

A Widow's Table

1 Kings 17:8-16

INTRODUCTION

- A. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted a study of poverty in the nation.
1. They found that many Americans were either hungry or concerned about where they could find food.
 - a. 12 million families were concerned at one time or another that they could not afford food.
 - b. Nearly 3.8 million families experienced hunger in 2002 & 34.6 million Americans were living in poverty.
 2. Sadly, I fear that those statistics would be much higher for this year.
 - a. The current economic downturn has taken a serious toll on many families.
 - b. Since the beginning of 2008, 6.7 million jobs have been lost.
 - c. Many states have staggering unemployment rates: In California, the unemployment is 12.2%; in Michigan, unemployment currently stands at 15.3%.
 - d. I shudder to think about how many children go to bed hungry each night; it frightens me to think about parents who worry where they will get the money to feed their children.
- B. Economic troubles are nothing new.
1. I vividly recall my grandmother's recollections of the Great Depression—beans for supper, dropping out of high school to help support her family.
 2. But, long before the Great Depression, there was the “Great Famine” brought about by Ahab's idolatry.
 - a. Ahab was a greatly wicked king.
 - 1) The inspired historian writes: “As if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Ki 16:31-33).
 - 2) It is immediately after the recording of Ahab's gross idolatry that we read of the drought.
 - b. “Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word’” (1 Ki 17:1).
 - 1) Baal was the pagan god of rain & thunder.
 - 2) The message is unmistakable: “Ahab, you worship Baal in order to bring rain upon the land. Let me tell you something: It's the LORD who brings rain, and the LORD shall send a drought that your worship of Baal cannot reverse.”
 - c. Elijah went to the brook Cherith where the LORD sent ravens with food to Elijah.
 - 1) But, the drought was so severe that “after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land” (1 Ki 17:7).
 - 2) The Lord then instructed Elijah to travel to Zarephath because there a widow would feed him.
 - a) Zarephath was about 85 miles from the brook Cherith.
 - b) This demonstrates just how severe the famine was.
 - i. The famine wasn't isolated simply to Israel over which Ahab reigned.
 - ii. This drought even covered Tyre & Sidon, the heart of the worship of Baal.
 - d. At Zarephath, Elijah encounters a widow who teaches us much about dealing with economic hardship.
 - 1) READ TEXT.
 - 2) While I'm unaware of any of us who have been seriously affected by the current economic situation, we've all struggled financially.
 - a) We have all wondered how we would make it to the next payday, and this poor widow had some things that money cannot buy that we desperately need.
 - b) This widow had POVERTY, PERSUASION, & PROVISION.

POVERTY, vv 8-12

- A. “Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], ‘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. And when he came

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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.' And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' 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.'"

- B. The Lord instructed Elijah to travel to Sidon, for he had commanded a widow to feed him.
1. Because the widow knows nothing of this command to feed Elijah, "command" should likely be understood as "ordain."
 2. The point is that God had determined that if Elijah went to this widow, he would be fed.
- C. When Elijah arrives at the city, he encounters a woman in deep, deep poverty.
1. It seems that God hasn't told Elijah which widow would feed him or how he would find her. Therefore, when Elijah arrives in town, he asks this lady whom he sees to bring him some water & then he asks her if she would bring him a morsel of bread.
 2. Her response indicates her abject poverty.
 - a. She has nothing baked in her house. It's not that she has eaten what she baked, had visitors who ate what she baked, or not had time to bake.
 - b. She hasn't baked, for she only has a handful of flour and a little oil.
 - c. She's gathering sticks to go home & bake that flour & oil, eat it with her son, & then wait for the two of them to die.
 - 1) Imagine being in this poor woman's shoes!
 - 2) You've lost your husband, you have been blessed with a son whom you love so dearly, but now food is so scarce that you have nothing left to do but cook what little you have & wait for the two of you die.
 - 3) I don't want to begin to imagine this woman's pain!
- D. Yet, this widow was so very blessed in her poverty.
1. Only because of her poverty did she learn a valuable lesson in trusting the Lord; only because of her feeding Elijah was the prophet able to resurrect her son when he died.
 2. Is it not the case that we can learn more of trusting God when things are difficult than when things are going well?
 - a. "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:11-13)—It was because Paul had done without that he learned he can do all things through Jesus.
 - b. Being poor, quite honestly, keeps us closer to God than riches every could.
 - 1) "There is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Tm 6:6-9).
 - 2) "Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it" (Prov 15:16).
 3. In their *Lessons of History*, authors Will & Ariel Durant declared, "As long as there is poverty there will be gods."
 - a. The idea is that as long as men have few material possessions, they will want religion.
 - b. We dare not forget the great things we can learn of God through our poverty & adversity.
 4. Someone once said, "When you have nothing left but God, then for the first time you become aware that God is enough." Let us never forget that God is enough!

