

The Widow of Zarephath

[1 Kings 17:1-16; Luke 4:22-30]

INTRODUCTION:

N.W.F.P. living on the edge, literally!

Once I was checking potatoes in a high mountain village, and was invited through this room to drink tea on what was the rooftop of another part of the house built – in the absence of any flat land, on the side of the mountain. Chairs had been placed in the sun at the edge of the roof – but as I sat down one of the back chair legs goes through the mud roof and my chair tilts me back precariously over a 50' drop down the mountain side! Thankfully the people sitting with me reached out instinctively at the same time, grabbed hold of me and pulled me back.

The widow of Zarephath was “living on the edge” when Elijah met her – going out to collect sticks for her last meal.

READ: 1 Kings 17:1-16; *commentary found in* Luke 4:22-30 (26-28)

When the brook dried up Elijah crossed the Jordan River and traveled North through the land of Israel and across the border into the heart of Baal-worshipping country, to the domain of King Ethbaal, the wicked Queen Jezebel's father...why? Because God had someone there who would look after his man and watch over his Word. And when he arrived at the town gate of Zarephath, there he met this poor starving widow with the faith to be used by God to care for him!

She was living right on the edge!

She was an emaciated bag of bones, collecting sticks to cook their last meal.

“FIRST, make a small cake of bread for me, and then make something for yourself and your son, because the LORD, the God of Israel, says:

*“The jar of flour will not be used up,
& the jug of oil will not run dry,
until the LORD gives rain on the land.”*

→ she went away and did as Elijah had told her.

Jesus gives us a fascinating commentary on the faith of the widow of Zarephath: even though it was the responsibility of the people of God to look after the prophets of God – and even though there were many widows in Israel at that

time, there was not one to be found who had the faith for God to be able to miraculously provide for his servant! So Elijah was sent to this widow in Zarephath, this foreigner in the country of Baal worshippers, because she had the faith to respond to God's word and look after God's man. And by implication, she was shown to have more faith than any of the people listening to Jesus in Nazareth that day!

Jesus' listeners in Nazareth were put to shame by the widow of Zarephath! She exposed their unbelief – and that provoked an angry response from the crowd, so much so that if they had had their own way, they would have thrown Jesus over the cliff and killed him.

Jesus could work no miracles there because of their unbelief.

These residents of Nazareth had grown up with him; they were too familiar with Jesus.

...and their familiarity with Jesus meant that they lacked the faith for Jesus to be able to work miraculously amongst them.

Have you grown too familiar with Jesus?

Does some of what you have learnt over the years need to be unlearnt if you are going to have faith like that of the widow of Zarephath?

Does God look down on us and see more faith in the Hindu widow in our midst than he finds in us?

The widow of Zarephath is the outsider living right on the edge of starvation

She is the statistic of famine soon to become a statistic of death

She is the vulnerable nobody

She is the walking dead

She is the despised foreigner from the land of Baal worshippers

...and yet she had faith, believing faith - more believing faith than was to be found in **anyone** of her position amongst **all** of God's people!

If the faith of the woman of Zarephath doesn't challenge, rebuke & provoke us then there's something wrong with our response!

WHAT IS THIS WIDOW'S FAITH?

1. Elijah said: "**FIRST** make a small cake of bread for me"

Even when what she has is almost nothing? *YES. It is always so...*

Elijah had been brought up in the household of faith (albeit nominal and corrupted), but here he was asking a foreigner to put God first, and to make a meal for him from her last resources. Elijah was asking for a response from this widow that was greater and more sacrificial than anything he had been asked to do in his life! *[And if you have you ever done that It's a very humbling experience.]*

*Jesus taught that we should love God 1st [Mk. 12:30-31] – to do so is to live life as God intended – putting God **FIRST**.*

Jesus commended the widow who put all she had into the temple treasury [Lk. 21:1+2]

Elijah asked the widow of Zarephath to **FIRST** make him a small cake of bread **...and she did it!** She responded in faith, putting God first.

***If God is calling you to give Him your all – don't hold back.
Where God is asking you to put Him first – don't resist.***

This is the message of the cross

- **that God gave His one and only Son for you – and it is that ultimate gift that defines God's love for you;**

This is the message of the cross

- **that Jesus gave his all for you, that he obediently fulfilled the will of his Father to lay down his life for you, to give himself as a sacrifice for your sins, so that by his wounds and through his blood atoning death, you may be healed.**

- **and he *calls* you to lay down your all for Him.**

2. Did her faith end there?

Did her exemplary faith start and finish with her first making that first bread for Elijah?

- *No, it was exercised every day!*
- *She emptied her flour and poured out her oil every day!*
- *God called her – “a person on the edge”, to live on the edge every day!*
- *God called her to live by faith every day, as every day she emptied out her flour... and poured out her oil...*

This was the faith that Jesus commended, and this is the living by faith that Jesus calls us to as well!

In his book "*Walking the Edges*" (pp. 142-3. SPCK 2003) David Adam quotes a verse from a French poet Apollinaire about eagles learning to fly:

Come to the edge,
He said. They said,
We are afraid.
Come to the edge
He said. They came
He pushed them, and
They flew.

