

## THE BARREL OF MEAL

I Kings 17:16 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.

This is one of the passages of Scripture it is good to return to time and again, - like how the widow of Zarephath kept returning to her barrel of meal during the time of famine in her country.

I Kings 17 relates to a long tragic episode in the history of Israel. God judged the nation during the reign of the grandson of King David, King Rehoboam, when Israel was divided between the ten tribes of the north and the two tribes of the south. Their kings subsequently epitomized the poor spirituality into which the nation had fallen. One of the worst kings was Ahab and he took over the throne (I Kings 16:29ff.) after his father Omri, - another evil man (v.25). Ahab married one of the wickedest women in the Bible, Jezebel, and she introduced her Baal worship which further infested the land with even more God-defying idolatry. Israel and Judah sank lower into the pit of unrighteousness ... and further away from God.

But, God did not leave them for, centuries earlier, He had made a covenant, - an unconditional promise, - with the father of their nation, Abraham, [Gen. 17:7 I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.](#) ... During these times in Israel, God honoured that covenant by introducing Elijah, - he was probably the greatest prophet of them all ... and yet just an ordinary man God used in a very ordinary place. There was famine in the land (famine is nothing new). There were poor people (poverty is nothing new). And death was cruelly staring them in the face.

To make matters worse, - spiritually, - the people would not turn to God for the simple reason they did not think they had gone away from Him. Yes, they were busy worshipping other gods, but they had 'tuned' their minds into thinking no harm was being done, for as far as they were concerned 'casting an eye' across to God every now and again was sufficient.

... Sadly, it is usually the case ... When God wants to say something to a nation, He comes against a barrier of stubborn hearts and closed ears. And, from the outset, Elijah's message was failing to get through to his audience. What he was being instructed by God to say 'went against the grain' of society and against the attitude upon which it was founded. ... It is not as if they did

not know about God, for the very existence of the nation was *because* of Him, and yet they had set Him alongside other gods which were no gods at all.

As you can imagine, times were really hard for Elijah and they were becoming increasingly harder! It was as if he was the only one left faithful to God, - we know there were at least one hundred and one others (the hundred prophets hidden in the two caves, and Obadiah who was the official in King Ahab's palace) ... but it *seemed* as if Elijah was the only one left. Only *he* remained true to God, while all others had abandoned Jehovah. ... God had told him to bring a prophecy to his people that would rock them in their comfortable surroundings. He told them a famine was coming and it would spread misery throughout the land.

What do you think Elijah should have done? ... Obviously, the people didn't want to hear! ... Surely, though, this would have been the prime opportunity to get alongside them ... 'lighten up' on the content of the message, get to know the people and 'where they are coming from', and then try and get your message across 'ever-so-gently' ... without causing any offence or 'rocking the boat'. But no, that was not how God directed Elijah.

Or, Elijah could have gone into the centre of Jerusalem and preached to them until they wept their way back to God! If ever there was a time repentance needed to be preached, it was in *those* dark days. But the people were *determined* not to listen! So, what did God do? He instructed Elijah to leave them, and to go out into the wilderness ... away to the southern end of the country ... near the River Jordan, - to a brook called Cherith.

Cherith was a stream trickling its way through the desert. ... God took Elijah out into the 'middle of nowhere' ... and kept him there in the most forsaken of places, ... and whilst he was there <sup>6</sup> *the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook.*

After a while, the brook dried up and the ravens stopped coming to Elijah ... that is because it was time for Elijah to move on. At that point, the Lord instructed him to travel north-westwards to a town called Zarephath, on the Mediterranean coast just south of Sidon. It was a long journey. It's no coincidence God was sending him there because Zarephath means 'refining', and this great prophet - early in his ministry - was being *refined* by God for what lay ahead. It is good when the Lord *refines* you for it means He hasn't finished with you, - He has yet something else for you to do for Him.

While coming into Zarephath Elijah met a woman who was in an awful state, and there seemed to be no way out of her predicament. She was poor, she was a widow, and she had the responsibility of caring for her ill son, and anyone else she had in the household (cf. v.17).

I doubt if there was anyone in that village whose circumstances were worse than this woman, - she was the last one Elijah should have been sent to ... and yet, she was the one the Lord brought him to for she was going to be the vessel God would bless and use to refine His servant. ... God was going to use a woman whose name we don't even know to make one of the greatest prophets, - if not *the* greatest, - into a better servant.

