

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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What can I do?: The Cruse of oil and the flour (Widow of Zarephath)

It was Harold Macmillan, who was the Prime Minister of Britain at the time, who declared that we have never "had it so good". As far as he was concerned, conditions in this land were getting better and better, and we should be content with our situation. The story we will talk about today is very different. The nation of Israel had probably never had it so bad!

The Lord Jesus even comments on the situation hundreds of years later, remarking on the level of poverty and sickness in the land. It is a story about an unnamed widow, her son, a cruse, or jar of oil, and a barrel or bin of meal. Possibly not the most exciting ingredients for a gripping read, but there is a lot that God wants to teach us from them. Whilst we live in a time of great technological achievement, and most of us are very comfortably situated, it is true that morally the nation is probably as sick as it has ever been.

Before thinking about this remarkable story, let's read it. It is found in 1 Kings 17: "Then the word of the LORD came to (Elijah), saying, 'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Zidon, 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 have do not have bread, only a handful of meal 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 upon 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."

In the first letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he records that God "has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:27) God so often surprises us! He does the unexpected. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. He challenges our ideas and preconceptions, and teaches us to rely fully on Him. This certainly is one of the lessons we can learn from the story we have read about Elijah and the widow who lived in Zarephath in Zidon.

It is an incident that the Lord Jesus referred to very early on in His ministry. Having been tempted by the devil in the wilderness, the Lord had returned to Nazareth, the village where He grew up. It was His habit to go to the synagogue and there He had read to them from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD" (Isaiah 61:2; see also Luke 4:14-30)

When He had finished reading He sat down and declared that this scripture had been fulfilled that very day! His hearers were delighted; they lived in a land that was controlled by the occupying Roman army and life could not have been easy.

The listeners were amazed; this was exactly what they wanted to hear. Good news, healing for broken hearts, freedom for the many prisoners of the Romans, deliverance from tyranny and the proclamation of the year of the Lord. They were really pleased to listen to the Lord Jesus, and marvelled at Him until He made reference to the story that we have read about the widow of Zarephath. Why? Why should the story of this widow so enrage the Israelites?

Racism is often in the news these days, both in this country and elsewhere, but it is nothing new. The Israelites truly were a special people in God's sight and they hated the idea that He might bless or use people of another race. Is this an infection that afflicts me or you? That was exactly the problem here. The Jews were all very happy to hear Jesus quote these great words from Isaiah that promised deliverance to their nation, but as soon as He made mention of this widow and Naaman the leper, neither of whom were Israelites, they were infuriated. They were outraged that God

would go outside of their circle with His blessing! They were so angry that they tried unsuccessfully to kill Jesus by throwing Him over a cliff!

Racial tensions will almost certainly continue to escalate, but God does not play favourites, and nor should we. He commands all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel. The message that we can be just or righteous before God goes out to everyone, but is only true of those who believe. Or as Paul writes in Romans 3:22: it is "unto all, and upon all those who believe". And if salvation is open to all, God is also free to use whom He will to achieve His purpose.

I must get back to the passage I read! What is the lesson today for us in this story about a godly man called Elijah and a widow and her son, neither of whose names we are told. The overall title of this short series of talks is a question "What can I do?" In the big scheme of things, what can I do today that will make any difference at all, to anything? It is so very easy to think like this. The problems are so big and I am so little - what can I possibly do? Well, the truth is that I can do nothing by myself, but put what little I do have at the disposal of the Almighty God and anything is possible! Obviously God doesn't need my meagre resources and abilities, but the great truth is that He wants me and He delights to use those who are obedient to Him.

So first of all what is the background to this story? Israel had been promised by God that the land He had given them was a rich and fertile country. It was fruitful and God would watch over them, and protect them. But God had also warned them that if the nation was disobedient they would be punished, and one form of punishment that they would face would be drought. This is precisely what had happened. The nation had ceased to follow God. They had devised their own forms of worship; they had practised behaviour that was expressly forbidden by God and now they faced the consequences of their action. The Bible says, "God is not mocked; whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). It was pay-back time! Ahab, one of the most evil kings that had reigned in Israel was on the throne; the nation was morally corrupt, and God was not being honoured by His people.

Elijah is concerned about the state of the nation and wants God to intervene so as to bring the people to their senses, to repent and return to God. To this end, Elijah prays that God will withhold rain, until such time that he asks God to send it again. The Apostle James comments on this incident centuries later, and says that "the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). It is amazing that Almighty God is listening to and responds to the prayers of His faithful people!

Elijah however is not unaffected by the drought that ravages the country of Israel. Although he personally was faithful, he still had to suffer the consequences of the nation's sin. Having declared to King Ahab the punishment that was to befall the nation, Elijah is told by God to go eastward "and hide by the brook Cherith, near the Jordan" (1 Kings 17:3). The vengeful king would not be allowed to harm him, and God would command the most unlikely of creatures, ravens, to feed him. Notice that God says "I will feed you *there*." Elijah wasn't free to choose his own hiding place, his own favourite piece of countryside! Obedience is the principle that shines all through this story.

There is a place where God has promised to bless His people. In the Old Testament, Moses is told that it is at the Mercy Seat, where God's righteousness is met by the shed blood, that God says He will meet with Moses and commune with him. Today, it is wherever Christians are gathered together to the name of the Lord Jesus that He promises to be present. It is not a question of what suits me, but what is suitable for God and His holiness. So Elijah is told exactly where to go, and God promises to sustain him. After a while, however, the brook dries up, and Elijah is told by God to go to Zarephath, where he would find another unlikely source of help!

