

Tests of Faith in Scarcities

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Date: 07 March 2010

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn then in our Bibles to 1 Kings, chapter 17, 1 Kings 17.

And we may just read at verse 9 of 1 Kings 17. And this takes us back to the point where at Wadi Kerith, Elijah was told by the Lord to go west, across country, across Israel, and to arrive at Saraphath.

Verse 8, we'll read at verse 8. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Arise, go to Saraphath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.

See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you. So he arose and went to Saraphath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed, a widow was there gathering sticks.

And he called to her and said, Please bring me a little water in a cup that I may drink. And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.

[1 : 28] So she said, As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar.

And see, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my sin, that we may eat it and die.

And Elijah said to her, Do not fear. Go and do this as you have said. But make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me.

And afterwards make sin for yourself and for your sin. For this says the Lord God of Israel, The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.

So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah. She and he and her household ate for many days.

[2 : 38] The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Elijah.

First Kings 17, and particularly verses 11 to 16 then. And I want to think about this in terms of tests of faith in scarcity's season.

Tests of faith in scarcity's season. Now, last time we had arrived at the scene where Elijah met this widow woman at the gate of Zarephath, exactly as the Lord had said he would meet up with a widow who was going to provide for him.

And we've now come to the point where we want to look a little more at the detail of this meeting and how things just didn't pan out.

Because for a start of, Elijah was told by the Lord when he was at Wadi Kerith on the east of the Jordan, that God had prepared this widow woman to provide for him.

[3 : 57] And the truth of the matter is, she had no provision. So, something is unpacking here in terms of tests of faith, both the Elijah word and both the widow word too.

So, I want just before we get into the substance of this, just to think about the scarcity that they were confronted with at the gate of the small town of Zarephath.

I want just by way of introduction to draw on something that actually happened in the course of the past week. Some of the family were talking with me and we were reminiscing on times past in the Highlands.

Actually, in my first charge. And it was interesting to me that one of the topics that came up was how the young ones, the then children, felt a great sense of security.

They were comforted when the cupboards were full of food. Now, that's something I had not heard of before from them. So, it was interesting to me, knowing I was going to prepare a sermon on this topic of tests of faith in scarcity season.

[5 : 15] But it was interesting to me and revealing that one of the things that gave them a great sense of comfort and security was the fact that the monthly shop that we used to do from Boner Bridge down to Inverness, that monthly shop meant the larders, the cupboards were packed full for the best part of the month.

And it was really interesting to see that actually the word, a great sense of comfort, was theirs, knowing that the cupboards were full.

And the truth of the matter is, we like to feel secure. We all do. Everybody likes to feel secure. We like to know we have enough. And the truth is, we like to know we have more than enough.

You're smiling, so you're with me in it. It's true. We like to know we have enough. We like a feeling of security. There's nothing worse than not having enough.

And the Lord knows that we've been looking at media coverage of places like Haiti and Chile and many other places in the world. And what you see in front of your eyes on the screen is people with absolutely nothing.

[6 : 29] And your heart goes out to them and you're looking for the best way to do a little something to help them, to make life easier for them. Because we all know the feeling that we experience in our own hearts and minds when we have enough and to spare.

But the truth of the matter is, from a believer's viewpoint, from a Christian viewpoint, is that God's people grow in times of adversity.

We develop. We may not like the way God does it, but we do develop. He knows what's best for us, and he knows that we can grow in times of scarcity and adversity.

Our own Scottish church history is writ large with wonderful examples of how the Lord's people managed in times of great scarcity and they were strong in the faith, they were spiritually minded. The things of God meant everything to them. They grew in times of scarcity and adversity. And if you were noticing in the songs of praise we were using, and the reading we read there in Matthew 15 through to chapter 16, you would have been reminded that having plenty doesn't equal a real sense of the Lord's presence and strength of faith.

[8 : 12] Because Israel had plenty. And Israel didn't trust God. And Israel was miserable because they would not trust God to provide for them.