So, Elijah asked her for a piece of bread, ... but she could not spare it! And that is what she had to tell him, <sup>12</sup> *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. ... That is all she had, - an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse.*

It is a truly pathetic scene. She was ashamed. Besides, did God not know the woman's circumstances? Could He not have sent Elijah somewhere else, or to someone else ... somewhere else more promising?! ... And what about that evil rascal King Ahab in the palace?! He would not have been in such a dire state as this woman, - not yet anyway. What about the people in Jerusalem who had at least a few more morsels ... none of them would have been as badly off as this woman ... and yet, it was to her the Lord brought His servant, - to a foreign city in a foreign land ... but He was teaching Elijah, - a faithful saint, - ... as William Cowper wrote, "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace."

God took His servant all that way from the south of the country to the coastline along the north-west to ask a woman for a piece of bread she didn't have, to give away! ... But let's look behind the scene some more ... Before Elijah arrived at her home, God had already visited that woman because He told Elijah He had already met and spoken with her, <sup>9</sup> *Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.* ... God had already gone on ahead! ... And before Elijah had taken the long journey northwards, God had already been there ... *Job 23:10 he knoweth the way that I take ... Ps. 23:4 for thou art with me.* ... God already knew the circumstances up ahead, and He had started the preparations.

So, it's not as if Elijah was on unchartered territory ... somewhere unknown to God ... God had been there before him! God knew what kind of woman this was. He already knew about her poverty, and her sick son, and how she was facing starvation. ... And yet, that, - the most unlikely of places, - is where He led His servant because that is where God was going to do something beautiful through Elijah. God was going to be glorified in this place, regardless of the famine. ... God knew the conclusion this woman would be brought to ... <sup>24</sup> *And the woman said to Elijah, ... that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.* ... From even before the beginning of their meeting, God already had the conclusion settled!

Yes, God knew all about her, ... and yet He put it within the heart of Elijah to give her a promise, <sup>13</sup> *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.* <sup>14</sup> *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.* He didn't promise the barrel would always be full ... He didn't even promise it *would* be full ... but He *did* promise her it would always have sufficient to meet her daily needs ... and she would not go hungry. And she trusted this stranger's promise, and because the Lord had already been working in her heart, she acted on that promise, <sup>15</sup> *And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.* That is what comes from trusting God's promises, no matter what the circumstances are around us!

She wouldn't have had much to live on. She had lost her husband (she was a *widow*) and the prospects were not good. Another man wasn't likely in those hard times to take her as his wife and look after another man's son.

There was no rain, nothing was growing in the fields and the famine had seriously hit home, - the future of this woman was very bleak. Times were desperately hard ... and all the indications pointed to the fact it was *impossible* for her to keep going on. But there is something else here we need to notice ... She wasn't aware the Lord knew about her predicament ... *but He did*, and He was already working to alleviate her dilemma. ... He was already putting into place solutions behind the scenes.

... And when Elijah walked in through the gates of Zarephath he found her at the gate picking through the 'left-overs' and gathering the last sticks she could find. Now, most probably it would have been round midday when the sun was

hot ... And she was poking around trying to find the sticks she needed to light the fire to make one last meal for her and her son.

No-one else was bothering with her. No-one offered to help her and her boy. No-one was handing out any modicum of care and she saw nothing but death catching up on her very quickly. She needed help ... and yet someone came asking *her* for help, - for a morsel of bread.

You can understand her distress, "I can't give you that, - I don't even have enough for myself and my child! ... I despise myself because I have nothing to give you, my guest!" ... She wasn't being selfish, - she was being realistic. It was a middle-eastern custom to be courteous and generous to strangers and to bring them into your home and feed them ... but this woman couldn't do that, for she had nothing to give this man who had come to her home.

But she did give to Elijah, for two reasons ... Firstly, he made her a promise that she put her trust in. It wasn't a blind promise for this was a man of God ... And the second reason she put her trust in him was because, - remember, - God had previously visited her, although she might not have realised it. ... God had already been in her home and saw, - not just a poor woman, - but a woman who knew what a man of God was, and also she was familiar with the word of God (v.24). ... Despite her being poor, God had sought her out and favoured her, - even though she didn't know it at the time ... from out of all the other homes in Zarephath, - ... and she would share the company of His servant, Elijah.

And she listened to what Elijah had to say ... She could have shown him the door and sent him away ... but she didn't because the Lord was there in the centre of the problem, and He was working in her heart, and she trusted her life and her future into His hands, through Elijah's ministry.