The people written about in David Adam's book [e.g. Martin, Patrick and Cuthbert – people from the earliest chapters of the Christian history] call us:

*to walk the edges,
to adventure and risk for the love of God,
to discover a deep and more profound world than the small,
artificially safe world we make for ourselves.*

- Come and stand where the wind blows freely,
- Come and be silent before your God and hear his calling to you.
 - God is not a theory to be studied. He is the "God with whom we have to do"; God wants each of us to enjoy a personal relationship with him.
 - God is not a great problem for us to seek to solve; he is a great mystery to be enjoyed. If our minds are too small to grasp this, we can discover our hearts are big enough to accept it. Heed quietly these words:

You have called me by name,
In the night, across the years;
You have called my name,
In my laughter and my tears.
The words are never quite the same,
Seeking out my dulled ears;
Wanting me to rise and wake,
To cast away my doubts and fears.
Your love is there for me to take;
More than this I should know,
When day is turned to night,
You are there, wherever I go,
My love, calling me to light.
Calling me at every breath,
Calling me to rise from death.

So come, walk the edges and enjoy the glorious freedom of the children of God!

Jesus was "a person on the edge"!

Jesus lived on the edge of the inside! That's a good place to be! Those on the inside just tend to defend the status quo, whereas those on the edge of the inside look in objectively, questioningly and reflectively!

Don't put God in a box! It doesn't work! Jesus was forever breaking out of the box people tried to put him into!

In the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, God breaks out of the box!
He's not meant to work that way! It's not right – to use a foreigner, from the territory of Baal!

When God breaks out of the box and does the unexpected, do you respond by trying to put God back into the box?

Or do you look for the strength to break free from the constraints of your preconceptions and the courage to think again!

If in this story we are challenged by the faith of the widow of Zarephath, then we should also be challenged by the prayers of Elijah – a man just like us!

James 5:17&18 ***“Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”***

How do you pray?

What do you pray for?

What are you called to have faith for?

What is God asking us to have faith for?

Recently when I was in visiting Cherrie Potter, she was telling me about when Michelle and Bruce visited her in ICU and how Michelle prayed for Andy and Christy, for them to be able to come and see their mother. She prayed for Andy to be able to get a new passport; to be able to meet the right people in the passport office so he could leave the very next day. *Andy then took up the story – he’d been told that it would take 3 days to get a new passport, but he needed one that day! He drove into down town Dallas and went into the huge Govt. Dept. building dealing with passports. The day before it had been crowded out with people waiting in long lines – that day barely anyone was there. Waiting with a number he wondered what cubicle he’d be called to and who he would meet. When his number was called he went and told his story and why he needed his passport...“Oh I understand, my mother died of colon cancer when I was 30 – come back at 2:00 p.m. and it will be ready”, was the sympathetic response he received. He was walking out of that building at 1:30 with a new passport!*

The fascinating thing is that while all this was happening Michelle was praying for just what he needed 1000’s of miles away!

Michelle – I am blessed and challenged by your praying.

Here’s another story:

A small congregation in the foothills of the Great Smokies built a new sanctuary on a piece of land willed to them by a church member. Ten days before the new church was to open, the local building inspector informed the pastor that the parking lot was inadequate for the size of the building. Until the church doubled the size of the parking lot, they would not be able to use the new sanctuary. Unfortunately, the church with its undersized lot had used every inch of their land except for the mountain against which it had been built.

In order to build more parking spaces, they would have to move the mountain out of the back yard. Undaunted, the pastor announced the next Sunday morning that he would meet that evening with all members who had "mountain moving faith." They would hold a prayer session asking God to remove the mountain from the back yard and to somehow provide enough money to have it paved and painted before the scheduled opening dedication service the following week.

At the appointed time, 24 of the congregation's 300 members assembled for prayer. They prayed for nearly three hours. At ten o'clock the pastor said the final Amen. "We'll open next Sunday as scheduled," he assured everyone. "God has never let us down before, and I believe He will be faithful this time too."

The next morning as he was working in his study there came a loud knock at his door. When he called "come in," a rough looking construction foreman appeared, removing his hard hat as he entered.

"Excuse me, Reverend. I'm from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We're building a huge shopping mall. We need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church? We'll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can't do anything else until we get the dirt in and allow it to settle properly."

The little church was dedicated the next Sunday as originally planned and there were far more members with "mountain moving faith" on opening Sunday than there had been the previous week!

What amazing, tremendous faith. Would you have shown up for that prayer meeting?

The widow of Zarephath had that kind of faith.
She didn't complain about the size of the sacrifice.
She did not question Elijah's sanity.
She went away and did as Elijah had told her.

In this series of "People on the Edge" the widow of Zarephath challenges us, as the people of God, to live on the edge:

- With risk for the love of God
- That we might discover the depths of God
- While sensing the mystery of God.
- Enjoying the glorious freedom of the children of God, as we use the daily resources given to us for each day

May we have the courage and faith to go there. AMEN.