Israel had plenty. And Israel became lukewarm back there in the days of Moses. They became lukewarm towards God. They were neither hot or cold.

They were almost indifferent to him, and they distrusted him. And God therefore brought about a change.

He took away their plenty. And he made them suffer. He made things scarce for them and difficult for them. To use a biblical turn of phrase, he sent leanness.

To their souls. He made them crave for him. It took a while. It's true. But that's the way he worked.

[9 : 19] And in this passage that's before us, we've got a situation where things are hard.

Obviously the famine, as we were saying, as a result of the drought that had come, was beginning to affect the whole land.

Not just the land of Israel, but all the countries round and about. And this poor widow woman was gathering a few sticks to cook her last meal.

Elijah was looking for provision. God said, I'll provide for you there. And both Elijah and this lady and her little family are suffering a season of scarcity.

And hopefully as we look at this and as we think about it under God's blessing, we will be strengthened in our resolve to rely upon God to provide for us, both in material things and more particularly to supply our spiritual food as well.

We want to take our starting point at what we'll call request impossible. We read the words from verse 11.

[10 : 34] As she was going to get the water. Elijah called to her and said, Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.

That is request impossible. And what we mean here, it was impossible for the widow woman to fulfill Elijah's request.

She had no bread. That's the first thing. She had no bread. She says herself, As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread.

I can't give you what I haven't got. Secondly, she says, The little meal I have is designated for life support.

For a very short space of time is for life support. I can only make enough to feed my son and me, and it will be our last meal.

[11 : 42] That's what she says. I am gathering a few sticks, that I may go in and prepare what I have for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.

Well, you can't put it more bluntly than that. That's it. And so Elijah's request was request impossible. She couldn't fulfill it.

She just couldn't do it. She couldn't see beyond the crisis she was in. She was in a critical family crisis. And we can well understand why she says simply, It can't be death.

Whatever our response as we probe into this, we can at least say the woman was in the position, she had to do what she was bound to do.

The law of love bound her to see to her own first. However important the prophet was, she had to give this priority to her son, and to herself for her son's sake.

[12 : 58] It's interesting, though, as we look at this for a few moments, to notice, she doesn't, as it were, she doesn't rip into Elijah.

She doesn't say, Well, you're a greedy prophet. You may be a prophet, but you're greedy. You're willing to take the food I have, the last I have. She doesn't say that. And she doesn't actually say, she doesn't flatly refuse to give him anything.

She simply says, Well, she says, I can't give you what I haven't got. She answers him in this way. I can't give you what I haven't got. I only have enough for my son in me.

She could have suggested, quite legitimately, that Elijah was a man of God. God provides for his own, the God of Israel.

She knew, you see, she says, she says there, she designates, the Lord, verse 12, As the Lord your God lives. And she uses that, very special word for God, the Lord.

[14 : 09] The word that, the Jews to this day, will not pronounce. The word that used to be translated, in our English Bibles, as Jehovah, and more commonly nowadays, Yahweh.

And she uses that word about him. She knows about the God of Israel. And the God of Israel is the Lord. The Lord your God, he says. As surely as, she says, as surely as he lives.

Well, she could have said to him, look, you're a prophet of the Lord. The Lord who provided for his people. And surely he can provide for you. And you could argue from that, that she would be right enough to say, well, you should be providing for me, and not me for you.

All perfectly legitimate to say. As I was reflecting on this, and as I was thinking about the whole situation, it's easy to miss what's going on here.

It's easy to fail to see that this woman is starving. Her son is starving. This is serious stuff. She's got enough for the last meal.

[15 : 26] That's really the case. And if you cast your mind back, and your imagination, to situations in the world, in recent months, you've seen, you've been there, in your mind, looking at situations, whether it's in Ethiopia, or in some other part of Africa, or Haiti, or Chile, you've seen folk, maybe in Brazil, on the rubbish tips in Brazil, with nothing.

