

Living at the Bottom of the Barrel

I Kings 17: 7-16

We have read a familiar portion of Scripture. Times were hard in Israel at this time. King Ahab was ruling over the nation and had led them into gross idolatry and sin. Because of the sins of the people, God had sent a drought that lasted for three and a half years. Our text is facing the backdrop of this unprecedented drought.

There are many approaches that we could take with this text. There are many great lessons to be learned. One of the heroes of the faith is a central figure in this story. His experiences certainly give valuable insight to our Christian journey. I am interested in the life of the widow woman who lived in Zarephath. Little is recorded of her; we don't even know her name, but her life has been a source of inspiration and profound truth for all who have read her story. I want to consider the [situations](#) surrounding this woman's meager existence as we think on the thought: [Living at the Bottom of the Barrel](#).

I. The Severity of Her Situation – Clearly we find that this woman was living while facing extreme circumstances and a severe situation.

A. Her Difficulty (9-10a) – [Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks:](#) Twice in these verses the woman is described as a [widow](#). It is interesting to note that God told Elijah that He had commanded a widow woman to sustain him. In that culture widows were typically very poor. They lived a very difficult life.

- We don't know how long she had been widowed, but it is certain that she had known great difficulty. The drought was hard enough to endure, but she had to make it all alone. It appears that this poor woman's life had been filled with one tragedy after another.
- Some of you might be able to identify with her. You may not be a widow, but maybe your life has been filled with heartache and pain. How often have we recited the old phrase, "When it rains, it pours?" Simply being a Christian does not exclude us from heartache or difficulty. Some of the most faithful Christians I know have faced great adversity.

B. Her Despair (12a) – [And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse:](#) Life was surely desperate for her and her household. The man of God desired a cake of bread, but all she had was a meager handful of meal and a little oil in the cruse. That was all that stood between her and absolutely nothing. It appears that this was all that she had left; this was the extent of her earthly possessions. She

had no money to buy any provisions and the drought hindered her from growing anything to replace her depleted supply.

- We too are facing difficult times. I am aware that we are blessed beyond measure to live in America. Even the poorest of our nation are rich by the world's standard. However, the current crisis that we face is very real in the lives of many people. There are folks who have seen their life's savings disappear with the fluctuation of the stock market. Countless millions are unemployed without any hope of employment. Sons and daughters have left home for a war zone to never return. Homes have been devastated by sin and it seems that all they had is now gone. Many today are living lives of despair that they never imagined.

C. Her Diagnosis (12) – *And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.* She had resigned to defeat. Her life seemed hopeless. What was the use in living? Why was there any reason to go on? All that she possessed would soon be gone along with her hope for the future. She was prepared to fix one last meal and die.

- Isn't that tragic? This was a woman who no doubt loved her son. She had lived a difficult life and now she was ready to end it all. She had reached the end of her rope and was ready to let go.

- I'm convinced that many in our day are there as well. Life has not turned out as they had planned. Maybe the bank account is gone, the dream job that promised to be secure has been lost, life now seems hopeless and they are ready to give up on living.

- You might say: surely it isn't that serious. I can assure that it is. Many have fought the battle and have no more strength to press on. It might surprise us to know just how many have reached the point of desperation.

I. The Severity of Her Situation

II. The Sufficiency of Her Situation – I am glad that the story doesn't end here. The widow soon finds hope in her desperation. She found that she possessed all that she needed to survive. What was involved in the sufficiency of her situation?

A. Faith in the Lord (13-14) – *And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.* Keep in mind that the little she had consisted of a handful of meal and a little oil in the cruse. She was going to

prepare that for herself and her son and die. Now Elijah was seeking a portion of the meager supply first. He promised, by the authority of the Lord's word, that neither the barrel nor the oil would fail until it rained.

- We have the benefit of reading the story after the fact, but imagine the faith that it took to do as Elijah commanded. He was asking for her excess; he was asking for all that she possessed. She had to step out in faith.
- Much of our lives must be lived by faith. We have placed our faith and trust in One we have never seen, only met through faith. Living by faith is easy preaching, but hard practice.
- We must also keep in mind that God isn't asking for our excess. He doesn't want what is leftover; He wants our all. We must be willing to fully submit our lives unto Him, walking by faith, even when we can't see the way clear.

B. Following the Lord (15a) – [And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah](#): She stepped out in faith and followed the direction of the Lord. She gave all that she had before she received anything in return. Her faith had to be proven by her actions. She may have believed God would meet her need, but until she stepped out and trusted Him she wouldn't know for sure.

- We are commanded to have faith in the Lord, but faith is of little value apart from obedience. We must be willing to follow the Lord's guidance for our lives. It is of no benefit to trust and know that the Lord will meet our needs unless we are willing to do as He says.
- God may have placed a particular burden on your heart. He may want you to pursue a new direction for Him. You may possess the faith that God will provide, but you will never know for sure until you step out in faith.
- The church as a whole may need to step out in faith. We believe that God is able, but often we are reluctant to follow His direction for our lives. We will never experience the bounty of God until we are willing to follow Him!

C. The Favor of the Lord (15-16) – [And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah](#). God honored her faithfulness. Because she did as she was commanded, God met her needs. I don't believe that the barrel was miraculously filled every day. In fact, I believe that it probably looked pretty meager, but each time that she reached in the barrel there was enough to supply the needs for the day. The cruse of oil was likely never full, but there was always enough to pour out what she needed. When she reached the bottom of the barrel, she found the abundance of the Lord!

- Life may be hard right now. You may not be able to see how things could possibly work out. You may have more month than there is money. Your family may face a desperate need that seems impossible to overcome.

- Is it possible that God wants to get you to the bottom of your barrel so that He can provide His abundant supply? It may not be all you dreamed it would be, but I can assure you that it will be enough and it will certainly be best. Living at the bottom of the barrel is really a secure place to be. When I reach the end of myself, it is then that God will provide!

I. The Severity of Her Situation

II. The Sufficiency of Her Situation

III. The Sovereignty of Her Situation – I want to close with this thought. From our perspective it may seem that her life was falling apart, but just the opposite was true. She may have had a hard time seeing or understanding it, but God was always in control. Our lives are no different. Let's take a moment to consider the sovereignty in this situation.

A. God has a Plan (7-9) – [And it came to pass after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.](#) The Lord had sent Elijah to dwell by the brook during the drought where the ravens fed him. In time the brook dried up, but the Lord was not taken by surprise. He already had a plan in place. The widow had never met Elijah and yet God was going to use her situation for His glory and the good of His prophet, as well as theirs.

- While in a valley it is often hard to see the hand of God. We don't always understand, but we must have faith that God has a plan. There is no such thing as luck or coincidence in our Christian lives. God is always aware and in control. [Rom.8:28 – And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.](#)

B. God has a Purpose – Situations in life happen for a reason. There is always a purpose for all we face. Notice the purposes revealed here.

1. To Sustain – [God had told Elijah that He had commanded a widow woman to sustain him. Through her obedience, God would also sustain her and her son.](#) We must realize that God is the One who sustains us anyway. We may be in the midst of a trial, but God has not allowed it so that we might perish, but so that we might live. Times may get hard, and we may live in fear and doubt, but God will see us through.

2. To Strengthen – The Scripture doesn't specifically say, but I am sure that it is safe to say that the faith of all involved was strengthened through this difficult situation. Elijah learned that God could use not only the ravens, but even the most unlikely people to care for him. The widow and her son realized that no matter how desperate things may seem, God was able and willing to provide. I am sure that their faith was no longer the same.

- Valleys are never enjoyable, but in them we learn that God is good and He will meet the needs of His people. How much is our faith strengthened when we feel as if we are in control? It is when we reach the bottom of the barrel and must lean upon the Lord that we learn to trust Him.

Are you living at the bottom of the barrel? If so, you ought to rejoice. It isn't an easy place to be, but there we know that God has been given complete control. Maybe you need to come and find the abundance that awaits those who reach the bottom of the barrel.