

## 1 Kings 17:7-16

Epiphany 4, January 30, 2022  
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*And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. <sup>8</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him, <sup>9</sup> "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." <sup>10</sup> 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, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." <sup>11</sup> And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." <sup>12</sup> And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." <sup>13</sup> And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup> For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" <sup>15</sup> And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.*

"Tough times don't last, but tough people do." Have you ever heard that saying before? It's actually the title of a book written by televangelist Robert Schuller back in the 1980's. If you lived through those years, you might remember the overwhelming emergence of Christian self-help books. Titles like *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *The Purpose Driven Life* promised Christians earthly success and happiness if they could only determine to think it into existence. Or as Robert Schuller famously preached, "If you can dream it, you can do it!"

What do you think the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath would have done if they heard that kind of theology? I think they'd probably laugh out loud! Or maybe shed a tear. Thankfully, God's Word for this morning provides a much more reliable and realistic solution to the problem of tough times. How are Christians supposed to endure desperate situations like family strife, financial instability, or even starvation? It's not by the power of positive thinking, it's much simpler than that. Tough times are overcome by placing our faith in the God who has given us every reason to trust him unconditionally, just as Elijah and the widow did in our text. The theme we'll be considering this morning is:

### **God, Grant Me a Zarephath Faith!**

- I. Like Elijah who trusted Your word of providence
- II. Like the widow who trusted Your word of salvation

You know, whenever we read about the lives of many of the people from the Bible, it's easy to think, "I wish my faith was that strong." When you read about the Apostles being willing even to be killed for professing their faith, yet they confessed Christ right till the end—"I wish my faith was that strong." When you read about Abraham, leaving all behind and simply going to the land that God directed him, or about Noah, building a giant boat for years in a location miles away from any major body of water, simply because God instructed him to do so—"I wish my faith was that strong." Elijah is another one like that. There are numerous accounts from his life, that when I read them, all I can think is, "I wish my faith was that strong." But when we focus on the strength of faith like that, we really tend to put the cart before the horse, and I'll explain why.

Consider the events surrounding our text this morning. We're told from the outset that the brook had dried up. That's because from the beginning of 1 Kings 17 through chapter 18, there's a severe famine in the land of Israel. No rain would come to the land for 3 and a half years, all because Elijah had prayed that God would not send the rain. He did so because the land was corrupt. The King of Israel at the time was the infamous King Ahab, husband of the wicked Queen Jezebel. She had seduced Ahab away from the Jehovah God and turned both him and the nation into Baal-worshippers instead. So, Elijah prayed that God would not send the rain in order to awaken the people to their terrible sin, so that they might turn back to the God who *could* save them!

Elijah prayed, and God listened. And I find myself thinking, "I wish my faith was that strong." But let me ask you this: was Elijah able to stop the rain from coming to the land of Israel because his faith was so strong? That's not the case. In the Letter of James, the author writes, **"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."** (James 5:17-18) Did you catch it? **"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours."** There was nothing special about Elijah that gave him this ability to bring a drought to the land. The power came from the God in whom his faith rested.

So, you see, the secret to strong faith is that it's not about faith; it's about the One in Whom that faith is placed. When we face those difficult times in our life—financial difficulties, families falling apart, relationships ending, health struggles, the times when our faith is being attacked by doubt and worry—we hear the common encouragement, "You just gotta believe." "You just have to have faith." And we want to believe, we want to be able to just trust that it will get better, we want a stronger faith. But rather than focusing on our faith and praying that it gets stronger, we'd be much better off by simply focusing on the One in Whom our faith rests. That's what Elijah was doing here in our text.

Looking at the first verse, **"And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him, 'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So, he arose and went to Zarephath."** Note the simple response from Elijah. **"So, he arose and went to Zerephath."** That's all we're told. There's no questioning, no distrust issues, no lingering around for awhile. God spoke, and Elijah went.

And that's remarkable when you consider what God told Elijah to do. First of all, God commanded him to go to Zarephath, a town in Sidon, up north of Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Sidon was the homeland of wicked Queen Jezebel, that Baal-worshipping queen of Israel. Zarephath was the town most notably known as the manufacturing center of the idols of Baal for Baal worship. So here Elijah is, life in Israel recently made uncomfortable by a King and Queen who had turned the nation against Elijah's God, and he's being told to go to that Queen's homeland and find providence in the town that was the heart of Baal-worship. Not only that, but who is he to turn to? To a widow, an impoverished woman with a son, who we then learn is down to her last bit of flour and oil, ready to die. "That is where I will provide for you, Elijah." And Elijah goes.

None of this makes any human sense. Of course, Elijah had learned that the Lord does not need things to make rational sense to us in order to keep His promises to us. In the verses

leading up to our text, we can read about the way God provided for Elijah before sending him to the widow in Zarephath. First, God had sent Elijah to the brook Cherith, and to that place, God sent ravens twice a day, carrying bread and meat with which to feed Elijah. That was unheard of thing, birds acting as a Meals on Wings service for the Prophet of God. And yet God saw to it. God had promised to provide for Elijah, and so Elijah could now go to a heathen city in an enemy nation to an impoverished widow, knowing that the God who sent Him there had never failed to provide for Him before.