Starvation. Grinding poverty. And, she could easily have said, look, you serve the Lord God, the Lord who lives, the Lord God of Israel, the God of heaven and earth, the God who can provide, you should be providing for me.

You're asking my help, it's your help I need. But no, no, she doesn't do anything of the kind. But, in this situation, where request impossible is made, God is at work, both Elijah word, and the widow word too.

He's working for them both, to strengthen them, in the faith. To enable them to grow, each in their own way, in their reliance, upon him.

I often think, when I see these situations, where, where, medical folks, have to make a decision, you know, on who gets the treatment, and who doesn't, because, there isn't, isn't enough to go around.

[17 : 09] What a hugely difficult, thing that is. To, to have to make a decision, on, on the lives of children, and so on. And, and here's this woman, being asked, to make a decision, that on the face of it, is Elijah, or your son.

Or, feed Elijah, feed your son, and not yourself. Profoundly difficult. And it's easy, with our familiarity, of, of the story, that we've known, from our childhood, it's easy to miss, what's going on here.

And how that God, is working. At the deeper level, we are to, to, to see that God, is working. That he would have, both his prophet, and his people, rely upon him. We said in the, beginning, in the introduction, we all like to feel secure, we all like to know, the larder's fool, so to speak. But the larder fool, doesn't mean, that we rely, on the Lord. I'm getting, an acknowledgement. It's true. We're so, earthbound, instead of being, heaven reminded, that we like, that's right, that's okay, that's fine, that's fine, that's fine, that's fine, thumbs up.

[18 : 34] But that, all takes away, from our reliance, upon the Lord. And we therefore, have to take care, not to rely, upon having plenty, or, on the other side of it, to despair, because we have, little or nothing, to grumble, in scarcity.

And it's, it's most revealing, you see, that Jesus, took issue, all the more, and most strictly, when, the disciples, refused, refused, to believe, that he could, supply, what they needed.

That's why, we read there, in Matthew, 15 through, into 16. where are we, where are we, going to get the food, to feed the, the 4,000 men, and all these women, and children besides, where are we, going to get it?

Well, they had already, witnessed the feeding, of the 5,000 men, besides women, and children. And can we see, what's going on here? Such was their level, of unbelief.

Yes, the holy apostles, as we call them. Such was their level, of unbelief. Only a short time, in terms of, of weeks away. They, they couldn't see, this could be done again.

[20 : 04] Here's 4,000 men, they need to be fed, the children need to be fed, the women need to be fed, I'm not going to send them away, empty, says Jesus. What are we going to do, they say? How can we feed them?

In, this, desert, place. Did you notice that, in the reading? It's an old story, and it's ever new.

Distrusting, the Lord. Not believing, that he can supply, the need. And we were singing, about it, can God supply, his people bread, in this wilderness?

And all those, centuries later, the holy apostles, are saying the same thing, can God supply bread, in this, desert place?

And here's Elijah, at gate Saraphath, and the widow woman, whom he was led to believe, would help, and would provide for him. And she is nothing, and he is nothing.

[21 : 14] And Elijah, has to go back, in his mind's eye, to, to Broke Kareth, to Wadi Kareth, on the east of Jordan, and to remember, that the God, who fed the ravens, fed Elijah, bread and meat, all the time he was there.

One thing to get, carrion, and bring it to the prophet, another thing to get bread. But they fed him, bread and meat.

Those voracious ravens, that will gobble up anything, God supplied, the prophets need, that way. And the God, who feeds the ravens, will feed his children too.

And we need to remember that. That is true materially, and it is true spiritually. So that's the first thing considered.

Request impossible. It can't be done. I can't give you what I have and go. Both prophet and the widow are learning.

[22 : 24] And the second thing, that comes out of this, and it's clear, the prophet is ahead, on his understanding, of what's going on, and he is the mind of the Lord.

The second point is, assurance extraordinary. And he says, verse 13, and Elijah said to her, do not fear, go and do as you have said.

That is, she was going away to make, a cake of the flour and oil, one for her son, one for her son.

Go and do as you have said, but, he says, make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me.

And after, make sin for yourself, and for your son, verse 14, for thus says the Lord God of Israel, the bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day, the Lord sends rain on the earth.

Now, remember, that Elijah wasn't, a long, long time, at, Brooke Kerith, and there was to be, three and a half years worth, of drought, and the famine, that that would bring.

[23 : 48] So, the supply, that was promised here, lasted quite a while. And there's a wonderful assurance, for the woman, and it comes, from Elijah to her.

She didn't have enough, to give him. And Elijah, yet, pushes her, to do it.

He pushes her forward. Faith is on the rack here, the widow woman's faith, is being tried, to the extremity. Go home, and make a cake first for me, and bring it to you.

But not, without saying, first of all, to her, do not be afraid. Do not fear.

Go and do as you have said. And I want, just for a moment, in looking at, this assurance extraordinary, to notice, it's prefaced, with these words, famous words, in the dealings, of God, with his people, do not fear.

[25 : 03] It's a study, in itself, that some of the, great saints, the great believers, in the kingdom, of God, have been riddled, with fear.

God said to Abraham, didn't he, fear not Abraham, I am your shield, and exceedingly, great reward. We call Abraham, the father of believers. And there, back in, early on in history, human history, God says to Elijah, to Abraham, do not fear Abraham.

To Isaac, the same, fear not. To Jacob, fear not, I am with you. To Moses, do not be afraid, to go, to Pharaoh, and so on. To Joshua, when he was commissioned, to be the general, to lead the people, into the land, of promise.

Fear not, neither be dismayed, for the Lord, your God, is with you. You see what I'm doing here? I'm catching up, all the great champions, of the faith, within a few centuries, and reminding you, of the deep, and ingrained fear, that stalks, the believer's heart.

Gideon, fear not, says God to him, you mighty man of valor. And Gideon said, it's not me, you're talking about. You got that wrong, Lord, I'm not, fear not.

[26 : 29] I'm here in this, secret place, where I'm grinding some grain, for fear of the Midianites. I'm no mighty man of valor. But you see, God says, fear not.

And on, and on we could go, through the history, of Israel. God telling his people, don't be afraid. And the Bible only selects, the champions, it doesn't go into, all the avenues it could, about the women folks, and the young folks, and the men folks.

It just selects, the champions. And it tells us, from the champions, that fear, of the unknown, of the inexplicable, stalks, the human heart.

And it stalks, the believing heart too. And so, the Lord puts his word, in Elijah's mouth, for the support, and the strengthening, of this woman, in carrying out, what was, what was mission impossible.

I want the, a cake first, says Elijah. Do it. Don't be afraid. Don't let, your fears, on what the logic, of all this, is going to be, don't let that stop you.

[27 : 53] Don't be afraid. And I, am bound to say, that, it doesn't take much, thought really, to, to put yourself, in the woman's position.

I, I don't think, that initially, fear not, cut very deep, into her mind. And I, don't think, that the word, of this extraordinary, assurance, cut very deep, either.

I don't think it sunk in. If, you're thinking, like me, you would think, her mind, was probably, in a fog. What's, going to happen?

There's only, two rations. If he gets one, my son's definitely, getting one, and without. So that, initially, this, extraordinary, assurance, has, little impact, on her thinking.

Her faith is, on the rack, as we say. Stretched, to the extremity. And you might argue, she has reason enough, to fear. Am I going to, sacrifice my life, for you?

[29 : 06] Am I going to, sacrifice my son's life, for you? And she's, distracted by fear. Fear not, says Elijah. And I think, we have to take, cognizance of this, problem of fear, for the Christian, believer.

Because, fears, distract us. Fears, deflect us, from the path, of duty. Fears, will turn us, away, from the assurances, that God gives us.

We focus, on the crisis, and the fears, grow. And we can't, shake off, focusing on the crisis, because we can't, really, in our own way, of thinking, see a way through.

And there's no one, immune to that. Here then, this widow woman, is put to the test.

Put to the test, which the New Testament, would, would, would, put out this way. Greater love, has no one, than this, than that one, lays down his life, for his faith.

[30 : 20] That's a big deal. That's no small thing. Let's be, brutally frank. To lay down, one's life, for a friend, or even a friend, of the Lord, as Elijah was.

That's what she was facing. It's him or me, it's not my son. He's going to, at least have, one last meal, before he's dead. I may not. And she's here, in this, rack of faith.

And my dear friends, there are times, in the Christian, believers experience, when self-denial, is demanded, of the Lord, from us.

He expects it. And so, the assurance, is pressed home, by Elijah. He gives, this extraordinary, assurance, of provision.

Verse 14, For this, says the Lord, God of Israel, the bin of flour, shall not be used up, nor shall the jar, of oil run dry. Until the day, the Lord sends rain, on the earth.

[31 : 25] Just think about, that bend, that little barrel, where the flour was, and there's a scraping, in the bottom of it. enough to make, two wee cakes.

That's it. Enough, in the jar, of olive oil, to make it, into a paste, to cook it. That's it. And just think, if it was in, you were in that position, and this is what, you're being told, cook it first, for Elijah.

it's a mighty, big challenge. But wonderfully, this assurance, extraordinary, touches the woman's heart.

And she lays hold, of the word, in the mist, and confusion, in her mind. She lays hold. For this, says the prophet, this is what, the Lord God of Israel, yes, your God, and my God too, he says, he says, the bin of flour, shall not be used to, nor shall the jar, of oil, run dry.

And faith, lays hold, of the word, of the word, of the word, and it acts, upon it. Verse 15, tells us, so she, went away, and did, according to the word, of Elijah, and she, and he, and her household ate, for many days.

[33 : 00] She laid hold, of the word, of this assurance, from God. She got, to the stage, you see, where she was ready, to lay hold of it. And we have, nothing to lose.

and everything, to gain, when we venture, our all, upon the Lord. He's no, man's debtor.

He supplies. And it's wonderful, in its, simplicity here, that, there's no, laugh, of incredulity, from the woman. She's not, raising doubts.

But, in a sense, she's, a wee bit like, Abraham of old, when he went up, the mountain, he resolved, the question, of what was going, to happen, with Isaac.

And he could say, to his son, when he asked him, Isaac said, my father, we have, the wood, for the fire, we've got the, we've got all we need, except, except the sacrifice, where's the lamb?

[34 : 08] My son, the Lord himself, will provide, a sacrifice. And she acts, upon the word.

It, as it were, it breaks through, it breaks through, her fears, it breaks through, her feeling, of confusion. What am I going to do?

What am I going to do? Rest, in the word of the Lord, and act upon it. Now, there are two instances, I want to, draw attention to, just to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to consolidate, what we've been saying, about this Canaanite woman.

Because remember, that's what she was, effectively, a Canaanite. And one of the women of faith, at the time of our Lord's ministry on earth, remember the woman, the side of Phoenician, she came to Jesus, her, her daughter, was needing urgent help.

And Jesus was, was pushing her away, not wanting to help. but at least that's how it seemed. And she kept persisting and the disciples were becoming angry with it.

[35 : 21] And Jesus said, it's not fitting that the dogs, the Gentiles, receive the food that belongs to the people, to Israel.

And do you remember what she said? She said, true Lord, but even the little dogs that feed around the table, they get food. The cremes will do me, she said. I'll be happy with the cremes because with the cremes, the problem will be solved for my daughter.

Woman, great is your faith. Go your way. Your daughter as well. A Gentile centurion sent his servants to Jesus in such a way that they communicated almost as if he was there.

My special servant, we might call him a PA, my personal assistant, is terribly sick and ready to die. Just say the word from where you are and he'll be healed. for I am not worthy that you should come under my roof.