In passing, it is worth noticing two things. The first is that Elijah is obedient. He doesn't question God's rather strange commandment, but does exactly as he is told. Secondly, when the circumstances that he is in as directed by God, become increasingly uncomfortable, he doesn't complain but listens for God's new directions for his life. One of the hardest lessons I have to learn is that what is right for me one day, might not be right for me another day. Inertia affects all of us, but God likes variety. I don't naturally like change. I like what I have always known and trusted, but God would teach me that, even in the changing circumstances of life, He can still be relied upon.

One of the criticisms of someone called Moab in the Bible is that he "has settled on his lees; he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel," (Jeremiah 48:11) He was quite content with his situation; he had no need of God. God does not want His people to be like this. He will sometimes make us uncomfortable, so that again we learn that we need to rely fully on Him.

In the book of Deuteronomy this is pictured in another way: "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone did lead him" (Deuteronomy 32:11-12) In my comfort zone I have no need of God, or I enjoy Him in a very superficial way. But God wants much more of a relationship with you and me than this. So He challenges us with changing situations so we learn, like Israel, that "the Lord alone did lead him."

It is obedience that is so striking in this widow of Zarephath as well. In Scripture, a widow is used to portray a person who has no natural resources. In the patriarchal society of that day this would quite literally be the case. If her husband had died, she would be dependent on the charity of others. She, too, was suffering with the nation of Israel because of their sin. She had reached the very end of her resources - a handful of meal, a little oil, and a few sticks to light a fire to cook this rather unappetising meal for herself and her son. And this man that she had never seen before in her life was asking her to provide him with a meal first!

But this is exactly what she did! We are told in verse 9 that God had already commanded her to do this, and she was obedient. This is not just important, it is vital! What can I do? I can be obedient! Resources are not the issue with God; He has an infinite supply. What He desires are obedient followers, and at that point there is no limit to what can be achieved! In a remarkable passage in Psalm 50:12, God says "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is Mine." It is inconceivable that God is ever, or could ever be, short of material resources. After all, we know that He made the world out of nothing; He is quite literally a resource-full God! But what can be, and are often in short supply, are obedient and willing servants.

The problem with this is that it doesn't let anyone of us off the hook! We are all too ready with excuses. I can't preach, I can't teach, I can't witness to other people; I don't have money to support Christian work. But I can be obedient! It doesn't require special ability; it doesn't require great resources or gift. I can be obedient when I am very young, or very old. I can be obedient if I am fit and active, or if I am restricted and infirm. I can be obedient if I am very poor or very rich. It is an all encompassing gift!

Obedience is highly prized by God. The first sin committed by man was the sin of disobedience. In a garden paradise, Adam and Eve, prompted by the Devil, question God's goodness, and disobey the only restriction placed upon them. One of the many striking features of the Lord Jesus was that He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. The contrast couldn't be greater! Adam and Eve were disobedient in the very best of circumstances. The Lord Jesus was obedient in the very worst of circumstances. Also the Gospel of God's salvation is preached for the obedience of faith, as we are told in Romans 1:5. God values obedience. And He blesses obedience!

This widow could have found so many good reasons for not doing what Elijah requested. She had a duty to care for her son; she needed to keep her own strength up. But instead she gave what little she had to this man of God! What would have happened if she had looked after her son and herself first? We are not told, but we can imagine! She was at the end of her resources. The famine would last many more months and without food, she and her son would certainly have died. We read in verse 12 of our story that this is certainly what the widow expected. Instead, having cared for God's servant, God cared for her and her family through the rest of the famine.

In a very similar incident, another widow is told to get as many containers together as she can and they are miraculously filled. This incident is different; the cruse, or jar, of oil is not filled and the barrel of flour is not filled - they just never became empty! Each day, for many months, she would go to these vessels and find enough in them for the three of them, not too much and not too little! Her obedience had been tested and now her faith is being tested. She wasn't going to be like the rich farmer in Luke's Gospel, who had "many goods laid up for many years" and wanted to build bigger barns to store them all. He left God out of the equation altogether, with disastrous consequences! No, this widow had just enough for each day at a time, and she could trust God to continue to supply her needs.

We could also ask what the flour and the oil represent, because nothing is without purpose or meaning in the Bible. God never wastes words! Flour was used in the offerings made to God as described in Leviticus 2. The Lord Jesus calls Himself the Bread of God in John 6:33 and the Bread of Life in verse 35 of the same chapter. He goes on to promise that "whoever comes to (Him) will never hunger, and whoever believes on (Him) will never thirst" (John 6:35).

Oil was used to anoint some of the sacrifices, as also the priests, the kings and even the cleansed leper! I think we can say that it is used as a picture of the Holy Spirit. We always make time in our lives for food but do we make time to read about the Lord Jesus? David valued the word of God more important than his necessary food! Do we live holy lives that allow the Holy Spirit to operate in us in an unhindered way? The Lord Jesus, when tempted by Satan, quotes from the Bible and says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God shall man live" (Matthew 4:4)

There is another important lesson in this story which I mustn't overlook. Elijah is told to go to the widow, who will look after him "until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth." There is always hope for the believer. The situation was grim, hard to bear, but there would be an end to it. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) The hardship of the widow and her son, and of Elijah was only until the day that the LORD would send rain on the earth.

The title of this series of talks is "What can I do?" What possible difference can I make in a world that has so many problems? We can do what this widow did - we can be obedient. We can take what little we have and place it at God's disposal. A little is a lot when given to God!

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