

Elijah and the Widow: The Miracle of the Flour and Oil

1 Kings 17:8-16

1 Kings 17:8-16 – *“Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, 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, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.” And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”*

So she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, 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.” And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’” So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.”

Background Notes

1 Kings 17:8-16 is the account of Elijah’s sojourn with the widow of Zarephath, and the great miracle of the continuous supply of flour and olive oil. From Cherith Brook the Lord directed Elijah to go to Zarephath (v8-9). This town was located on the Mediterranean coast, between Tyre and Sidon, in what was then Phoenicia (Lebanon today). Elijah left his hiding place by the brook in Gilead, on the east side of the Jordan River, and traveled about 75 miles to Zarephath.

When Elijah arrived at Zarephath, he saw a woman gathering sticks by the gate of the city. He recognized her as a widow, and she apparently recognized him as a Jewish prophet, probably because of his dress. Elijah asked her to bring him a cup of water and a little bread.

The woman and her son were close to death by starvation, but Elijah asked her to give him their last morsel of food! This appears (at first) to be a very selfish request! How can we explain it? Well, the answer is that Elijah was checking to see if she was the widow God had appointed. God had told Elijah that he would stay with a widow up north in Zarephath, but He didn’t specify which widow. (After living beside a brook, maybe Elijah was hoping she would be a rich widow – a big house or estate with lots of room and a private study!)

In spite of her poverty, the woman believed what Elijah said, and did what he requested. And sure enough, just as Elijah had predicted, a great miracle took place. The four in the bin was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry! Certainly that's evidence that this woman put her faith in the God of Israel. She may have been involved in Baal worship before, but she recognized that Elijah was a prophet of the Lord - and she responded in faith. Her faith was about to grow, but I'd say we can point to her conversion right here.

So Elijah recognized that he was to stay with this widow. It appears that he stayed with this woman and her son for at least two years.

Doctrinal Point

1. God leads one step at a time.

Promises that God will guide us are found in many places in the Bible. What's the first verse that comes to mind for a promise of God's guidance? Maybe, *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don't depend on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path"*(Proverbs 2:5-6). God promises that He will guide the believer who walks unreservedly by faith - but the guidance comes to us one step at a time.

God leads one step at a time. He doesn't drop a roadmap for your life out of Heaven when you become a Christian. He doesn't reveal His plan for your life from conversion to Heaven. No. And I'm glad for that - aren't you? Suppose God's plan for tomorrow is a car accident? Or a cancer diagnosis? Or a loved one's death? Aren't you glad you don't know about that ahead of time? I'm glad that God guides us only one step at a time. He doesn't show us what's out there in the future.

But God does guide us if we're walking with Him and trusting in Him. We can certainly see that truth illustrated in the life of Elijah. First Elijah confronted Ahab. At that point he didn't know where he was going next, but God guided him - one step at a time. God told him to turn eastward, and go to the Brook Cherith. Next thing he knew, he was fed by ravens that miraculously dropped off bread and meat - twice a day!

But then the brook dried up, and God specifically directed Elijah to go to Zarephath to stay with a widow. This step was only revealed to Elijah when the brook dried up, not before. Elijah had no idea what the next step in his life of faith would be. He probably never dreamed that God would send him into Phoenicia – wicked Queen Jezebel's home turf - to stay with a poor widow! But so it was. God leads one step at a time.

Several years ago I was directing a counseling staff at a Christian summer camp. One of the counselors came to me and said, "I don't know what God wants me to do after the summer is over." He'd just received the very sad news that his parents had separated and were divorcing. And he literally did not have a home to return to. I'll never forget his words,

“When I drive out the camp road at the end of the summer, I really don’t know whether to turn left or right. I don’t have a job lined up, and I have no home to return to. I don’t know what to do.” We prayed together and I assured him that by the end of the summer, he would know. I could say this because God has promised that He’ll guide one step at a time.