[36 : 41] Lord Jesus, say the word and it's enough. And Jesus healed the man. Do you remember what Jesus said to the people all around him?

I have not found such great faith. No, not in all of Israel. We're to take him at his word.

We're to listen to his assurances, however extraordinary they may appear in our time of crisis. And we're to lay hold.

We're to remember that he can supply. That he does know how to provide. Bread in the wilderness?

Yes. Food for our souls? Yes. Meeting our needs? Yes. Well, the third and final point. The obedience of hope is rewarded.

[37 : 50] And it is rewarded by the Lord. It is rewarded graciously. He's not indebted to reward her for her obedience. No. But he recognizes her obedience in this gracious way.

He helps her. And he helps Elijah too. The widow woman, as we've seen, acted by faith and the Lord provided for it and for the prophet Elijah all those days until the rain came upon the land again. The jar of flour was not used up with it. Nor did the jug of oil run dry. There's a... I mentioned an evangelical bishop of a bygone day, Robert Hall.

I've mentioned him before to you. He's one of those very scholarly preachers. But he had a great way of putting things in a digestible form.

And he said, and I quote him here, Never did corn or oil so increase in the growing as this did in the using.

[39 : 07] I like that. I like it. It just encapsulates what was going on. The corn didn't increase in the growing like the flour in that barrel.

The olives didn't grow like the olive oil replenished in the little jug. because the growth is of God. And he caused the supply to continue. Not in abundance, but enough for each day to keep them waiting upon himself.

And we read, and I come back to this as we round this off, remember the disciples themselves had to learn this important lesson. God is the God of miracles.

He can command even the stones to become bread. And on earth our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as we mentioned already, twice fed thousands of people from a few fish and a few cakes.

[40 : 26] And the disciples thought this is impossible. And they discovered that they were no better than their fathers before them in the wilderness.

And I think we need to really lock on to that. If I said to you, without any context, if I said to you, the twelve apostles, you'd hardly know they had faith at all.

They were no better than their fathers in the desert. You'd say to me, be careful what you're saying. But Jesus said as much. Jesus said, where's your faith?

Jesus said, you have a lot to learn, Peter, James, and John, and Matthew, and so on. You have a lot to learn. And we mustn't give the apostles of the early days and in the early years what they had and got.

They were developing. And they were developing because their faith was tested to the extremity. How can it be done?

[41 : 32] Do you not remember? Do you not remember the twelve thousand? And the five loaves and the few fishes? stories abound in our own church history of how God provided for his people.

And I recall there was a family of guns in Sutherland in Dornach area and I recall a story about a husband and wife and children who went from Sutherland up to Caithness to a place called Westerdale and they had nothing except a wee poke of flour in the bottom of a barrel and God provided for them.

God provided for them in a way that was not dissimilar to what we've been looking at. God made things last. God then in his own way brought an abundant supply to them.

Stories abound of this no doubt they abound in other parts of the world too of how God moved someone here or there to supply the need.

God delights yes he delights to put our faith on the rack in order that we might learn to rely all the more upon him.

[43 : 05] And he brings us into scarcity inner souls as well as temporally in order to bring us nearer to himself. Some of you will know the gospel hymn nearer my God to thee nearer to thee though it be a cross that raiseth me still all my song will be nearer my God to thee nearer to thee.

But do we really want the cross to bring us nearer to him? That's the thing you see. And that's the way he operates.

He brings us into scarcity in order to bring us on in the faith in order to make us rely upon him. And perhaps we should finish on the spiritual side of it and remember that Jesus said to the lukewarm church of the Laodiceans, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone will open in to me, I will come in. And what does he say? I will dine with him. I'll bring the food. I'll bring the food, says Jesus, and you can dine with me.

You can have your soul filled with the good things that I'll provide. Let us eagerly go to him who satisfies the longing soul with his own goodness.

[44 : 48] Amen.