

The Widow's Faith—Don't ask for just a few!

2 Kings 4:1-7

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The Background

The prophet Elisha was sent to the people of Israel in a season of national apostasy. The nation had turned away from God, all except for a handful who remained faithful—we call them the remnant - a faithful few scattered throughout the land.

Into this apostasy, God sent prophets to warn the nation and urge repentance.

First Elijah, now Elisha. The remarkable miracles these two performed were evidence they came from the Lord and spoke with his authority.

And alongside Elijah and Elisha, were a large band of minor prophets who also remained faithful to God.

In these dark days, all prophets were persecuted: because they said challenging words no-one wanted to hear. For example, in the first book of Kings we read about Jezebel, wife of the wicked king Ahab who “killed all the prophets with the sword” (1 Kings 19:1)

This is the background to our story.

The Story

One day, one of these faithful minor prophets died, leaving behind a widow and two boys who were too young to earn money.

With no social security, no universal credit, no pension, this widow fell into the “most vulnerable” category according to Old Testament law - “widows, orphans and aliens (people from other countries).”

We should notice that her name is not recorded. This omission is not sexist on the part

of the author, but is intended to highlight her insignificance: she's just one poor widow in a vast world of need. Who cares a dime for a no-name widow?

True faith in spite of calamity

But this desperate widow had something very precious: she had faith in God! And that is all the more remarkable in the light of her husband's recent death.

I watched a documentary film about five women who survived Auschwitz. One of them said, when she came through the gates of the concentration camp, at that very moment she stopped believing in God. Unbelief is a common response to trouble: "Why should I believe in God if he allows trouble, life?"

But fair-weather faith, brothers and sisters, is not true faith. True faith may strain in the fires of adversity but since it is a divine gift, it does not evaporate in the heat. True believers keep on going—no matter what.

This widow demonstrates she has true faith, because though her beloved husband, protector and provider has passed away, she still believes in God!

Is this the kind of faith you have and I have? A persevering faith? A keep-on-going faith? If you do, you have a most precious thing! A divine gift!

Three sorrows have descended on this widow all at once. First, she is grieving the death of her husband. Second, she has run out of money, she has sold all of her possessions, she is down to a jar with some oil in it. Third, she has inherited debts from her husband. Perhaps in times past, the family had fallen on hard times, famine or illness and during that season the prophet had to borrow money. And that debt has been passed from deceased husband to widow.

And when we meet this widow, the bailiffs have turned up ready to take her two sons as payment for the debt.

She is destitute, but she has faith!

So she does not go to her neighbours, for many of them, no doubt, belonged the vast

majority of the nation who have turned away from God, and have hard hearts. She does not go to the state, because Universal Credit or Pension Credit does not exist.

No, because she has faith, she turns to the Lord, she turns to Elisha! She “cried out to Elisha.” Hear that? Cried out! “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditors is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.”

Did you hear another pain in her voice? “My husband “*revered the Lord*. But now his creditor is coming.” “Trouble has come upon us even though we have been faithful to God!”

Adoniram Judson sacrificed everything at the tender age of 25 to travel from comfortable USA to be a missionary in Burma with his wife Ann. Their first child died on the journey, their second child before the age of two, Ann died, and soon after her death their third child died (that’s four deaths so far). Adoniram married Sarah and out of their eight children, 3 died. Then Sarah died (that’s now 8 deaths in the family). Adoniram then married a lady by the name of Emily, but she too died of fever. A more faithful servant of the Lord you could scarce meet! But a life filled with nine personal bereavements!

Faithful servant of the Lord, have you ever felt aggrieved by providence? You have served the Lord faithfully, but still sorrow and trouble has come your way? You need to hear 2 things:

Know that you are in good company; with this widow here, with many of the choicest saints in history, with the prophets and the apostles, and with the Lord Jesus himself, who though filled with godly zeal, was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.

Our response to aggravating providence must be to continue trusting in God, as this widow did.

Elisha wants to help, but he starts by assessing, need. “*How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?*”

If she had said “I have got a 90” Smart TV in my front room,” Elisha would have said

“well go sell that, pay off your debts and live.”

We’re not in need, not really, not yet, while we possess expensive luxuries. When people in our own day spend money on unnecessary luxuries, such as tattoos, manicure sessions, gigantic TVs and so on, they are not poor, not yet.

This isn’t right-wing patter, it’s Biblical wisdom. Need is defined in Scripture as being without the necessities of life such as housing, food and clothing (1 Timothy 6:8)

“Tell me, what do you have in your house?” asks Elisha, “Your servant has *nothing there at all*, except a little oil.” She is genuinely poor.

Look at how God starts the miracle, he starts with the little the widow has, the one remaining pot of oil: *“Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars (that is from the little pot you already have), and as each is filled, put it to one side.”*

You may not have much, but you do have *something!* Start with that! Start with what you have! You want to be great in the kingdom of God? You long to be useful! To be a blessing? To be fruitful? But you do not have many gifts? Start with where you are, serve with what you have. Give a cup of cold water to a lowly saint!