Sure enough, God was true to His word. By the end of the summer, this young man not only knew which way to turn when he left the camp, God had opened the doors for him to go to seminary! That man is in the ministry today, serving the Lord. God guides - but He guides one step at a time.

2. God provides one way at a time.

We often say God provides “one day at a time.” That’s certainly solid biblical truth, and it’s certainly taught here as well. God miraculously multiplied the flour and the oil, but the supply was sufficient for only one day at a time. It wasn’t a year’s supply, but there was always enough flour and oil. It never ran out. Enough for one day at a time!

God provides for our spiritual needs one day at a time, too. That’s pictured in the bread and the oil. Often in Scripture the bread (flour) speaks of Christ. And in Scripture so often oil speaks of the Holy Spirit.

There’s a lesson for us here. Like us, this widow had come by faith to believe in the God of Israel - and as a result her needs were continually met. There was a continuous supply. It never ran out! In the same way, when we turn to Christ (pictured by the bread) there’s a continuous supply for our nourishment through Christ. And pictured in the oil is the Holy Spirit, who provides the strength that we need. The Holy Spirit enables us to follow Jesus day by day.

But my main point here is not just that God provides one **day** at a time - He provides one **way** at a time as well. At Cherith, Elijah was provided with rolls and burgers twice each day, and water from the brook. He had his own private retreat center. But then everything changed. He was sent to a different location - in Phoenicia. Baal country! He didn’t have his private retreat center any more. A poor widow was caring for him.

And the time frame was different too. He was at the Brook Cherith for a short time, but he was two years with the poor widow at Zarephath. And the food was different! No longer bread and meat twice a day. Now it was just flour and oil. Just this little pancake-like bread - every day.

So even when times and places are totally different - but God is still providing. God not only provides one day at a time, He provides one way at a time. But He does provide. Some of you know I went to seminary. My wife and I prayed about this for a long time. “Lord if you want me to go to seminary, please provide this in your own way.” It was amazing how God answered that prayer! One day a Christian man said to me, “I think you should go to seminary - and I’ll pay your way!” And he did exactly that. (Probably some of you want to know his address [laughter], but that kind of thing doesn’t normally happen to me!)

God provided for our family one **way** at a time - and that's the way He chose to provide for us at that time. Something like this has never happened to me since. God provides – and it's not just going to be one **day** at a time, it's going to be one **way** at a time as well.

Practical Application

1. Expect to be tested in the domestic area.

Elijah was tested in the public area - and he passed the test. He boldly confronted wicked King Ahab. And then he was tested in the private area in his solitary time at the Brook Cherith - and he passed there too. But next he was tested in the domestic area. He stayed with a poor widow who had a young son. She probably had a very small house. Maybe Elijah had to share a room with the young boy.

There may have all kinds of problems in the domestic life of this poor household – cramped quarters, noise, interruptions, disruptions of all kinds. It's tough to live in situations like that. Maintaining a godly life in a busy domestic setting is not always easy. In many ways it's easier to be godly in a monastery than in a home.

You may be tested in a public area, like Elijah confronting King Ahab or living by faith in Baal country, and we may be tested in the private area, like Elijah at the Brook Cherith. But we can be sure that we'll be tested in the domestic area! In fact we're all being tested there right now, every day. How are you doing? Expect to be tested in the domestic area.

2. Expect to be dependent on others.

God planned for Elijah to be dependent on a poor Gentile widow in Phoenicia. That was not easy! Every day, for every meal! And the widow was dependent on Elijah, too.

It was a lot easier to be faithful at Brook Cherith - not having to live with and depend on others. But that's not the way God works all the time. God wanted Elijah to learn to be dependent on the poor Gentile woman in Phoenicia.

And the same is true of us. He doesn't want us to be freeloaders - but He doesn't want us to be independent of others either.

Being dependent on others keeps us humble. Being dependent on others makes us appreciative. God has ordained that we grow in that way as Christians - dependent on one another. Expect to be dependent on others.