

**1 Kings 17:8-16**

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

The Word of the Lord from 1 Kings 17: “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.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

It’s not a setting where you expect to find a happy ending. These are not good times. Ahab is king of Israel, and he is considered to be the worst, the wickedest king of all. To complement his own evil, he has married Jezebel, princess of Sidon; and among other things, Jezebel will be remembered in history as the one who especially plagued Israel with the worship of false gods (which filtered down into Judah, too). She will also be remembered as one who “cut off the prophets of Yahweh” (1 Kings 18:4), depriving the people of the Word of the Lord. These are terrible times for Israel: as the people follow the lead of their king and queen and turn away from God more and more, God withdraws His protection more and more. It is not that He is unfaithful, but that they do not want Him.

Among the prophets not cut off is Elijah. He has just been sent by God to tell Ahab that, because of his sin, there will be a terrible drought in the land until the Lord says otherwise. The drought will last for years; and with it, there will be famine and starvation. After preaching this Word, Elijah hides at a brook as directed by God until the drought runs it dry; after that, the Lord sends him to a town called Zarephath. Zarephath is in Sidon—Jezebel’s backyard, her hometown according to some. One imagines that the prophet is spending a fair amount of time looking over his shoulder.

And to whom is Elijah sent? To a widow and her son. There is no safety net in Zarephath; and without a husband, widows have few options for sustaining a household even in the best of times. This is not the best of times: and in our text, we find the woman gathering sticks to make a fire; and with that fire, she is going to use the last of her flour and oil to bake some bread. Once that is gone, there is no more food. As far as she knows, she and her son are about to die.

So, there you go. That’s the setting for our text. Wicked rulers. Widespread drought and starvation. A prophet on the run. A widow and son with no food. It’s grim.

There is reason for hope, though—hope in what we do not see. Where a prophet of God goes, he speaks God’s Word. And God’s Word has been spoken in Sidon before: it was not so long ago that nearby King Hiram reigned, a believer in the one true God (1 Kings 5:7). There’s no reason to believe that this widow is not a believer—that when she says, “As the LORD your God lives,” she is speaking of the LORD of whom she has heard.

When Elijah arrives, he calls to her and asks for a cup of water: normally, this is a minimal request, but remember that there’s a drought and water is scarce. Still, the woman goes to get some; but before she can, Elijah has another request: “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” Here, the compliance stops as she explains, “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." It's an accurate description: where there's no food, death follows. That is life and death in a sinful world, and that is what she sees.

But faith trusts in what it does not see. Faith trusts in what it hears from God. So the prophet speaks the Word of God to the widow: "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.'"

The natural reaction would be disbelief, unbelief. Put yourself in her shoes: you've got one meal left during a famine, and a stranger appears and tells you that God said to give it to him instead. But by faith, the woman trusts the Word that Elijah speaks, and the Lord keeps His Word. She feeds Elijah; and lo and behold, there's enough food left for her and her son. Not just for that day, but for many days. The Lord always keeps His Word: in times of plenty and in times of want, the Lord always keeps His Word.

## **II. God's Word Forever Shall Remain**

You're not in Zarephath. Elijah lived many centuries ago; and since then, the world has changed a lot. At the same time, though, there are some ongoing themes throughout history, many of them troubling: there will always be a mixed bag of rulers and authorities. There will always be natural disasters, poverty and scarcity. There will always be anxiety, worry about the future and rebellion against God. There will always be death until the Lord returns. I leave it to you to ponder which of these most trouble you.

Of all these troubles, there is one that stands out the most: it is the scarcity of the preaching of the Gospel. Where the Gospel is proclaimed, people repent and believe. They are made alive and enjoy God's favor. Where the Gospel is not preached—where it is replaced by some other message of some false salvation, there is no true grace and life to be found.

But while it is scarcely found, God's Word *is* still found: and this is the clearest connection between our Old Testament lesson and you, here, tonight. For where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. And the same God proclaims His Word to you.

Where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. You saw this in the text: Elijah spoke God's Word, and the flour and oil didn't run out. The household stayed alive throughout the famine. Likewise, God continues to provide daily bread for you today; and while you do not hear Him speak outside of Scripture, you know that He creates by speaking. He provides daily bread ultimately by His Word.

