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1 Kings 17:8-16   
Bible Characters You Never Heard Of: Widow of Zarephath

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1 Kings 17:8-16 New Revised Standard Version

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”  So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.”  As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”  But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”  Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.  For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.”  She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.  The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

A new king began to reign over Israel. His name was Ahab and the Bible says this about him, “Ahab, son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30). That is a lot of evil. If someone talks about me after I die, I hope they don’t say that about me! Ahab married Jezebel and served and worshipped Baal. Baal is the storm god. Baal was known as the lord of rain and dew, the two things that were essential for anything to grow in Canaan. Then the Bible tells us again, “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:33). The Bible wants to make sure that we know that Ahab was a bad dude.

Then, we are introduced to the prophet Elijah. Elijah goes to king Ahab and tells him that it isn’t going to rain in a long time. In fact, there won’t even be any dew. Sounds like the lord of rain and dew, the god that Ahab is worshipping, is not working out so well. There will be a severe drought. There isn’t a reason given for this drought but God is speaking through Elijah. God then tells Elijah to go hide by the river Jordan and not to worry because the ravens will feed him. Every day the ravens bring him bread and meat in the morning and again in the evening and Elijah drinks from a stream. But, after a while the stream dries up due to the severe drought that Elijah had predicted. Then, we have our scripture for today. READ SCRIPTURE.

Elijah had no problems telling the king it wasn’t going to rain. Go say something scary to a powerful king. No problem. Run and hide, no problem. Birds will feed you. Okay, sounds great! Go ask a widow to feed you. Um, that sounds weird. I’ll start out asking her for some water. And while she’s getting me the water, I’ll see if she can bring me something to eat.

The widow was down to her last meal for her and her son. You can hear her desperation in her words to Elijah. This is it. My son and I will now die. We have no more food, we have no more resources, we don’t have anyone that we can turn to for help. We are all alone and we are going to die. She is resigned and hopeless. Elijah, this unknown man, this stranger, this foreigner, just keeps pushing. The widow goes and does what Elijah asks of her and we don’t know why. She has enough meal and oil to prepare a last bit of food for herself and her son. But when she is asked, she willing shares what she has with a stranger. She shows us that sharing is an act of trust. We don’t know if she feels threatened by Elijah or if she is convinced that his promise of food is truthful.

This is the first time in the Bible that the prophet Elijah is mentioned. Elijah’s first words earlier in this chapter are that God is a God of life. God is the source of life. Elijah’s entire life will be a witness that God is a God of life. The Canaanite storm god Baal is not bringing rain or the possibility of life on earth. Elijah wants people to know that it is God not Baal who makes life possible. Zarephath is a Phoenician city. Phoenicia is a rich country just north of Israel. It is a city that normally exports wine, grain, and oil but now it is in a drought. It is a destitute widow, one of the neediest of that society, that feeds Elijah.

After the scripture that we read together, the widow’s son becomes so ill that there is no more breath left in him. Her son dies. God has provided life for the prophet Elijah through ravens who brought him food and through the widow who fed him, but this boy, the widow’s son, dies. Elijah calls upon God and God brings life to this boy who is dead. Again and again, the Bible wants us to know that God is the one who brings about life. God works through the unexpected, God works through foreigners. There were widows in Israel but Elijah went to a foreign land and sought out a foreign woman. God’s love reaches beyond the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and even religious affiliation, that we put up.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The widow of Zarephath isn’t the focus of this story, we don’t even know her name. Elijah isn’t the focus of this story. God is the focus of the story. God provides, God sees, God acts with compassion. The widow is open to what God is doing. God keeps filling the jar of meal. God raises her son from the dead. God gives us life. God gives us hope. Elijah tells the widow, “Do not be afraid.” God will take care of you.

This is also a story about the effects of economic injustice. The effects of natural disaster, including climate change, are felt most acutely by women and children. Even though there is this great famine in our story, I imagine that the rich and the powerful had food on their table. Once again we are shown that God stands with the poor.

This woman who didn’t know the God of Israel was an ordinary, regular person. She saves Elijah. She has this huge role in history. God worked through her to do something extraordinary. It’s like the story about the little boy who gave his two fish and five loaves of bread to feed the crowd of 5,000 hungry people. It’s like the organization that we support at our yearly alternative Christmas market, Global Village Market, called Paper for Water. Two young girls aged 8 and 5 who learned two things. They learned that girls in third world countries often do not go to school because they are hauling water all day and that a child dies every 15 seconds from unclean water. So, this two young girls started a project making origami Christmas ornaments and exchanging them for donations to raise money for water wells. In six years they have raised more than 1.3 million dollars and helped fund over 150 water projects in 14 countries.

It is like the woman in the Bible that Jesus points out. Jesus is teaching at the temple in Jerusalem and a poor widow comes and puts two small coins, worth a few cents. Jesus says this poor widow put in more than all the others because she gave all she had, her whole livelihood. There is another organization called Pennies for Peace in which school children in the United States raise pennies to help fund educational projects. Since 1995, more than 700 schools across the United States have given over 16 million pennies supplying paper, pencils, books, uniforms and desks for students in remote northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It is so easy for us to live a life of scarcity. A life of fear. A life where there is never enough. So, we hold onto our stuff and we keep our arms closed to others. Generosity and hospitality come from the image of God that is in us. When we are generous and when we are welcoming and kind, we are living a life of goodness and Godliness. Being open to others may mean making room at your table, but it may also mean that you have to create a different kind of table. There are some folks who have never known a table blessed by laughter and welcome. There are some folks who never hear that they are a beloved child of God. There are some folks who are yearning for a reminder that they are loved.

The woman in our story is resigned to her death and the death of her child because they are running out of food. Where the widow sees scarcity, Elijah talks about abundance. Elijah speaks a word of faith and hope into a time of fear and resignation. Fear debilitates; it steals hope. Fear robs us of the gift of possibility. This is story of new life, of resurrection, of Easter. We are called to be God’s love in the world. We are called to set many tables.

There is a song by Jonathan David and Melissa Helser called No Longer Slaves that has these words as its chorus, “No longer a slave to fear. I am a child of God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That is the good news. If you are paralyzed by fear, be set free. If you’ve relapsed, come home. If you’re locked into certainty that things will never change, be released into the realm of possibility.[[3]](#footnote-3) May we cast aside fear, not in our own strength, but in the presence of God’s perfect love that casts out all fear (1 John 4:18). Remember the widow of Zarephath. She was resigned to death yet the word of God brought by Elijah, saved her family. May we hear God’s promise in our own life and act from hope and not from fear.

1. New Interpreter’s Bible. 1st Kings. Seow, Choon-Leong. P. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8TkUMJtK5k&app=desktop [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.facebook.com/melissa.maher.752?hc\_ref=ARSoH3w86wQyPkxZ6bRk0rSgk-9PeiOg64AvNYd7H1CtykM8LrspwvrJq0VMQ5naODo&fref=nf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)