One of the greatest missionaries of all time, William Carey started off as a mere shoemaker. A cobbler! But he gave his life to the Lord and ended up mastering languages and translating the Bible into Bengalee. You don’t need tons of education; you don’t need degrees in theology, you just need to start with the little that God has given to you. And he will multiply it!

Off she goes collecting empty pots from all the neighbours! Can you imagine it! Up this side of Oldbury Road, down the other! “Could I borrow your empty pots!” “Here you are, I’ve got two spare.” “Can you check under your kitchen counter?” “In your back garden, I’m looking for any old empty pot.” “Ah yes, let me go back and check—here goes three more.” “Is that all, how about tucked behind the sofa in your front room, please check for me.” “OK,” “Ah yes I found one more pot!”

She's remembering what the prophet had said "Don't ask for just a few." She believes in the words of God through Elisha, she's going to fill up her house, jam-packed, with empty pots!

If she collects a few pots her blessing will be small! Our problem is that we often expect too little from the Lord. The Lord wants us to bring bold petitions to him, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) He says "you do not have because you do not ask God." (James 4:2)

Why does Elisha tell the widow to close all the doors behind her once she has collected all these borrowed vessels?

Because he doesn't want a miracle to become some flash mob TV spectacle, with a thousand eyeballs fixed on a miracle that would turn the widow into some sort of local spiritual celebrity?

Because greedy people might think that if they tried the same thing they could make a buck or two?

Perhaps simply to test the widow's obedience to the Lord—this is the way the Lord wants you to act!

The important thing is that she obeyed every part of the prophet's instructions, which came from the Lord.

"She left him and afterwards (that is after collecting as many empty pots from her neighbours as she could) shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring."

Can you imagine the scene?! "Benjamin bring me an empty jar" She pours in oil, and as she pours it out, so miraculously, new oil appears in the flask! "Joseph take away this full jar, put it to one side, and Benjamin bring me another one."

As she poured so the miracle happened! As she acted in faith, mighty things took place! If the widow had not poured, the oil would not have multiplied! There's a lesson here for us all!

Some people never experience the blessing of God in their lives because they haven't *started* pouring! They haven't started serving, they haven't started giving! They haven't started believing, they haven't started repenting! They haven't started ACTING in faith!

The miracle happens as she poured!

We want to see a work of God in the needy towns around us; such as Malvern, with 30,000 lost souls; it's not just going to happen by sitting in Worcester praying or planning! We have to start sowing Gospel seed!

God acts as his people pour! It's his appointed way!

"When all the jars were full, she said to her son (presumably that's my Benjamin whose in charge of the empty pots) "bring me another one." But he replied "There is not a jar left. Then the oil stopped flowing."

God provides just enough for her needs! The oil stops when she has been given enough!

"She went and told the man of God (Elisha) and he said "Go sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

Sell -> Pay -> Live!

Note the order, after you've sold the oil, pay your debts off first, then live. Don't think "I've got all this money, I'm going to blow it on some luxury and I'll leave my debts for the future." No, as soon as you have the money, pay your creditor and *then* use the rest of the money to live.

The Bible's debt policy is this: always pay off your debts first: *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."* Romans 13:8-10

And look how generous God is! He provides not only for this widow to pay off her debts, but with enough money to live—possibly until her boys are old enough to go out to work!

(1) The Lord cares for the Needy

The Lord has compassion on his needy people: *“He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour.”* (1 Samuel 2:8)

What is your need? Financial? For a husband, for a wife? Comfort? “Cast your cares upon the Lord, for *he cares for you.*” (1 Peter 5:7)

(2) The Lord wants us to trust and Obey

The Lord wants us to trust in him and obey his word. This widow turned to the Lord, and when she heard his commands she obeyed: collect many jars; close doors. When we are in need, the Lord wants us to turn to him. And when he gives his command, he wants us to obey.

(3) The Lord is generous!

The Lord met all of the widow’s needs and more! She was able to pay back her debts and live on the remainder—for how long we do not know! My guess is until the boys were able to earn. Our God is generous! He is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 5:20). Is that your experience? It is mine for sure! Is that our expectation? “Expect great things from God” “Attempt great things for God.”

The Gospel

And do you know why God gives his children material blessings in abundance? It’s written in Romans 8:32, *“He who did not spare his Son but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*

If God has given us his best, his greatest gift, the gift of his own beloved Son, “His indescribable gift” to quote Paul elsewhere; if he has given us spiritual billions, the

forgiveness of our sins, the adoption as sons, justification by faith alone, the hope of life eternal, then when we come to him for a few quid - for clothes or food or for a roof over our head - then of course he's going to add that little stuff!

Thanks be to God!