PERSUASION, vv 13-15

- A. "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. 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."' And she went and did as Elijah said."
- B. This woman was persuaded by what Elijah said & acted out of great faith.
- C. Elijah told this widow to go & bake as she had planned, but to make a little cake for him first & then to bake for her son & herself. She went & did just as Elijah had said.
1. Talk about persuasion! Talk about faith!
 - a. This woman's obedience run counter to every reasonable action. Who will cook for a stranger when there isn't enough food to keep yourself & your child alive?

- b. But is it not the case that true faith runs counter to our own thoughts?
 - 1) It did for Abraham: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son" (Heb 11:17). This was the son through whom God said he would bless the world, but God said, "Sacrifice," & Abraham—in faith—obeyed.
 - 2) It did for Gideon:
 - a) The Lord told Gideon to winnow his fighting force to 300 men. Gideon did so & went against the Midianites (Judges 7).
 - b) No military commander in the world is going to act as did Gideon, but God said, "Go with 300 men," & Gideon—in faith—obeyed.
2. When we act in faith, our obedience runs counter to every reasonable action.
 - a. I do not at all mean to imply that faith is a leap in the dark or that faith is unreasonable—I deny such a statement with every fiber in my being.
 - b. But, what God requires quite often runs counter to human reasoning.
 - 1) When I contribute generously but I'm struggling financially, doesn't that obedience to God run counter to human reasoning?
 - 2) When I stand at the grave with a calm assurance of a resurrection, does not that hope run counter to our human thinking?
3. But, that's what trusting God is all about: Realizing that he has the answers, realizing that he is in control, and realizing that his promises are so very sure.

PROVISION, vv 15-16

- A. "She and he and her household ate for many days. 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."
- B. The Lord had promised that he would bless this woman if she fed Elijah: If the woman would bake a cake for Elijah first, "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" (v 14).
- C. The Lord kept his promise, as he always does, and blessed this woman with oil and flour.
- D. I cannot promise that if you trust God, he will give you great provisions in time of want.
 1. The Lord has never promised to keep the bank account full, a new car in the driveway, or a big plasma for the den.
 2. But, the Lord does promise that if we trust in him, he will meet our needs.
 - a. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing, & shelter] will be added to you" (Mt 6:33).
 - b. "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread" (Ps 37:25).
 3. God will meet our every need.
 4. A man once made a wooden statue of Hermes & took it to the market to sell.
 - a. When no buyer came forward, he tried to attract one by shouting aloud that he was offering for sale a god who could confer blessings on a man and make him prosper.
 - b. "Oh, are you?" said a bystander. "If he is all you say he is, why do you want to sell him? You would be better off if you kept him and profited by his help."
 - c. "But it's present money I need," the man replied. "It generally takes Hermes a long time to put anything into one's pocket."
 5. That poor man had the wrong god!
 - a. No, our God will not put riches in our pockets; he has **never** promised to do so.
 - b. But, God has promised to meet my every need. If God feeds the sparrows, he will surely feed me!
- E. This poor widow found her blessing through obedience.
 1. God always blesses obedience.
 - a. God promised to bless the Israelites for their obedience: "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine (Ex 19:5).
 - b. God still blesses obedience.
 - 1) "The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing" (Jas 1:25).
 - 2) "Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him" (1 Jn 3:22).
 2. Do you need to come & obey the Lord to receive his blessings this morning?

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- a. If you've never been baptized into Jesus, God will bless you for that obedience.
 - 1) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).
 - 2) If you will obey the Lord in baptism this morning, the Lord will wash away every sin & he'll send the Holy Spirit to dwell within you.
- b. If you're a Christian who has sinned, if you will confess your sins this morning, God will bless you for that obedience.
 - 1) "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).
 - 2) Do you need to come, obey our God, & receive his blessings?