Where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen because God is at work. Do not dismiss the miracle that happens here. The Lord speaks, and sin and death are removed far from you: He says it is so, because He has gone to the cross and died in your place. This is a far greater miracle than the one at Zarephath, because this is about eternal life and death. The Lord spoke at your Baptism and sent the devil scurrying away as He clothed you in His own righteousness. He speaks His Absolution and gives you life everlasting. He speaks at the Supper to give you His own body and blood in bread and wine; and far better than the wonder bread of Zarephath, He declares, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

You were in far worse shape than the widow at Zarephath, who knew her hunger: you were once dead in your sin, but too blind to know it. But by the grace of God, His Word has reached your ears. And where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. Now you have life. Now you know that, for Jesus' sake, God doesn't hold your sins against you. Now you know that death might be terrible from this side, but it's no match for your Savior who went to the cross and conquered death for you.

This is true. And because it is true, you have other comforts as well.

One is this: because you are the Lord's, He will keep you and deliver you from every trouble. We know this in theory, but it is more difficult to accept in practice. Before you can be kept and delivered from trouble, there must be trouble: that is how it is in a sinful world. Before the widow and her son were delivered from famine, first came the famine before the deliverance. In writing about this text, Luther made some observations that should provoke thought on our part:

It is utterly impossible for God to let anyone who trusts in Him die of starvation; all angels would have to come and feed him. Elijah was fed by ravens and lived for many days on a handful of meal, he and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:6, 15). God cannot forsake those who trust in Him.

But our wretched unbelief always hinders God from working such works in us, and ourselves from experiencing and knowing them. We desire to be filled and have plenty of everything before hunger and want arrive. We lay up provision against future hunger and need, so that we no longer have need of God and His works. What sort of faith is that which trusts in God, when all the while you feel and know that you have goods laid up to help yourself? It is because of our unbelief that we see God's Word, the truth, and the right defeated and wrong triumph and yet remain silent, do not rebuke, speak out, or prevent it, but let things go as they will. Why? We are afraid that we, too, might be attacked and made poor and might then perish of hunger and be forever laid low. That is to esteem temporal goods more than God and to put them in God's place as an idol. If we do this, we do not deserve to hear or to understand this comfortable promise of God: that He exalts the lowly, puts down the mighty, fills the poor, and empties the rich. We do not deserve ever to come to the knowledge of His works, without which there is no salvation.<sup>1</sup>

When you are troubled, friends, it is a good time for self-examination. We sinners are tempted often to make mountains out of mole hills anyway, to think of things as worse than they are. When we do so, we deny that God is taking as good of care for us as He is. Furthermore, even when we pay lip-service to trusting in God in trouble, we are usually scheming as to how we'll get ourselves out of it—putting our trust in our plans and resources. For such things, it is good and right to repent, for you know the better truth: the Lord let the widow get down to her last cup of flour before He saved her, but He did save her. The same Lord watches over you night and day. He will not forsake you.

Furthermore, the Lord makes much out of little. He did so with the widow's flour and oil. Remember also the Gospel lesson for the day, as Jesus observed another widow placing two copper coins in the temple offering and said, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, M. (1999, c1956). *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (21:346). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43-44).

Like the widow of Zarephath, this widow also had very little. Yet, by faith, she gave more than all others who seemed to contribute much more. It was this widow with two copper coins who received praise from the Savior, and it was the Savior who made her offering "more" by His Word. God originally created people to serve and to give; but that natural inclination was lost at the fall into sin. By nature, we're selfish; but redeemed by Christ, we are once again set free to give and to serve. Sometimes, for whatever reason, we have little to give in offerings or energy; and because of this we'll be tempted to feel like inadequate children of God. And so we are—but only because our adequacy never came from us, but comes from our Savior. By His grace, you act and give and serve by faith: and whether it be a little or a lot, the Lord declares that what is done in faith is pleasing to Him.

Rejoice, then, dear friends. The Lord continues to speak His Word. And where the Word of God is proclaimed, miracles happen. It was true in Zarephath. It is true here: for the gifts of grace and eternal life are miracles wrought by God for the sake of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for you. And thus these miracles of grace and life are bestowed upon you as the Lord speaks His miraculous Word...that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen