

Series: Hope For Hard Cases

THE CASE OF THE EMPTY BARREL

1 KINGS 17:8-16

Text:

Introduction:

The story of the prophet Elijah is a fascinating account of the power of God.

God called Elijah to stand before Ahab and pronounce a sentence of divine judgment on the nation of Israel. Elijah's message was that it would not rain until he said it would. And it didn't.

God then sent Elijah to dwell beside an isolated stream in the wilderness. At that stream, God fed Elijah every morning and night with bread and meat carried to him on the wings of ravens.

When the brook went dry, from the very lack of rain Elijah prophesied, God sent Elijah to a place called Zarephath to be fed in the home of a widow.

Note:

1. A HOPELESS PREDICAMENT (VS. 10-12)

1 Kings 17:10-12

¹⁰ *So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.* ¹¹ *And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand.* ¹² *And she said, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.*

Note some things about this widow:

A. Her Place In Life

One of the first things we learn about her is that she is a “widow” who lives in a place called “Zarephath.” These two truths reveal a lot about this woman. As a “widow” she was in a difficult place at best. In that society women were largely dependent upon men to take care of them. They depended on the men in their lives to provide shelter, food and protection. We find out in verse 12 that she had a son. Not only is she responsible for her own care, she is also responsible in providing for a child.

B. Her Problems In Life

The depth of her poverty is revealed in verse 12. Elijah asks for for “a morsel of bread.” He isn’t asking for a whole loaf. He isn’t asking for a sandwich. He is asking for a small piece of bread. The widow replies that all she has is a “handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse.”

She’s outside at that moment “gathering two sticks.” She intends to take those sticks and use them to cook the last of her food. She is looking for fuel to cook a final meal for her and her son. As you read her words in verse 12, you can hear the desperation in her voice. She is in a hopeless situation, and in her mind, there is no way out.

C. Her Plan in Life

Her plan is simple. She is going to take two sticks, and the last of her food, and she is going to “go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” They have reached the end of the line. Death is the only ending she can see. This is a woman without hope. This is a woman who sees no way out of her situation. This is a woman who is ready to embrace death for herself and for her son because there is no other alternative.

This is about as hopeless as it gets.

We too at times have experienced circumstances that appear to be hopeless.

- It might be a sickness in the body that continues to deteriorate.
- It might be a fracture in a marriage that appears to be getting worse.
- It might be a financial crisis that grows worse day by day.
- It might be the death of a loved one and we see no way that any good could ever come out of it.
- It might be any of ten thousand other things, but the fact is, there are times when life appears to be hopeless.

Notice not only “A Hopeless Predicament” but also:

2. A HUMBLE PRESENT (VS. 9, 15)

1 Kings 17:9

⁹ *Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.*

1 Kings 17:15

¹⁵ *And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.*

In spite of her condition, God works in this poor widow to bring her to the place of absolute faith in Him and His power.

Note:

A. An Unusual Relationship

Verse 9 tells is that she is “a widow” in “Zarephath.” Zarephath was the hometown of Queen Jezebel.

It was a Gentile town filled with worshippers of the fertility god Baal.

She was a very unlikely candidate to be chosen for the work of God.

God chose to send His prophet to a pagan town to the home of a Gentile widow who could not even take care of herself and her son.

Of course, Elijah was a wanted man. Ahab was looking for him because Ahab wanted to kill him.

God sent Elijah to the one place on one would think to look for him.

This was a very unusual relationship. God finds the clay for His wheel in unusual places. He takes that which no one else wants and He makes something glorious out of it. That's what He did with this poor widow.

B. An Untroubled Request

When the brook dried up, Elijah left the wilderness and traveled to Zarephath. He traveled under the promise that God has already gone ahead of him and “commanded a widow woman there to sustain” him, v. 9.

When Elijah arrives in Zarephath, he finds a widow gathering sticks.

He speaks to this widow and asks for a drink of water, v. 10.

When she goes to get the water, he calls to her and asks her to bring him a “morsel of bread,” v. 11.

In verse 12, she tells him her tale of woe. She tells him of her poverty and of her plans to cook what little food she has.

She tells him of her plans to share one final meal with her son.

After that, she says, they will lay down to wait for death, presumably by starvation.

Elijah hears all of this and his response is strange. He tells her to go ahead but to feed him first.

