

"A Little Widow Gift"

Biggest Losers in the Bible – part #3

1 Kings 17:7-16

[1-title slide] *Welcome, prayer. Explain "Biggest Losers in the Bible."*

[2-Stone Soup] You might have heard the story of the stone soup. A poor traveler enters a town, looking for a warm meal, but is turned away at every home. The usual response he receives is, "I'd like to help you, but I have very little myself." Finally, the man convinces one family to give him a large soup caldron and a fire to cook over. When someone asks him what he is going to make, he tells them, "Stone soup: it's fit for a king." He fills the pot with water and drops in one smooth, round stone the size of his hand. As the curious townsfolk look on, he says, "Yes, stone soup is fit for a king, but it tastes even better with potatoes." A farmer says, "I have a few potatoes I could add," and he brings them for the soup. Once again, the traveler says, "Stone soup is fit for a king; but it's even better with carrots." An elderly lady says, "I have a few I could add," and she runs home and gets them. Each time the traveler suggests a new ingredient, another villager adds it from their meager supplies: some onions, celery, some meat trimmings, salt and pepper. Over time, the soup smells great, and there is enough to share with the whole village. Out of their scarcity, they provide a meal for all. All it took was a man with a simple stone, and all the people responded so that there was more than enough to go around.

What I love most about that story is how, at the beginning, the man has nothing but an idea. It looks like it will all amount to nothing, until, one by one, the people offer what little they have, creating something great.

[3-hands, coins] Our world is full of people living in scarcity. Even in our great country with incredible resources, we still have the homeless, the hungry, the unemployed, the underemployed, the oppressed and harassed. And I believe God asks us, what will we do with the "little" that He has entrusted to us? I don't know about you, but I long for a world where everyone is taken care of, all have enough, and no one is overlooked.

[4-title slide] That's why I resonate with this story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. It's a story of scarcity and abundance, of the miracles God can do if we only show a little faith and obey.

[5-Elijah and Ahab] In the book of Kings, there is basically one overall issue: do the people, and specifically the monarchy, worship God alone, or not? Unfortunately, the answer more than often was "Not." King Ahab was a prime example. 1st Kings 16:30 says Ahab "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him." It was bad enough that the kings oppressed the poor while they lived in opulence. But most dreadfully, Ahab encouraged all sorts of nasty idol worship, including child sacrifice. Ahab's leadership was so bad, Elijah the prophet went to the king and told him that God had declared a three-year-long drought because of his evil. (1 Kings 17:1)

In case you didn't know, Elijah was the greatest prophet in Israel's history after Moses. Let's face it, it takes a lot of guts to tell the king off; to say, "Because of your leadership, your whole country is going to suffer." This is Elijah's first appearance on the main stage of Israel, and he proclaims a message that is devastating to the agricultural economy of Israel.

[6-Elijah and ravens] Not surprisingly, Elijah immediately goes into hiding after proclaiming the drought. He first hides in a ravine and is miraculously fed by some ravens. But that can't last long, and God directs him to go to a foreigner, the widow of Zarephath, in order to be cared for.

[7-Elijah meets the widow] This direction from God is surprising on several levels. This widow is not an Israelite – she is not part of the "in" crowd of believers. Second, widows are not the first people you turn to when you are looking for help. That is generally true in our time, and it was especially true in Elijah's time, when women could not own property or wealth. If Elijah was going to find help, you would have thought he would go to his own countrymen, or at least to someone with deep pockets. Widows were the lowest on the totem pole. This woman was the least likely person to help Elijah.

[8-Elijah asks for water] Look at verse 10, as we see how this story unfolds. Elijah enters the village to find this woman collecting some sticks, some firewood. Right there is our first indication that she is poor – she has no servant to do this

job, nor any way to buy fuel herself. Elijah calls out to her, asking, "Could you get me a glass of water?" That's bold to ask for water, during a drought that you caused. Seriously, Elijah? That's like walking up to someone with a cardboard sign on the street corner and asking if you can borrow \$20. It doesn't make any sense.

[9-Elijah asks for cake] The first surprise is that Elijah even asks her for help, but he is doing so in faith. God said this woman would provide for him, and he is being obedient. But the audacity doesn't stop there. As the woman turns to go, not saying a word, Elijah calls after her, "And bring me a little cake, too." Maybe it is OK to expect water from this woman – she appears to be fulfilling the first request, getting water in a drought. It seems she has some faith, or at least understands the code of hospitality in the Middle East. But on top of the first weird request, Elijah wants a bite to eat, too.

[10-Widow responds] At this point, the widow has to engage Elijah. She turns to him and lets him have it. "Sir, do you even realize that the only reason I am gathering firewood is to cook my final meal for myself and my son? I have a cup of flour and an ounce of oil. I'm going to make a little loaf, split it in half, and after we eat it, we are going to literally lie down and die of starvation. You want a cake? You're crazy."

Was she exaggerating a little bit? I don't know. I've never lived through a three-year drought. It was enough for me this August to see how little rain we got, and the worst consequence was that my lawn turned brown. I mean, the rivers and lakes did not dry up, and when I turned on my faucet, water still came out. I don't think this woman was joking. Three years of no rain? That's bad.

[11-Elijah gestures] This is where Elijah issues his challenge of faith. He tells her, "Don't be afraid. Go ahead with your plan: make your cake for you and your son. But first bring me my little muffin. I promise you, God will not let your flour or oil run out until this drought ends, until your misery is relieved."