May **God Grant Me a Zarephath Faith!** And you too, just like Elijah who trusted God's Word of providence. When we are faced with crippling doubt and worry in the throes of financial, health, and emotional battles, we can remember that we still have the same God who has never failed to provide for us before! He is the one who promises, **"I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."** (Jeremiah 29:11) Even when what seems like the worst possible outcomes hit close to home, God's promise remains sure when He says, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** (Hebrews 13:5) And we know that from experience, don't we? Because of Him, we can declare that **"we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."** (Romans 8:28)

**God, Grant Me a Zarephath Faith!** Like Elijah, who trusted your word of providence. And also like the widow, who trusted your word of salvation. You see, there's a tremendous amount of trust on display in these ten verses—first by Elijah, and then by this poor widow. And her trust is remarkable too, not just because of what she did, using the last of her oil and flour to bake a cake for Elijah and then trusting that there would be more leftover for her—and certainly that is remarkable—but also because of who she was. Undoubtedly, she was a heathen, most likely a Baal worshiper. Notice she doesn't call the LORD "her" God in verse 12, but she refers to Him as **"The LORD your God."**

So why did she trust that what Elijah said would really happen, when she didn't even believe in His God? Well, perhaps it's because she could compare the LORD God to her Baal god and see clearly that they were not equals. You see, Baal was known as the universal god of fertility, he was often called the lord of the earth and the lord of rain and dew. Well, where was he now? No doubt this widow and the whole nation of Sidon had been crying out to Baal, and yet this severe drought persisted and this widow was down to her last meal. Baal was the god to whom later the 450 prophets of Baal would cry out from morning till night, cutting themselves until their blood gushed out (cf. 1 Kings 18:20-40), and still he said nothing.

How different was this God of Elijah! For He was the one who spoke and who promised salvation and could deliver on His promises. Elijah reassured the woman, **"Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'**" Finally, a God who spoke and who was intimately concerned with His people. And in the most stunning contrast to her Baal, *this* was a God of grace.

Think about what Jesus meant in our Gospel lesson when He said, **"There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to**

**Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.”** (Luke 4:25-26) The point is that this woman was no more deserving than anyone else in a similar situation. Yes, from a humanitarian point of view, we would say that she deserved some help, but from God’s point of view, she deserved His love no more than the thousands of others that were also down to their last meal. And yet God chose her. Why? Simply because of His grace—that is, He loves people, even when they haven’t deserved it.

How this word of gracious salvation must have sounded, filling her with hope. There she was, a widow, unimportant to her neighbors; impoverished, unloved by her nation; a worshipper of god who did not listen and would not answer. And now a God whom she didn’t know spoke to her and promised her life. She knew that she didn’t deserve this attention, and yet God spoke to her, filling her with true hope for the first time. He spoke, and she trusted.

**God, Grant Me a Zarephath Faith!** Like the widow who trusted your word of salvation. Thankfully, this Zarephath faith is mine, and it’s yours too, because Your God speaks to you as well with words of salvation.

There might be those times in your life when you feel like the Psalmist did when He asked: **“Will the LORD be favorable no more? Has His mercy ceased forever? Has His promise failed forevermore? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies?”** (Psalm 77:7-9) Those moments in life when you’re down to your last meal, so to speak, it’s easy to wonder where God is. But then the Psalmist provides the answer: **“I will remember the works of the Lord; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. . . You are the God who does wonders; You have declared Your strength among the peoples. You have with Your arm redeemed Your people. . .”** (Psalm 77:14-15)

Have you ever found yourself hungry and lacking? I’m thinking not so much of physical hunger now, but those times when you just find yourself spiritually deficient—like your faith has begun to dwindle, and you’re just not sure that God will look favorably on you anymore. Even then, you still can turn to God’s Word of salvation, like in Lamentations: **“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”** (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Perhaps there’s some great sin weighing you down. You know that God forgives sins, but it’s hard to believe that He would really be willing to forgive this specific one. Again, there’s a Word of salvation for you. As the Psalmist declares, **“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”** (Psalm 103:10-12)

It might still seem difficult to believe that these things could be so, after all, in the weakness of our faith we doubt the promises of God. If only we had the strength of faith to always take God at His Word, if only we had a Zarephath faith! Well, remember, the secret to strong faith is that it’s not about faith; it’s about the One in Whom that faith is placed. Your God is the One who promises to provide, even in tough times. And your God is the one who gives you His Word of forgiveness, which you can depend on always. This God is the **“same yesterday, today, and forever.”** (Hebrews 13:8) So His Word to you will never change. May God grant us the faith to trust that Word always. Amen. **“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.