He says, “Give me what you have left. Then, after I have eaten, fix food for you and your son.” She knows that she only has enough food to prepare a small cake for her and her boy. Elijah knows that he has the promise of God to supply his needs through the hands of the widow. Because Elijah has the promise of God, he is able to preface his request for bread with the words “fear not.” He was able to tell her God would honor her obedient sacrifice by providing for her, her son, and Elijah in a miraculous way, v. 14

Notice not only “A Hopeless Predicament” and “A Humble Present” but also:

3. A HEAVENLY PROVISION (vs. 15-16)

1 Kings 17:15-16

¹⁵ *And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.* ¹⁶ *And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah.*

The widow obeyed God and God honored His promise. God told Elijah they would be fed and they were. God was as good as His Word in this situation, and He will be as good as His Word in your situation as well.

For the next three years, every time she used all the meal and the oil, there was plenty the next time she needed some.

I don't know how God did it, but He did. She would take some out, and He would put more in. They never missed a meal. While others around them starved to death because of the famine, they had food to eat until the rains came. God took care of them during a hopeless situation.

Note some lessons from this story:

- Serving God from an empty barrel does more to fill my barrel than trying to fill it myself.

In other words, if I will forget about what I think I need and leave my care in the capable hands of God, He will take care of me. If I spend all my time trying to solve my problems, I will only make my problems worse. My duty is to faithfully serve Him and rest in the assurance that He will do what is right, all the time!

- My two sticks, my meal and my oil will accomplish very little, but God can do wonders with what I leave in His care.

This widow planned to use those two sticks to cook a final meal for her family.

She was planning to die.

In the end, she used those two sticks to feed God's prophet.

She took those two sticks and placed them in the hand of God and He didn't just supply one meal, He supplied thousands of meals.

Three people eating three meals per day would translate to over 3,200 meals in three years' time!

What a miracle of multiplication.

Here's the point, two sticks in a widows hand will accomplish very little.

What kind of a fire could she have built with just two sticks?

When she placed those sticks into the hand of God, her world changed.

In fact, God used two sticks and three nails to offer salvation to the world!

Note:

All David had was a sling, a shepherd's staff and a few stones, but in the hand of God he killed a giant.

All Moses had was a shepherd's staff, but in the hand of God it parted a sea.

All a little boy had was five loaves and two fish, but in the hand of God it fed a multitude.

All the widow had was two sticks, but in the hand of God it fed her family.

God doesn't need a lot to work with. In creation, God took nothing and made everything. All He is looking for from us is the faith to place our two sticks in His hands. When we do, everything changes.

Close:

A man called Chaplain Robinson, his first name has been lost to us, shared a true story about his grandmother that took place in 1949. His father had just returned home from World War II. On every American highway, you could see soldiers in uniform hitchhiking home to their families, as was the custom at that time in America. Sadly, the thrill of his reunion with his family was overshadowed by the illness of Robinson's grandmother. The problem was her kidneys. The doctors told Robinson's father that she needed a blood transfusion immediately or she would not live through the night.

The problem was that his grandmother's blood type was AB negative, a very rare type of blood even today, but even harder to get back then because there were no blood banks or air flights to ship blood. None of the family members had matching blood. So the doctors gave the family no hope of her surviving through the night. Robinson's father left the hospital in tears to gather all the family members so they could say “Good-bye” to Grandmother.

As Robinson's father was driving down the highway, he passed a soldier hitchhiking home to his family. Deep in grief, the father had no inclination to do a good deed at that moment. Yet, he felt strongly impressed to stop and pick up the stranger. Robinson's father was so

upset that he did not ask the soldier's name. The soldier, however, noticed the tears in his eyes and asked what was wrong. Through the tears Robinson's father told this stranger about his dying mother in the hospital because they could not give her a transfusion of AB negative blood because they did not have any. She would be dead by morning.

It got very quiet in the car. Then this unidentified soldier extended his hand out to Robinson's father with the palm upward. Resting in the palm of his hand was his army dog tags with his blood type engraved on them, AB negative. The soldier told Robinson's father to turn the car around and get him to the hospital where she was given a transfusion of this man's blood.

Robinson's grandmother lived until 1996, 47 years later, and to this day no one in the family knows the soldier's name. Robinson's father wonders if he was a soldier or an angel in uniform.

We never know how God will keep His promises. We never know how He will manifest His power. We never know what He will do!

What happened there? Somebody got their two sticks into the hand of God. When they did, everything changed!

What do you need to get into His hand today?