[12-Widow shows empty jar] Can you imagine living for multiple years in a drought that completely impoverishes you? And you didn't have anything to begin with! Do you wonder how her husband died? Maybe something happened to him because of this drought! Maybe he lost his job, maybe he died while trying

to go find food for his family. Maybe he got sick because there was no clean water. There was a long list of horrible things that had happened to this widow's family, and now on top of that, this crazy prophet comes up and says, "Why don't you share with me out of the little that you have? And let's see what God does."

That's a challenge. That's crazy talk. Do you know what that is? That's faith. Faith is not sane. It is not comfortable. When we live, doing the same-old same-old, trying to stay happy and comfortable, especially at the expense of others, we are not living according to God's word. Faith means risk.

[13-Elijah points] James 5:17 says Elijah was a human, just like us, and when he prayed, miracles happened. Droughts toppled kings. Miracles of provision fed the poor, the widows, and the orphans. And in this moment, this widow has the choice to go through with something that seems absolutely crazy, and yet, it is what God is calling her to do. She wants to throw up her hands and say, "That's it! I've had it! I'm tired of what life has done to me. I want to curl up on my bed and just die." She has a choice, to listen to this prophet or not.

[14-Widow shares the cake] What does she do? You know. You read the story. She believes. She makes that cake. I like to think that she put a little candle on it for Elijah. "Here you go, prophet! I put some sprinkles on it for you. At least those didn't dry out in the drought. Make a wish!" She could have made a very crass remark.

[15-Miracle] But she does as he asks, and true to his word, God never lets her flour run out or the oil run dry, and there is enough for everyone in the household, for three years. Isn't that amazing?

I wish I had time to tell you about Elijah's next miracle, but you can read ahead on your own. It wasn't all cupcakes and frosting for the widow having a prophet in her house.

[16-widow] But what I love about this story is the example of faithfulness in the midst of scarcity. All miracles aside, this story tells of a woman in dire straits who listens to God's word and says, "I believe," and then acts accordingly. Have you ever noticed that in the Bible, God lifts up the widows and the orphans? Whom did Jesus himself minister to? The oppressed, the downtrodden, those with nothing! Who was the example of faithful giving at the temple? The rich?

No! The widow with the two pennies. (Luke 21:1-4) Who had "great faith" so her daughter could be healed? The desperate, foreign Phoenician woman. (Matthew 15:21-28) Jesus heals the lepers, blesses the children. Jesus heals the son of the man who says, "I don't have much faith. Help me with what little I have!" (Mark 9:23-25) Jesus turns to his disciples, when a hungry crowd is surrounding them, and asks, "What do you have?" (Mark 6:38) A little boy offers his meager lunch of five loaves and two fish, and Jesus feeds them all. (John 6:9)

Do you see this? Do you understand? The heroes of the Bible are the ones who have next to nothing, and they are the closest to God. They are the ones who enter the kingdom of heaven, who see miracles. Those with the least are the ones who are the most generous.

[17-Fountain hand] What do we do with what God has given us, whether it is prodigious and abundant, or whether it is scarce? Do we hoard or do we share? Are we good stewards? Do we expect miracles?

What is your attitude when you think things are scarce? It is scary to be unemployed, underemployed, sick and facing medical bills, worried about how you will survive. There are also times we face spiritual scarcity. Emotional emptiness. As a church, we ask, where will new life come from, where will new members come from, how will we meet our budget for ministry?

[18-title slide] Our choice is the same. We can come in here every Sunday, lie down on our pews, and wait for the end to come. Oh, I know no one does that intentionally. We love God's church, and we believe in this place. But sometimes our actions don't back up our words. We tend to act like we don't believe in God's provision. We complain, instead of saying, "Yes, I'll make the cake for you." We wait for *someone else* to invite a new person to church. We wait for *someone else* to step up to teach, to serve, to give, when God is calling every one of us to participate in the kingdom of heaven.

We can't have our cake and eat it, too. God calls us to believe in his provision in spite of our circumstances. It is sacrificial, it is crazy, but we absolutely can be the church that makes "stone soup" by each person contributing the one thing that they have, the one gift, the one talent, the uniqueness that each person brings, to make a glorious meal that God is creating.

We can address poverty, oppression, racism, corruption, loneliness, pornography, addiction, and dysfunction. We simply must have a prophetic mindset that this is the work of justice to which God calls us.

Look, we can just shutter the windows, lock the doors, curl up and hide, and simply wait for the end. We can say, "I'm the king or queen of my world. Don't let any prophet come in here and tell me what to do!"

Or we can listen to the crazy words of that prophet, the one who was "a human just like us," and offer what we have into the hands of Christ, who loves us enough to die for us. The choice is ours. Will we live like we expect miracles in God's church? Do you have the faith of a widow, the faith of a hero?

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: **James 5:17**

"Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years."

Reflection Questions

1. When have you felt that you were in a time of scarcity? How did you get into that position, and did you get out of it? Who helped you? Was there a miracle?
2. Who are people that society overlooks? How are we as Christians called to help them?
3. When (or if) you give to the church, do you recognize the value of your offering, no matter the size? Do you expect someone else to support our ministries, or do you take a personal hand in supporting them?
4. If the church closed tomorrow, would you miss it? Who in our community would notice?
5. How can you be a prophet to someone in need today? Ask God to help you see miracles in times of scarcity.