Of course, you could say she had no choice. If she didn't trust Elijah and if she didn't give him her last morsel of bread she was going to die anyway. But there is more to it than that for God knew all about her and He had sent Elijah to meet her for a purpose that would suit them both. ... This woman was to prove her confidence was in God ... for she was to discover '*Little is much when God is in it*'.

It didn't matter that she had nothing ... through Elijah she was trusting in the promises of God. And even though it looked like she was dying, God had brought the answer to her need ... In fact, it came down to this: the only hope

she had lay in the promises of God ... and Elijah was telling her what God had sent him to say, **14** *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.*

That's the same hope I believe we have today. For over eighteen years the Lord has privileged me to be here, He has answered one need after another ... in my own life, and in the life of the fellowship ... and we never have been in want. Yes, I know that sometimes we could almost imagine seeing 'the bottom of the barrel', ... but the Lord has always been faithful, and we trust Him that the *meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail until His purposes amongst us are fulfilled* ... Gen. 22:14, *Jehovah Jireh* ... **Lk. 12:24** *Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls? ... Phil. 4:19* *But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*

When we read through the Bible and discover what the great servants of God have achieved ... it is not the servants who have done it ... it is what God has done for them and through them. ... And here in this widow's home, they kept eating from God's provisions. There was never a day they went out and the barrel was empty. ... They never had to go and beg, and to lie in bed all night worrying if there would be a meal in the barrel the next morning ... for God always made sure there was enough there for each day.

You don't find any of the prophets or the disciples in a place of great popularity and worldly success ... you simply find them labouring faithfully in the place where God has led them to, labouring for His glory. ... Even Jesus said, **Mt. 8:20** *The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.* ... You have got to be where He has for you, - whether it is a 'wilderness' or a 'Zarephath' ... whether you have the ravens for company, or a widow who has no apparent hope in this world.

The Lord's work is different to all others. His work does not depend on human plans and programmes ... instead, it relies upon His, **Jer. 29:11** *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. 12* *Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. 13* *And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. 14* *And I will be found of you, saith the Lord.* ... Those are mighty promises!

Elijah was where God wanted him to be, and all the evidence points to it that the promise God made to this woman reached into her predicament too. ... *The barrel of meal shall not waste.* You're not going to go hungry ... not while God is

able to open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it (Mal. 3:10). ... We don't need it all at once, otherwise, we take it for granted ... or it's wasted because we cannot use it all!

Woman of Zarephath, you're not going to starve because God has confirmed your barrel of meal shall not waste. He has promised your cruse of oil [*shall not fail*].

I believe this promise because we are in the Lord's work too, and His work depends upon Him. ... He honours those who honour Him and I believe that is how He answers our needs. ... I believe we can trust God for the work He has for us to do. ... This woman wasn't being told she was going to have a banquet every day for the rest of her life, or even that she was going to have plenty ... but she was being told that God would supply all she needed.

It's good to look in the Bible and see these beautiful illustrations of God at work. Actually, Luke records the feeling with which Jesus remembered this story, **Lk. 4:25** But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; **26** But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. ... Here is a woman out of all the women in that whole countryside and God brought Elijah to her door, whilst she was out preparing for one last meal.

Yes, she was being realistic. We must be realistic! No good comes out of 'sticking your head in the sand'. We live in an age that is rapidly bypassing anything to do with God ... the same God Who made this country great! And sadly, the spiritual decline has affected our churches.

The mind of God is not being searched after and the wisdom of men and women is being presented instead. What is the alternative for God's people? ... It is to be confident and convinced our God continues to bless those who are faithful to Him, **Heb. 11:6** ... that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him ... like Elijah and the woman of Zarephath! ... He enjoys it when His people trust Him more than ever, and when His people humbly realise their work is *His* work, and *the work depends upon Him!*

We pray for growth for advancement in the Kingdom ... the way God looks at it! What God uses is His people who trust Him ... a people believing in Him, and convinced of His plan. ... And out in a desperate community a woman who faced starvation and death along with her son were being kept secure with

the promise of God. ... And that promise ruled her heart, <sup>15</sup> And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. <sup>16</sup> 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's promises neither fail nor run out!

We do not know how long the Lord will tarry before He returns ... but *each day* He so graciously allows us is another day we prove His goodness and faithfulness. ... Someday the drought in the desert will be a thing of the past, as will the little brook struggling to flow through the wilderness ... Instead, as the psalmist describes, <sup>Ps. 1:3</sup> he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper ... <sup>6</sup> For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous.

Meanwhile, - in this wilderness in which we find ourselves, may our confidence in our God continue to grow as He proves His grace and provision from day to day. Amen.