking you to step away from Netflix for a few hours this week to send some notes of encouragement to the seniors of the congregation?
- Is God asking you to give up watching the Olympics on Sunday afternoon so that you can take the Lord's Supper to one of our seniors who is shut in up in DeForest?
- Is God asking you to take time to shovel snow for an elderly neighbor...or maybe here at church?

Today, we value our time. We think of the widow in the New Testament who was praised by the Lord for putting those two small coins in the temple treasury. When added together, those two coins added up to a single penny, but those two coins were all she had. And so the question is: How are we using the little that God has given us? Are we faithful with a little? God wasn't asking this woman for steak and lobster, but he was asking for the little that she had – a few cups of flour and a bit of oil. For us, we might not miss a little bit of flour, but we might miss two or three hours. The point is: God wants what is important to us. God wants us to step out in faith. God wants us to obey, even when it is a challenge for us. God is asking for our trust.

One of the most encouraging moments I've ever had as a minister came maybe 10 years ago. We went on a visit to a town not too far from here, and this senior woman had almost nothing in her cupboards. But when we got there, she fixed some instant coffee, and then she brought out some handmade tortillas that had been

cooked over a cowchip fire in Mexico. She had just returned from a long trip to see her family, and she offered us the best that she had. What an honor! What an encouragement! That is what this woman did for Elijah.

I would ask a thought question here, and that is: What do you think would have happened if this single mother had not demonstrated her faith. What if she had said, "I'm sorry Elijah, but there is no way that I can give you this flour"? We may never know for sure, but I would assume that it would happen to her what would happen to anybody else in this situation. She and her son probably would have eaten that last meal, and then they would have starved to death. That is the reality of the situation. And yet thankfully she responded to God's command with obedience. We think of what the Lord said in Matthew 16:25, "**For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.**" God, then, wanted this woman to trust him with her life, and to show that trust, she actually needed to do something. This challenge fits right in with so many other challenges of faith elsewhere in the Bible.

- Moses had to stretch out his hand before the Red Sea parted.
- The Levites had to step into the Jordan River before the river dried up.
- The Israelites had to march around Jericho 13 times before the walls came down.
- Namaan had to dip himself seven times in the Jordan before being cured of his leprosy.
- And today, we must allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins will be forgiven. God is looking for obedient faith.

We find a powerful lesson here, then, on the kind of faith that God wants us to have today. And I say that (I make this application to us) because of how this passage is used in the New Testament. Did you know that Jesus referred to the widow of Zerephath? Keeping a finger or some kind of marker here in 1 Kings 17, I would invite you to turn over very briefly to Luke 4:24-26 (p. 1603). In Luke 4, Jesus went to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He opened the scriptures, he applied them to himself, and then notice what the Lord says, starting in Luke 4:24, "**Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.**" Notice how the people reacted in verses 28-30, "**And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way.**" The Lord, then, intended this reference to be an indictment against the people of Nazareth. Just as the people of Israel had rejected Elijah, so also they would reject the Lord, and just as Elijah had to leave the land of Israel to find the kind of faith that God honors, so also the Lord's message would need to spread far beyond the city of Nazareth. These words were spoken during a public assembly, the equivalent of a church service today, and the Bible very clearly implies that the people understood exactly what the Lord was saying. They got up, ran him out of town, and tried to throw the Lord off the edge of a cliff.

I point this out to show us what the Lord wants us to get out of this passage. He wants us to trust God just as this single mother trusted God. And when we trust God, the Lord will take care of us. Notice: The Lord does not provide steak and potatoes, but he did provide an unlimited supply of oil and flour. In a prolonged drought, what a blessing that must have been! They were not living like kings by any means, but they were cared for by the Lord. So, we learn something from the faith of this single mother: In faith, she obeyed God by giving up something that was very important to her. Once she took that step, God responded with a blessing. Her life wasn't perfect at that point, but God did take care of her.

So what? What does this passage really mean for us today? It means that we also need to trust and obey. We need to be reading our Bibles. Several weeks ago, I passed out some plans for reading through the New Testament in a year by reading one chapter a day. That takes about five minutes. And when we read something that challenges the way we think, we need to be open and we need to step out and take a risk. We need to do it. Again, maybe the Lord is challenging how we use our time. Maybe the Lord is challenging our attitude toward another person. Maybe the Lord is challenging some kind of bad habit or addiction. Whatever it is, if we have the word of God on it as something that we should or shouldn't be doing, this woman serves as an example.

Lord willing, I would love for us to continue next week as we finish this chapter and notice what happens next. I would invite you to read ahead and come prepared to study the final paragraph in this chapter next Sunday morning.

**Conclusion:**

As we close, I want to remind all of us why we are here. The Lord Jesus came to this earth to offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice, to die in our place. That is the love and grace of God. In response to that offer, we are invited to love God and to put God first in our lives. Once we believe in Jesus as being the Son of God, we turn away from sin (we repent) – we have a change of mind resulting in a change in the way we live. At that point, we are told to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. God is at work in the act of baptism, we are born again and the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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